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Tucker's excellent adventure

By Howard Kurtz

"We need a roundup of the weirdness," Tucker Carlson shouted, walking past a row of young staffers hunched over laptops on the sort of cheap-looking teak tables that scream startup venture.

The Fox News commentator launches his new Web site, the [Daily Caller](#), on Monday. His partner is Neil Patel, a former Dick Cheney aide. His opinion editor is Moira Bagley, who spent 2008 as the Republican National Committee's press secretary. And his \$3 million in funding comes from Wyoming financier Foster Friess, a big-time GOP donor.

But Carlson insists this won't be a right-wing site: "I don't feel guilty about or ashamed in any way of saying we'll cover the people in power," he says, dismissing the capital's Republicans as "totally powerless."

"Our goal is not to get Republicans elected. Our goal is to explain what your government is doing. We're not going to suck up to people in power, the way so many have. There's been an enormous amount of throne-sniffing," he says, a sly grin beneath the mop of brown hair. "It's disgusting."

When he announced the Daily Caller last spring, Carlson was more explicit about its ideology, telling Human Events the site would be "opposed to what's going on" under President Obama -- "a radical increase in federal power. . . . a version of socialism."

Whatever its eventual coloration, Carlson faces a daunting challenge. Does the post-HuffPost world really need yet another political Web site?

Carlson, who started out as a Weekly Standard writer before becoming a cable pundit, says the site will be distinguished by original reporting, including his own. "One reason there isn't more reporting online is that it's really expensive," he says.

Beyond the 21-person staff at the office, a stone's throw from the White House, Carlson plans to attract top freelancers by offering them a share of ad revenue based on the traffic they draw. (The Chamber of Commerce and National Mining Association have already signed on as sponsors.) With mounting newspaper layoffs, "there are a lot of unemployed or semi-idled journalists out there who have experience that is amazing."

The Caller has tapped a number of down-the-middle journalists, including executive editor Megan Mulligan, who was the Guardian's Washington editor. Conservative politics "is not my thing," she says. "They knew what my background is."

Mulligan says she signed up because of Carlson's open-mindedness: "He doesn't mind if people disagree with him. He's kind of his own man."

Carlson and Patel, who were roommates at Hartford's Trinity College, hatched their scheme over dinner at the Palm after the 2008 election. They spent months pitching venture capital firms.

Patel, who was nominated by the Bush White House to run the National Telecommunications and Information Administration -- he was never confirmed -- has a home in Jackson Hole, where Friess is based, and a friend arranged a meeting in September. Friess, an investment magnate and a Christian philanthropist, has donated \$689,000 to Republican organizations and the Bush presidential campaigns over the past decade.

When they met for lunch, Carlson and Patel had funding offers from two sets of venture capitalists, in Washington and Boston, who wanted to serve on various management committees. Before they finished their salad, they exchanged looks of amazement as Friess offered to match the \$3 million, but without the bureaucracy. Two days later, they had a deal.

Why would Friess insist that he didn't even want to serve on the company's board? "He's eccentric," Patel says.

Friess, who has gone hunting with Cheney, is a man of many opinions. He has sent out fundraising letters to fight the Democrats' health-care legislation, calls much of the information on global warming "distorted and manipulated," and says "the American public is oblivious to the fact that we are at war and that just playing defense is a disastrous course to take."

As for his new partners, Friess says by e-mail: "Tucker and Neil present a huge opportunity to re-introduce civility to our political discourse. They are mature, sensible men who are very thoughtful and experienced with pleasant senses of humor and do not take themselves too seriously. They want to make a contribution to the dialogue that occurs in our country that has become too antagonistic, nasty and hostile. . . ."

"You don't have to be around them very long to sense that they are hard working, committed American Patriots who love this country."

Although the site has lined up such sponsors as the Chamber of Commerce and the National Mining Association, the business model does not extend to paying for opinion pieces. Bagley says she is soliciting contributors "from Tucker's Rolodex" and her own. But Carlson disputes the notion that the commentary will lean right.

"We're not enforcing any kind of ideological orthodoxy on anyone," Carlson says.

"It's boring," Patel agrees.

The focus will be on the White House and Congress; early stories will examine Medicare fraud and wasteful stimulus projects, along with a Carlson [piece](#) on the latest White House party-crasher, Carlos Allen. But the Caller also plans to feature culture,

sports and a humorous advice column by Standard writer Matt Labash. Carlson says such potential Web rivals as Politico's top editors, Tina Brown and Arianna Huffington have been generous in offering advice. Huffington has written a piece for the Caller about the Web helping to break the mainstream media's tendency to view issues through a left/right lens.

The buzz factor is crucial in trying to break through the static. The site has hired a media strategist, Becca Glover Watkins, who persuaded Carlson to join Twitter and leaked to Fishbowl DC that Tuesday's launch party will be held at the home of her sister, Republican lobbyist Juleanna Glover.

At 40, Carlson retains his boyish enthusiasm and preppy look (though he tossed the bow ties years ago). The other day he padded around the downtown office in a navy blazer, green striped tie, tan slacks and battered moccasins. But he seems more measured than when he was trading insults with Jon Stewart on "Crossfire." Carlson, who once bragged of being soused during a radio interview, gave up alcohol seven years ago.

Although he will still pontificate on Fox, Carlson says the Web site is no sideline. "I wake up at 5:30 obsessing over it," he says. "Whatever my many faults, this is something I'm totally committed to."