

Correspondence and collusion between the New York Times and the CIA | Glenn Greenwald | Comment is free



CIA spokeswoman Marie Harf told New York Times national security reporter Mark Mazzetti to 'keep me posted' about a forthcoming Maureen Dowd column; he obliged. Photograph: [@marieharf](#), via Twitter



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- [Glenn Greenwald](#)
- [guardian.co.uk](#), Wednesday 29 August 2012 14.58 EDT

(updated below)

The rightwing transparency group, Judicial Watch, released Tuesday [a new batch of documents](#) showing how eagerly the [Obama administration](#) shoveled information to Hollywood film-makers about the Bin Laden raid. Obama officials did so to enable the production of a politically beneficial pre-election film about that "heroic" killing, even as administration lawyers [insisted to federal courts](#) and [media outlets](#) that no disclosure was permissible because the raid was classified.

Thanks to [prior disclosures](#) from Judicial Watch of documents it obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, this is old news. That's what the Obama administration [chronically does](#): it manipulates secrecy powers to prevent accountability in a court of law, while leaking at will about the same programs in order to glorify the president.

But what is news in this disclosure are the [newly released emails](#) between Mark Mazzetti, the [New York Times](#)'s national security and intelligence reporter, and CIA spokeswoman Marie Harf. The CIA had evidently heard that Maureen Dowd was planning to write a column on the CIA's role in pumping the film-makers with information about the Bin Laden raid in order to boost Obama's re-election chances, and was apparently

worried about how Dowd's column would reflect on them. On 5 August 2011 (a Friday night), Harf wrote an email to Mazzetti with the subject line: "Any word??", suggesting, obviously, that she and Mazzetti had already discussed Dowd's impending column and she was expecting an update from the NYT reporter.

A mere two minutes after the CIA spokeswoman sent this Friday night inquiry, Mazzetti responded. He promised her that he was "going to see a version before it gets filed", and assured her that there was likely nothing to worry about:

"My sense is there a very brief mention at bottom of column about CIA ceremony, but that [screenwriter Mark] Boal also got high level access at Pentagon."

She then replied with this instruction to Mazzetti: "keep me posted", adding that she "really appreciate[d] it".

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Obtained by Judicial Watch via FOIA (August 24, 2012)

(b)(3)
(b)(6)

From:
Sent: Friday, August 05, 2011 8:13 PM
To:
Subject: Re: Any word??

Ok thanks - keep me posted. I really appreciate it.

Marie E. Harf
CIA Spokesperson

----- Original Message -----
From: Mazzetti, Mark
Sent: Friday, August 05, 2011 08:06 PM
To:
Subject: Re: Any word??

Going to see a version before it gets filed. My sense is there is a very brief mention at bottom of column about CIA ceremony, but that Boal also got high level access at Pentagon

----- Original Message -----
From:
Sent: Friday, August 05, 2011 08:04 PM
To: Mazzetti, Mark
Subject: Any word??

Marie E. Harf
CIA Spokesperson

Moments later, Mazzetti forwarded the draft of Dowd's unpublished column to the CIA spokeswoman (it was [published the following night online](#) by the Times, and two days later in the print edition). At the top of that email, Mazzetti wrote: "this didn't come from me ... and please delete after you read." He then proudly told her that his assurances turned out to be true:

"See, nothing to worry about."

From: Mark Mazzetti
Sent: Friday, August 05, 2011 8:13 PM
To: MARIE

this didn't come from me....and please delete after you read. See, nothing to worry about

WASHINGTON

Barack Obama must wonder sometimes if his luck has run out.

Maybe he used it all up in 2008.

"Yes, we can!" has devolved into "Hev, we still might..."

This exchange, by itself, is remarkably revealing: of the standard role played by establishment journalists and the corruption that pervades it. Here we have a New York Times reporter who covers the CIA colluding with its spokesperson to plan for the fallout from the reporting by his own newspaper ("nothing to worry about"). Beyond this, that a New York Times journalist – ostensibly devoted to bringing transparency to government institutions – is pleading with the CIA spokesperson, of all people, to conceal his actions and to delete the evidence of collusion is so richly symbolic.

