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What would the Koch brothers do to the Los Angeles Times?

By: Harold Meyerson – April 23, 2013

On May 21, Los Angeles voters will go to the polls to select a new mayor. Who will govern Los Angeles, however, is only the second-most important local question in the city today. The most important, by far, is who will buy the Los Angeles Times.

The Times is one of the eight daily newspapers now owned by the creditors who took control of the Tribune Co. after real estate wheeler-dealer Sam Zell drove it into bankruptcy. Others include the Chicago Tribune, the Baltimore Sun, the Orlando Sentinel and the Hartford Courant. The Tribune board members whom the creditors selected want to unload the papers in favor of more money-making ventures.

Fans of newspapers are a jumpy lot these days. And in the past couple of weeks, their apprehension has gone through the roof with word that right-wing billionaires Charles and David Koch are looking to buy all eight papers.

The Koch boys, whose oil-and-gas-based fortune places them just behind Bill Gates, Warren Buffett and Larry Ellison as the wealthiest Americans, have been among the chief donors to the tea party wing of the Republican Party. Their political funding vehicle, Americans for Prosperity, ranked with casino billionaire Sheldon Adelson among the largest funders of right-wing causes and candidates in 2012. Their purchase offer won't be buttressed by a record of involvement in or commitment to journalism on their part. But it will come complete with a commitment to journalism as a branch of right-wing ideology.

As the New York Times reported Sunday, the Koch brothers told a group of like-minded money men at a closed-door conclave in Aspen three years ago that the right needed to invest more in grass-roots activism, politics and media. Given the nature of the Kochs' investment in grass-roots activism and politics, that doesn't bode well for the kind of fact-based journalism that most American newspapers strive to practice.

One indication of the Kochs' goals was their effort last year to take control of the board of the Washington-based Cato Institute, the nation's leading libertarian think tank. Widely respected for their scholarly advocacy on behalf of economic, social and foreign-policy libertarian perspectives, Cato's staff and leaders were alarmed when the Kochs sought (ultimately unsuccessfully) to turn the institute, in the words of its chairman, Robert Levy, into "a source of intellectual ammunition for Americans for Prosperity."

Being human beings, all newspaper owners have politics of their own. Since the 19th century, however, most haven't gone into business primarily to advance a political

perspective. Profit, professional and civic pride, and recognition have largely motivated them. It's hard to see how any of these factored into the Koch brothers' calculations.

In their very-brief no-comment on the sale rumors, the Kochs took care to note, "We respect the independence of the journalist institutions" owned by Tribune, but the staffs at those papers fear that, once Kochified, the papers would quickly turn into print versions of Fox News. A recent informal poll that one L.A. Times writer conducted of his colleagues showed that almost all planned to exit if the Kochs took control (and that included sportswriters and arts writers). Those who stayed would have to grapple with how to cover politics and elections in which their paper's owners played a leading role. It's also unclear who in Los Angeles, one of the nation's most liberal cities, would actually want to read such a paper, but then the Kochs don't appear to view this as a money-making venture.

Though slimmed down from its glory days, the L.A. Times remains a great newspaper, as its recent stories on increasing employer surveillance of blue-collar workers illustrate. But the paper that, under the reign of publisher-owner Otis Chandler in the 1960s and '70s, moved to the apex of American journalism has suffered a string of indifferent-to-godawful owners, ranging from Chandler's cousins to Zell — that rare journalism mogul who actively hated journalism and journalists — to, now, the representatives of banks and investment houses looking for the sweetest deal. A (bipartisan) team of Los Angeles investors, led by Eli Broad, who has funded close to half of the new university and museum construction in L.A. in recent years, is also bidding for the paper, and thousands of Times readers have signed petitions preemptively protesting a sale to the Kochs.

The bankers' men on the Tribune board likely view the sale of the papers as a financial transaction, pure and simple. But Times readers (and the Koch brothers themselves) would view a sale to the Kochs as a political transaction first and foremost, turning L.A.'s metropolitan daily into a right-wing mouthpiece whose commitment to empirical journalism would be unproven at best. A newspaper isn't just a business; it's also a civic trust. The money men who have been plunked down on the Tribune board should remember that as they sell off the civic chronicles of some of America's great cities.