

POST GUILD UNIT forum



Local 32035 The Washington-Baltimore Newspaper Guild

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Of Radio Free Washington Post, Hate Blogs, and Blogging for Free

Life in the Washington Post newsroom is changing fast. It started with reporters being “asked” to provide Web versions of stories with early and frequent updates. More recently, foreign reporters and others have been “asked” to take time-consuming video clips as well as photos. The call for online “chats” grows louder all the time. And hey, can you do a blog? How about balancing twirling plates on sticks while riding a unicycle to your next assignment?

Now comes Radio Free Washington Post. “Free” because that is the cost to the Washington Post for much of the labor – our labor – that will fuel this latest venture.

When reporters and other employees were told last month (a full day after the rest of the world learned about this from news releases) that they were being counted on to help fill 14 hours a day of radio airtime for a new Washington Post radio station, the Guild quickly arranged a meeting with Post vice president for labor Trish Dunn, TV and radio projects director Tina Gulland and other Post managers to talk about the terms of that extra work.

At that meeting Guild representative Rick Ehrmann and officers Darlene Meyer, Rick Weiss and Robert Pierre expressed concerns that Post employees are getting spread too thin. The Guild also sought details about The Post’s programming plans and its proposed payment scheme for employees who contribute their labor to the radio effort.

The Guild has a legal right to see draft programming documents and other materials that can shed light on how the radio deal may change the nature of Guild-covered jobs. Remarkably, however, Dunn and Gulland insisted repeatedly that no such written plans exist – a claim the Guild finds difficult to believe considering the company has signed a contract with the station owners, has invested real money (including a new ISDN radio studio being completed on the fourth floor) and is only six weeks away from going live on the air. This kind of stonewalling ought to be anathema to the Fourth Estate.

Gulland did offer a few details about her plans for payments — or non-payments, as will be the case for most of the pieces she envisions newsroom employees doing.

“Three minutes — I’m not going to pay for that,” Gulland said. But workers who get up early in the morning to do a radio spot, she said, or who in some other way make a notable sacrifice for a broadcast might expect to get something like \$50. “It could be more depending on the length of the interview,” she said, adding that some individuals may be able to negotiate better deals.

No one will be told they have to do radio work, Gulland said; paid or not, all contributions will be “voluntary.” Asked if volunteerism for the radio would be a consideration when editors decide who should get merit pay, the answer was “Absolutely.”

“It will all be taken into account for total performance,” said Shirley Carswell, as Dunn nodded her head in agreement.

Post Claims Lack of Jurisdiction Over Offensive Blogs

When Washington Post.com blogs recently got hijacked by a gang of Internet extremists who posted libelous and pornographic hate mail aimed at Post reporters, the Guild was back on the 7th floor, demanding that management take appropriate steps to stem the harassment.

At that meeting with Dunn — this time with Claudia Townsend, the newsroom liaison for Washington Post.com, by her side — the Guild addressed the serious issue of workplace harassment raised by the attacks. There’s nothing wrong with The Post offering online venues for feedback from readers, as long as some controls are in place, Ehrmann said. But by taking no action when those sites are being used day after day to post highly inflammatory hate mail, he said, The Post is “aiding and abetting” the abusers and contributing to the creation of a hostile workplace in violation of federal law and the company’s code of conduct.

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The Web is already overflowing with sites where people can attack the Post's reporting to their heart's content, said reporters Sue Schmidt and James Grimaldi, who attended the meeting. And notwithstanding its commitment to free speech, the Guild added, The Post is under no obligation to sponsor sites it knows are being used to launch personal, sexually explicit and highly offensive attacks against its employees.

WPNI took down the affected blogs before the meeting — after an employee invoked the hostile workplace argument and called in the Guild for backup. At the meeting, the Guild provided two pages of recommendations for The Post and WPNI to consider before relaunching the blogs, including a registration process for all who want to post on the site and clearly stated rules of conduct.

Townsend sought to reassure the Guild that the Web site is sensitive to employees' workplace rights. "We're going to set the standards and they're going to be appropriate standards," she said.

But taking a disturbing stance, Dunn washed her hands of responsibility for the problem, claiming that The Post newspaper had no authority over the Web site. WPNI is an independent company, she said, with its own lawyers to help it decide how to run its blogs.

Metro Bloggers Holler for Dollars

Post management's claim of an arm's-length relationship to the Web site is ironic, given the ever-increasing demands that Post managers are putting on employees to feed the always-hungry beast across the river.

Earlier this month, four Metro DC reporters became the latest to be summoned to the cause: We want you to start writing a regular series of blogs for the Web, they were told — and for free! Being good reporters, they checked around. They found that some reporters — including some on National — are getting paid for their scheduled blogs, but others — notably those on Metro's Maryland and Virginia desks — are not. The DC gang piped up in protest to AME Bob McCartney. And when word got around to their counterparts in Maryland and Virginia, the scent of roused rabble began to waft through the air.

Faced with one of the more delicate decisions in his short tenure on Metro, McCartney told the DC folks that The Post believes it has the legal right to demand the work — but that he would not demand it for now, to avoid having a negative impact on morale, according to sources who were later told about the conversation.

As it turns out, the DC crew is going to give it a shot, dividing the work four ways. But the issues brewing here — not just the extra work, but the disparities in how people are being compensated — are far from resolved. Web publisher Jim Brady told Rick Weiss last week he is sensitive to the problem of unequal compensation for Web contributions and is trying to resolve the issue.

The Guild is happy to hear that and recognizes that the changes taking place at The Post are neither inherently bad nor unique to The Post.

But these changes do point to the need for employees to be organized and on guard as our jobs morph in ways that few of us could have imagined a few years ago.

Our strength is in our membership — our colleagues, friends and co-workers. Only together can we press for solutions that are fair for all.

If you're not a member, you weaken the organization that is working to protect your rights at work. If you are a member, we thank you and ask that you reach out to your colleagues who have yet to join the guild.

You work for the Post. The Guild is working for you.

Save the Date: Brown Bag Lunch to discuss these and related issues that are changing the nature of our work at The Post. March 15 in The Post auditorium. Details to come soon.