



The Devils Koch

J-schoolers should wait to see what the Kochs actually do with Tribune Company—if they buy it.

By: Marta H. Mossburg – May 24, 2013

If the Tribune Company were Biblical Egypt, the Koch brothers buying its papers would be the 11th plague. They are probably behind billions of red, bulgy-eyed cicadas poised to swarm the East Coast this year, too. Or so think many liberals.

So bad is the perception of the pair of billionaire industrialists known for their support of libertarian causes that the Pavlovian revulsion triggered by uttering their names makes the collective leftist disapproval of Ronald Reagan seem like an inaudible “boo.”

Take this typical response to them by “Hangover” actor Zach Galifianakis. Last year he told the *New York Daily News*, “I disagree with everything they do. They are creepy and there is no way around that. It’s not freedom what they are doing.”

Never mind that they have underwritten the Cato Institute, whose scholars support gay marriage and drug legalization, two causes of many on the left. (Full disclosure, my first job out of college was as an intern at Cato.) They have also given tens of millions to arts and medical institutions in addition to conservative political causes, including Americans for Prosperity, so hated by liberals. A doorman cited in a 2012 documentary claims David Koch is a bad tipper. Being stingy is mean. But no one needed that tidbit to hate him.

Charles and David Koch, who control privately owned Wichita, Kansas-based Koch Industries, have reached that special status where knowing anything about them is not necessary for condemnation. For those in a certain crowd mentioning “the Koch brothers” grants permission to listeners to suspend critical thought in the same way that saying “George Soros” triggers a mental meltdown for those on the right.

That is the take of Progressive Maryland, which in an email to supporters last Friday wrote, “We have a major problem brewing here in Maryland. Our only statewide daily newspaper, *The Baltimore Sun*, is in grave and immediate danger of being bought by a pair of wealthy members of the 1% club, the notorious Koch brothers.”

New Executive Director Kate Planco Waybright added, “There’s no other way to put it, the Koch brothers...would ruin *The Baltimore Sun*” and “further conservative corporate control of mainstream media, paralleling Rupert Murdoch’s ideological print and broadcast empire as showcased by Fox News, the *Wall Street Journal*, and many more.”

The first LGBT director of the organization, according to her bio, urges supporters to email and call Tribune board members to voice their disapproval of a sale to them.

Rupert Murdoch — Chairman and CEO of News Corp. — is interested in purchasing a part of Tribune, by the way, but for some reason he isn't as scary to Progressive Maryland and other groups around the country, including the staff at the *Los Angeles Times*, another Tribune paper. Half of them reportedly indicated at a meeting in April they would quit if the Kochs bought it. Only a few said they would if Mr. Murdoch did, maybe because the *Wall Street Journal* has not fallen apart under his leadership. Not to be outdone, a Los Angeles City Councilman introduced a motion in April to remove pension money invested with the firms that own the *Los Angeles Times* unless it is sold to buyers who support “the highest terms of professional and objective journalism.”

Before all these people rush to condemn the Kochs, maybe they should wait to see what they do with Tribune — if they buy it. Making money will require them to earn the trust of the generally liberal communities in which Tribune operates. Besides, if they run the papers as ideological mills the company will become a very expensive vanity project read by people who already share their views. That will not help spread a free market ethos — one of their main goals — or their bank accounts.

Watching the scandals unfold in Washington should make Koch skeptics wonder, too, how more people who don't hold government in such high regard might break more stories about government corruption. They may not be very likeable people. And they may be really dumb thinking they can make money off of newspapers. But they should be allowed to try just like other potential buyers.