

At New York Observer, Trump's Too Close to Cover-but Promoting Publisher's Real Estate Is No Problem

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As Huffington Post [pointed out](#), Donald Trump was once a central figure in the cast of characters covered by the New York Observer.

The Huffington Post's Michael Calderone ([7/28/15](#)) had a piece on the ethical dilemma posed for the weekly New York Observer by the fact that its owner and publisher, Jared Kushner, is married to Ivanka Trump, daughter of real estate mogul and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump. One would expect the Observer to be all over the Trump story, given that its self-proclaimed [mission](#) is to cover "the city's influencers in politics, culture, luxury and real estate who collectively make New York City unique," but instead the paper has had next to nothing to say about Trump's controversy-fueled presidential bid.

Calderone quotes from a memo sent by Observer editor [Ken Kurson](#):

If we run something pro-Trump we will automatically be accused of carrying water for him (on account of the relationship to our publisher). If we run something anti-Trump, we will be accused of trying to curry favor with our peers in journalism or worse, intentionally being only a little hard on him so that later we can love him up and point to the earlier softball as proof that we're fair. Normally, I don't give a shit what people think of what we do — I just want us to try to do the right thing and people can say what they're going to say. But this situation is unique.

It's a rather odd ethical standard—being concerned about running a negative story about your publisher's father-in-law because people might think you're doing it only to "curry favor with our peers in journalism." Presumably you would be "currying favor" with other journalists by impressing them with your journalistic ethics, which is an argument against ever doing anything in journalism simply because it's the right thing to do.

On the other hand, if you're worried that people will think you did an ethical thing only because it will help you to be unethical later—boy, you must really think people have a low opinion of you, huh?

Kurson wrote an opinion piece for the Observer ([7/29/15](#)) where he quoted more from his own memo—"As always, we will disclose relationship in the story.... In news stories, we should continue to play it straight, always"—and explained that an email exchange he had with International Business Times reporter Brendan James "underlines precisely why I was right to be reluctant for the Observer to write about Donald Trump."

How so? In short, while James was asking Kurson for a quote about Trump, he was also asking other journalists what they thought about the Observer's Trump policy—or, as Kurson put it, “asking for dirt about any arrangement the Observer had not to cover Trump's run.” While to those with a less finely honed ethical sense this might seem like a normal way a media reporter might cover a media story, to Kurson it revealed the kind of seamy muckracker James was, leading to this exchange:

Kurson: Your greasy trolling for Trump clicks by asking other journalists to comment on how the Observer does or does not cover Trump is exactly the reason I'm reluctant to cover Trump more than necessary.

James: So the Observer is refraining from covering Trump not because of any kind of pressure from its publisher but in fact because it finds the subject cheap and not newsworthy?

Kurson: The Observer has had zero pressure from its publisher in our coverage. Zero. You made up the words “cheap and not newsworthy.” As I told Huffington Post, we are limiting our coverage because the perception of a conflict is unavoidable. As this unpleasant exchange has proven.

Of course, when someone refers to reporting on Trump as “greasy trolling for Trump clicks,” one might well wonder if that means they view the subject of Trump as “cheap and not newsworthy”—and ask them whether this is the case. (You can read James' reporting on Trump and the Observer, and his own account of his exchange with Kurson, [here](#).)

But the main takeaway from all this is that Kurson is very concerned about conflict of interest when it comes to his publisher's wife's relatives. This makes it all the more striking that the Observer editor does not seem to have much concern about conflict of interest when it comes to his publisher's real estate investments.



The New York Observer called for a police crackdown in response to outdoor sleeping in Tompkins Square Park. (photo: Céline Haeberly/NY Observer)

Take an Observer editorial that ran on [July 14](#), headlined “Take Back Tompkins Square Park. And New York City.”

Writing that “New York City has made tremendous progress over the past 20 years” as “whole swaths of the city once bereft of cultural opportunities or even a safe place to live are now blossoming anew for businesses and residents,” the editorial asserts that “there are

unmistakable signs that New York City is creeping toward the bad old days.”

Exhibit A is the state of Tompkins Square Park, the central green space of Manhattan’s East Village neighborhood. Photography by the New York Post([7/10/15](#)) “showed six homeless men sleeping in Tompkins Square Park,” the editorial pointed out, warning that “allowing homeless people to take over even a corner of the park invites more problems”:

Tompkins Square Park has been an accurate barometer of where the city is headed. Known for decades as “[Needle Park](#),” its disarray and lawlessness reflected a dysfunctional, ungovernable city. The restoration of its beauty over the last 20 years has heralded an era where residents and a vibrant collection of small businesses near the park—is there a single better food in all of New York City than the jalapeno cheddar cream cheese at Tompkins Square Bagels?—have thrived. Let’s not allow that progress to slip through our fingers.

The article noted that Police Commissioner William Bratton had made a personal appearance at the park, apparently in response to press coverage—at least, the Observer hoped so. “But it will take more than a visit,” the editorial said. “The city needs a strategy and the determination to stick with it.”



The NYPD installed a mobile surveillance tower in Manhattan’s Tompkins Square Park in response to media complaints about the homeless (photo:@urbanmyths)

Shortly thereafter, Tompkins Square did get more than a visit—it got a guard post, a mobile police surveillance tower that was installed on July 21 as “a temporary ‘high-visibility’ police command post to address safety issues on a temporary basis,” according to a spokesperson for New York Mayor Bill deBlasio (Gothamist,[7/22/15](#)). The tower was emplaced, according to local blogger EV Grieve ([7/21/15](#)), “following the [Post](#) and the [Observer’s](#) recent reports citing anecdotal evidence that there’s an influx of homeless people and drug users in the park.” The tower was removed a week later after widespread complaints from area residents (DNAinfo, [7/28/15](#)).

What the Observer didn’t disclose in its successful call for a police crackdown on homelessness in Tompkins Square was that its publisher has a direct financial stake in the mix of classes using the park: Jared Kushner’s real estate company, Kushner Companies, has been buying up hundreds of rental units in the East Village, including in the blocks

immediately surrounding Tompkins Square. The Kushner company is “now likely the largest landlord in the East Village with all [its] acquisitions, and will continue to buy more,” the Real Deal New York real estate magazine (2/15/13) quoted an industry insider. Kushner has been accused of “forcing residents out of two buildings he owns on East Second Street so he can gut the apartments and rent out luxury units to more well-heeled people,” according to the Daily News (7/10/14). This is a different perspective on what the Observer calls “whole swaths of the city...now blossoming anew for businesses and residents.”

As the blogger Grieve (7/15/15) noted, one of the buildings that Kushner owns is 165 Avenue A, the location of the same Tompkins Square Bagels that got a plug in the Observer’s editorial. Yet Kurson, so concerned about the perception of conflict of interest when it comes to Trump, evidently doesn’t think any of this is worth disclosing. Maybe because demands for a police crackdown on poor people are less credible when you acknowledge that your boss stands to profit from it?

To disclose my own interest in this story: Having lived around the corner from Tompkins Square Park for the past 24 years, I’ve been in the park literally thousands of times at all times of day and have never felt remotely threatened. And Tompkins Square Bagels aside, the “vibrant collection of small businesses near the park,” along with the mix of classes and cultures that gives this neighborhood its unique character, is rapidly being destroyed by the gentrification that Kushner is spearheading—and that the Observer serves as a mouthpiece for.

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