

Soapboxer: A town without muckrakers

Who will afflict the powerful when the powerful own the media?

By: Jeffrey C. Billman – May 29, 2013

I'm usually inclined to roll my eyes at the liberal caterwauling over all things Koch brothers. Too often, it feels like that time Glenn Beck and his Chalkboard of Paranoia spent a week caricaturing George Soros as the Sith Lord of progressivism. Yes, the Kochs are ideologues who've funneled some of the billions they've made from fossil fuels into climate-change disinformation and other conservative causes. But the knee-jerk tendency to paint Charles and David Koch as bogeymen – almost cartoonish, mustache-twirling villains – can be a bit much, especially considering the more than \$600 million the brothers have donated in recent years to the arts, educational foundations and medical research.

That said, their play for the eight Tribune Company newspapers, including the *Orlando Sentinel* and the *Sun-Sentinel* in Fort Lauderdale, is a real and present threat to our community. That's not because they're conservatives. Sam Zell, the erstwhile Tribune leader who ran the company into bankruptcy, gave hundreds of thousands of dollars to right-wing causes and politicians. But Zell, for his many faults, didn't have an explicit political agenda. The Kochs do, and they're not coy about it. Three years ago, according to an April *New York Times* story, they told an Aspen seminar of like-minded political donors that part of their decade-long strategy to push deregulation and lower taxes was to acquire major media outlets, to "make sure our voice is being heard."

A recent piece in the *New Yorker* suggests this agenda wouldn't be confined to the papers' editorial pages. David Koch – a longtime public-television donor and trustee of two PBS stations – reportedly pulled a large donation after WNET in New York aired an unflattering documentary. PBS officials subsequently spiked another documentary on the *Citizens United* decision that portrayed the Kochs in a negative light. Earlier this month, David Koch resigned from WNET's board, "the result, an insider said, of his unwillingness to back a media organization that had so unsparingly covered its sponsor," reports the *New Yorker*. (The Koch Industries website KochFacts.com denied the story and said that, "on principle, [Charles Koch] has never interfered with WNET's programming decisions.")

Even if he did, it makes sense: Why support someone who sullies your good name?

There are two problems here. First, the Kochs are players. They're behind Americans for Prosperity, the Tea Party front group, and Charles Koch helped found the influential Cato Institute, to which the brothers have donated more than \$30 million over the years. They also fund the right-wing American Legislative Exchange Council, a body that has molded legislation on taxes, gun control, the environment, energy policy and voting rights passed by conservative legislatures in Florida and elsewhere. There's little assurance that a Koch-owned *Sentinel* and *Sun-Sentinel* wouldn't become part of their

propaganda machine. At the very least, there's no doubt their credibility would be shot, especially on issues identified with the Kochs and their movement.

Second, and more importantly, Orlando is already perilously close to being a town without muckrakers, a town without the kind of aggressive journalism that sinks time and money and energy into investigations that hold the powerful in check (and sometimes piss off advertisers). Don't get me wrong: The *Sentinel* has some excellent reporters. But few, I think, would argue that the paper isn't a shell of its former self, all but stripped and sold for parts by the Zell regime.

This is true across the local media spectrum. TV news is almost singularly focused on cheap crime, weather and sports reporting. The *Orlando Business Journal* and *Orlando Magazine* have shown zero interest in shaking things up. Even the *Weekly*, if we're being honest, doesn't dedicate nearly the investigative resources it once did.

The *Sentinel* is, and will continue to be, the most important newsgathering operation in town. The more it gets hollowed out, the less its reporters will be able to carry out Finley Peter Dunne's famous missive to "comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable" – to take on formidable business interests or the politicians who cower before them. With the comfortable calling the shots, there'd be little affliction at all.