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MEDIA NOTES

By Mark Jurkowitz, Globe Staff, 06/03/99

Speaking of the perception of conflict of interest, author Carol Felsenthal is making that accusation in a case involving two pillars of the media establishment - The New York Times and the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism.

Last year, Felsenthal, who has written biographies of Katharine Graham and Phyllis Schlafly, published "Citizen Newhouse," an unauthorized bio of media magnate S. I. Newhouse Jr. It then garnered a very unflattering review from Columbia Journalism School Dean Tom Goldstein - who called it "a rather dull hatchet job" - in The New York Times Book Review.

Goldstein wasn't her only critic. Felsenthal admits the book got a "horrendous" review in The Washington Post and took a trashing in the New York Observer. But she says she was taken aback by the negativity of the Goldstein review. And now she believes she has found a smoking - or at least warm - gun.

Doing some sleuthing, In These Times magazine learned that the Newhouse Foundation had donated \$30,000 a year to the Columbia Journalism School in 1996 and 1997, the last two years in which records were available. In a May 6 letter to Times book review editor Charles McGrath, Felsenthal cried foul. Goldstein, "should not have accepted the assignment," she wrote. And as the outlet that published the review, the Times, she added, "should run an 'Editor's Note' or some form of correction."

"I think it's a nonissue," says McGrath, adding that "it stretches credibility" that Goldstein would write a tough review to curry favor with the Newhouse benefactors. "I'm very sensitive to ethical and conflict issues," adds Goldstein. And "there is no conflict."

There's one other little twist to the episode. Back in 1994, Felsenthal wrote to McGrath - who was then at Newhouse's New Yorker - asking to interview him for the biography. In a polite return letter, McGrath informed her that he could not comply unless Newhouse himself was cooperating.

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