The relationship between the New York Times and the US government is, as usual, anything but adversarial. Indeed, these emails read like the interactions between a PR representative and his client as they plan in anticipation of a possible crisis.

Even more amazing is the reaction of the newspaper's managing editor, Dean Baquet, to these revelations, as [reported by Politico's Dylan Byers](#):

"New York Times Managing Editor Dean Baquet called POLITICO to explain the situation, but provided little clarity, saying he could not go into detail on the issue because it was an intelligence matter.

"I know the circumstances, and if you knew everything that's going on, you'd know it's much ado about nothing," Baquet said. "I can't go into in detail. But I'm confident after talking to Mark that it's much ado about nothing."

"The optics aren't what they look like," he went on. "I've talked to Mark, I know the circumstance, and given what I know, it's much ado about nothing."

[There is so much to say](#) about that passage.

First, try though I did, I'm unable to avoid noting that this statement from Baquet – "the optics aren't what they look like" – is one of the most hilariously incoherent utterances seen in some time. It's the type of [meaningless, illiterate corporatese](#) that comes spewing forth from bumbling executives defending the indefensible. I've read that sentence roughly a dozen times over the last 24 hours and each time, it provides me with greater amounts of dark amusement.

Second, look at how the New York Times mimics the CIA even in terms of how the newspaper's employees speak: Baquet "provided little clarity, saying he could not go into detail on the issue *because it was an intelligence matter*". In what conceivable way is Mazzetti's collusion with the CIA an "intelligence matter" that prevents the NYT's managing editor from explaining what happened here?

This is what the CIA [reflexively does](#): insists that, even when it comes to allegations that they have engaged

in serious wrongdoing, you (and even courts) cannot know what the agency is doing because it is an "intelligence matter". Now, here we have the managing editor of the Newspaper of Record reciting this same secrecy-loving phrase *verbatim* – as though the New York Times is some sort of an intelligence agency whose inner workings must be concealed for our own safety – all in order to avoid any sort of public disclosure about the wrongdoing in which it got caught engaging. One notices this frequently: media figures come to identify so closely with the government officials on whom they report that they start adopting not only their way of thinking, but even their lingo.

Third, note how Baquet proudly touts the fact that he knows facts to which you are not and will not be privvy:

"I know the circumstances, if you knew everything that's going on, you'd know it's much ado about nothing."

Isn't the function of a newspaper supposed to be to tell us "everything that's going on", not to boast that it knows the circumstances and you do not?

Baquet's claim that this was all "much ado about nothing" did not, apparently, sit well with at least some people at the New York Times, who seem not to appreciate it when their national security reporter secretly gives advanced copies of columns to the CIA spokesperson. Shortly after Baquet issued his ringing defense of Mazzetti's behavior, a spokesperson for the paper not only provided the details Baquet insisted could not be given, but also made clear that Mazzetti's conduct was inappropriate:

"Last August, Maureen Dowd asked Mark Mazzetti to help check a fact for her column. In the course of doing so, he sent the entire column to a CIA spokeswoman shortly before her deadline. He did this without the knowledge of Ms Dowd. This action was a mistake that is not consistent with New York Times standards."

It may be "inconsistent with the New York Times standards" for one of its reporters to secretly send advanced copy to the CIA and then ask that the agency delete all record that he did so: one certainly hopes it is. But it is not, unfortunately, inconsistent with the paper's behavior in general, when it comes to reporting on public officials. Serving as obedient lapdogs and message-carriers for political power, rather than adversarial watchdogs over power, is par for the course.

The most obvious example of this is the [paper's complicity with propagating war-fueling falsehoods](#) to justify the attack on Iraq – though, in that instance, it was [hardly alone](#). Just last month, it [was revealed](#) that the NYT routinely gives veto power to Obama campaign officials over the quotes from those officials the paper is allowed to publish – a practice [barred by other outlets](#) (but not the NYT) both [prior to](#) that revelation and [subsequent to it](#).

