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White House Correspondents' Association dinner isn't costly, but the parties are

By [Paul Farhi](#), Published: April 25

Figure on paying big time for a semi-glamorous locale; an embassy will do (but only one for a *major* country). Then, add in food and booze — about \$100 a head. Plus entertainment, security, cleanup, insurance. Valet parking for a few hundred could cost roughly \$6,000.

Want a celebrity at your event? *Of course* you do. First-class flight to Washington, a hotel suite and limo for the weekend: Count on \$4,500 or so more per glamourpuss, not including his or her posse, which you may have to include.

Add it up. When all is said and paid for after all the parties surrounding the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner this weekend, some media organizations will drop as much as \$200,000 each to entertain an elite list of guests.

[Live updates from the White House Correspondents' Association dinner and events](#)

As the numbers suggest, the media-sponsored partying before and after the annual dinner on Saturday has become the tail wagging an overfed dog. The dinner — 3,000 people hobnobbing with the president in a televised lovefest — costs media companies \$2,750 for each table of 10; the event at the Washington Hilton will raise about \$150,000 for journalism scholarships, according to the WHCA, a nonprofit group.

Pfft. Small change.

In the past half-dozen years or so, the real money has been poured into celebrity wrangling and brunches, receptions and blowouts before and after the big dinner.

The two biggest after-dinner events, one hosted by Vanity Fair and Bloomberg Media and another hosted by MSNBC, will fete 400 and 750 people, respectively, in rented embassies (France and Italy, respectively). The Vanity Fair-Bloomberg party is so chichi that guests have been asked to send digital headshots of themselves in advance in order to discourage gate-crashers.

At least a dozen other media companies, including People magazine, the Hill newspaper, Yahoo, Reuters, Politico, the New Yorker and the co-owned Atlantic and National Journal will do up their own parties (The Washington Post is hosting a pre-dinner reception at the Hilton).

The schmooze-a-palooza has grown so elaborate that news organizations have offloaded some of their costs.

Not only have some hosts teamed up (Bloomberg and Vanity Fair, Yahoo and Reuters), but most events are “sponsored” by *other* companies that pay the host, in cash or in kind, for the privilege of piggybacking on the party.

Some of the victuals at MSNBC's bash, for example, will be brought to guests by Starbucks, Ben & Jerry's, Smartwater and Bacardi. One party-giver, Capitol File magazine, lists a “presenter” (the Bipartisan Policy Center) and five corporate sponsors on its invitation, including Mercedes-Benz and Corona Light. In a strange-bedfellows pairing, the Atlantic has signed up a Las Vegas hotel, the Cosmopolitan, to sponsor one of its invitation-only affairs.

Tammy Haddad, the Washington media consultant who is the godmother of the WHCA dinner's mix and mingle, plans to co-host a brunch this weekend at a historic home in Georgetown. Last year, 600 people came to her brunch, but it's unknown how many will come this year. The event will be studded with celebrities, political figures and journalists, of course. But Haddad says the biggest influx has been businesspeople who want to meet celebrities, political figures and (maybe) a journalist. The newest arrivals over the past two years have been tech executives, from such companies as Twitter, Foursquare, Groupon and Facebook, among others.

The most unusual arrangement may be Atlantic Publisher David Bradley's exclusive “welcome” dinner party at his home Friday night. Bradley plans to treat a select crowd of 150 to a “festive” dinner previewing the “Ballets Russes” exhibit that will [open to the public](#) at the National Gallery of Art on May 12. The underwriters of Friday's dinner include Exxon Mobil, General Motors, Siemens and Altria.

The ironic thing about all the White House Correspondents' Association Dinner-related events is that they have little to do with the White House or the correspondents or even, in many respects, the WHCA dinner. Journalists are largely beside the point when it comes to their employers' parties. As it happens, journalists are likely to be in the minority at most of these gatherings.

Instead, the before- and after-derby has become an exercise in “branding,” an effort by publishers, networks and other media companies to raise their profiles among a subset of the WHCA dinner masses, event planners say. The real targets are a few hundred elite and influential guests.

The parties help news organizations court would-be advertisers and reward existing ones by putting them in proximity to power and the Hollywood figures who will be transported and pampered at the media's expense this weekend. The goal is to cement the party-giver's status as a big-time Washington player, even when some party-givers, such as Vanity Fair magazine, aren't really Washington players.

As such, the most important party guests this weekend are “the guys who control [an advertiser's] marketing budget,” says David Adler, the chief executive of BizBash.com, a news site that tracks corporate events and planning. “One guy from GM is much more important” than a typical Washington figure. Adds Adler: “The dinner is just a prop for the merchandising and marketing side of the media business.”

Celebrities might be the bait, but the businesspeople are at the top of most guest lists. Politico's chief executive, Robert Allbritton, for example, has invited a sprinkling of Hollywood types (Bradley Cooper, Daniel Day-Lewis, Kerry Washington) to a Sunday brunch at his home in Georgetown. But Politico has a much longer guest list of corporate figures for the dinner the night before, including top executives from AT&T, Bank of America, the Business Roundtable, Coca-Cola, Chevron, GE Transportation, Goldman Sachs, Google, MGM Resorts, Microsoft, Northrop Grumman, Qualcomm and Siemens. (We know this because Politico is among several

media organizations that have issued news releases bragging about their guests.)

Atlantic Media's top event planner, Senior Vice President Elizabeth Baker Keffer, says the WHCA weekend has become Washington's not-quite-equivalent version of the Davos economic conference. Much like that annual gathering of corporate royalty in Switzerland, she says, the events and parties this weekend will bring "key influentials" to town, including "the entire C-suite."

The what?

"Chief executives, chief financial officers, chief operating officers, chief marketing officers," she says. "The seniority of corporate contacts [in attendance] has increased. That creates an opportunity to showcase our brands . . . to build relationships and interact with some very senior clients." For most of the high rollers, she says, "this is less about going to a party and much more about high-level networking."

For Atlantic Media, which is staging five events, the return on investment remains "intangible," Keffer says. It's impossible to know if a relationship struck up over cocktails led to an ad buy, she notes, but it can't hurt.

Keffer thinks some C-suite denizens — particularly those in banking and the auto business — were reluctant to be seen at glitzy social events in Washington in recent years because the optics were all wrong, especially for those who received government bailouts. But as the economy improves, that concern might have faded.

In any event, she says, "there's more interest and appetite to attend and less concern about the risk to reputation this year than in years past."

All the corporate courting would suggest that the usual criticism of the correspondents' association dinner misses the mark. The conventional critique, about the glitz-o-rama's corrosive effects on journalists, was voiced by former NBC anchor Tom Brokaw on "Meet the Press" the day after last year's dinner.

"Look, I think George Clooney is a great guy. I would like to meet Charlize Theron," Brokaw said. "But I don't think the big press event in Washington should be that kind of glittering event where the whole talk is about Cristal champagne, taking over the Italian Embassy, who had the best party, who got to meet the most people. That's another separation between what [journalists are] supposed to be doing and what the people expect us to be doing. I think that the Washington press corps has to look at that."

Brokaw, a celebrity in his own right, could always choose to boycott the dinner and all the satellite events, of course. But you'd have to bet MSNBC's corporate guests, and MSNBC, would be mighty disappointed if he did.

Eliza Krigman contributed to this report.

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