

GANNETT

Koch brothers create a panic

By: Bill Cotterell – May 15, 2013

Downtown motorists may notice an unusual public demonstration this evening in front of the *Orlando Sentinel's* offices

An organization called Florida Watch Action Inc. plans to be picketing against the possible purchase of that newspaper, and seven others owned by the Chicago Tribune Co., by the notorious Koch brothers. Charles and David Koch are expected to be the high bidders for the papers, and that bodes ill for truth, justice and the American way, according to a whole slew of overwrought liberals — including some journalists working for those papers.

Have you ever encountered a situation or famous person whom everybody was really excited about, for good or ill, but you just couldn't see what all the shouting was about? That's how I've felt in the past month about the Koch brothers possibly buying out the Trib and its far-flung corporate cousins.

But many journalism blogs, some evening cable news shows and some political websites have been terribly upset by the specter of the conservative billionaires acquiring some newspapers. It was reported last month that half the staff of the *Los Angeles Times* threatened to quit if their company was acquired by the Kochs.

Rush Limbaugh and other voices on the right, predictably, have been saying, basically, "Good — quit. Maybe they can replace you with right-thinking reporters."

A Los Angeles city council member sponsored a resolution declaring, "A newspaper isn't just a business, it's a civic trust." Two members suggested the city pension fund divest its holdings in the *Times*, if the Kochs buy it. (Apparently, it doesn't bother L.A. journalists if the city government they cover has stock in their employer, or that it might vote its shares to influence corporate behavior.)

In Broward County, where the Trib Co. owns the *South Florida Sun-Sentinel*, an online petition campaign — not associated with the paper — states that "we can't allow respected journalistic institutions to become mouthpieces for the Kochs' corrupt agenda."

Florida Watch Action's invitation to downtown picketing this evening warned, "If bought by the Koch brothers, the *Orlando Sentinel* would become a powerful arm of their Kochtapus tentacles, along with the think tanks and political groups that they fund, like the Cato Institute, ALEC, Americans for Prosperity and the Tea Party."

ALEC is the American Legislative Exchange Council, an officially nonpartisan organization that does much of what passes for thinking among Republican legislators in

Florida. Cato is a libertarian think tank. Americans for Prosperity monitors Congress and state legislators, in daily combat with all those Americans Against Prosperity out there.

The Koch brothers set liberal hearts aflutter in Tallahassee a couple years ago by funding a chair at Florida State University — subject to their approval of the chosen professor's rightward rectitude.

There are three good reasons not to get incontinent about the Kochs buying up papers in Los Angeles, Baltimore, Allentown, Hartford, Chicago, Orlando and Fort Lauderdale and Newport News, Va.

First is the assumption that they will tilt editorial pages and news coverage so far to the right that readers will turn into right-wing robots. Well, how much would they have to spend to make you yearn for a Rand Paul presidency? In Florida, the *Sentinel* and *Sun-Sentinel* endorsed Mitt Romney for president six months ago — in fact, he wouldn't be president today, if the voters of Broward and Orange Counties hadn't so blindly, helplessly followed the orders of their local newspaper editorial boards.

Second, the fact that anybody wants to buy newspaper companies nowadays is good news. Just a wild guess, but it's likely the Chicago Tribune is not selling because its papers are making too much money.

If the Kochs buy, they must know there will be mass subscription cancellations. If they turn the papers into right-wing hate sheets, sane competitors will emerge or their papers won't last long. The Kochs have rightly been called many things, but stupid isn't one of them.

Warren Buffett recently bought a whole slew of formerly Media General papers, but he's a benign billionaire. McClatchy bought out Knight Ridder, which had earlier sold this paper to Gannett. A deep-pockets investor recently cranked up a daily in New Orleans, where the *Times-Picayune* has cut back on the number of days it prints a paper.

If newspapers survive, does it matter who owns them? Are they better dead than read?

Maybe the Kochs will plunder newsrooms — laying off employees, freezing pensions and doing whatever it takes to raise revenue. Well, guess what? So will any other new owner. If the papers are losing money, or aren't profitable enough now, the new bosses aren't going to turn it around by doing more of the same.

Third, newspapers aren't exactly pristine anyway. For more than a century that the Chandler family owned it, the *L.A. Times* was the Republican kingmaker of California. The *Chicago Tribune*, under the legendary ownership of Col. Robert McCormick, was the anti-New Deal conservative voice of Middle America for decades.

That paper's famous 1948 headline, "Dewey defeats Truman," was made more memorable because of its rock-ribbed Republicanism in that era.

When a Chicago sportswriter told Leo Durocher the Cubs were going to start a brawl with his "Gas House Gang" Cardinals of the 1930s, Leo the Lip supposedly retorted, "Yeah, you tell 'em they ain't getting no virgins."

Similarly, if the Kochs bring a conservative tone to major American newspapers, it will just be a bias done on purpose.