Worse, the paper frequently conceals vital information of public interest at the direction of the government, as it did when it learned of George Bush's illegal eavesdropping program in mid 2004 but [concealed it for more than a year](#) at the direction of the White House, until Bush was safely re-elected; as it did when it complied with government directives to [conceal the CIA employment](#) of Raymond Davis, captured by Pakistan, even as President Obama falsely described him as "our diplomat in Pakistan" and as the NYT reported the president's statement without noting that it was false; and as it did with its disclosure of numerous WikiLeaks releases, for which the paper, as former executive editor Bill Keller [proudly boasted](#), took direction from the government regarding what should and should not be published.

And that's all independent of the [chronic practice](#) of the NYT to permit government officials to [hide behind](#)

anonymity in order to disseminate government propaganda – or even to smear journalists as al-Qaida sympathizers for reporting critically on government actions – even when granting such anonymity violates its own publicly announced policies.

What all of this behavior from the NYT has in common is clear: it demonstrates the extent to which it institutionally collaborates with and serves the interests of the nation's most powerful factions, rather than act as an adversarial check on them. When he talks to the CIA spokesperson, Mazzetti sounds as if he's talking to a close colleague working together on a joint project.

It sounds that way because that's what it is.

One can, if one wishes, cynically justify Mazzetti's helpful co-operation with the CIA as nothing more than a common means which journalists use to curry favor with their sources. Leave aside the fact that the CIA spokesperson with whom Mazzetti is co-operating is hardly some valuable leaker deep within the bowels of the agency but, in theory, should be the supreme adversary of real journalists: her job is to shape public perception as favorably as possible to the CIA, even at the expense of the truth.

The more important objection is that the fact that a certain behavior is common does not negate its being corrupt. Indeed, as is true for government abuses generally, those in power rely on the willingness of citizens to be trained to view corrupt acts as so common that they become inured, numb, to its wrongfulness. Once a corrupt practice is sufficiently perceived as commonplace, then it is transformed in people's minds from something objectionable into something acceptable. Indeed, many people believe it demonstrates their worldly sophistication to express indifference toward bad behavior by powerful actors on the ground that it is so prevalent. This cynicism – *oh, don't be naive: this is done all the time* – is precisely what enables such destructive behavior to thrive unchallenged.

It is true that Mazzetti's emails with the CIA do not shock or surprise in the slightest. But that's the point. With some noble journalistic exceptions (at the NYT and elsewhere), these emails reflect the standard full-scale cooperation – a virtual merger – between our the government and the establishment media outlets that claim to act as "watchdogs" over them.

From "All the news that's fit to print" to "please delete after you read" and cannot "go into detail because it is an intelligence matter": that's the gap between the New York Times's marketed brand and its reality.

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UPDATE: The Times' Public Editor [weighed in](#) on this matter today, noting his clear disapproval for what Mazzetti did:

"Whatever Mr. Mazzetti's motivation, it is a clear boundary violation to disclose a potentially sensitive article pre-publication under such circumstances. This goes well beyond the normal give-and-take that characterizes the handling of sources and suggests the absence of an arm's-length relationship between a reporter and those he is dealing with."

While Mazzetti himself expresses regret for his behavior -- "It was definitely a mistake to do. I have never done it before and I will never do it again" -- both he and Executive Editor Jill Abramson insist that he had no bad intent, but was simply trying to help out a colleague (Dowd) by having her claims fact-checked. Like Baquet, Abramson invokes secrecy to conceal the key facts: "I can't provide further detail on why the entire column was sent."

The question raised by these excuses is obvious: if Mazzetti were acting with such pure and benign motives,

why did he ask the CIA to delete the email he sent? This appears to be a classic case of expressing sorrow not over what one did, but over having been caught.

On a different note, Politico's Byers, in response to my inquiry, advises me that Baquet did indeed say what Byers attributed to him -- "he could not go into detail on the issue because it was an intelligence matter" -- and that his exact quote was: it "has to with intel."