

Rich newspaper owners: Industry saviors or foes?

By Brady McCombs, AP

SALT LAKE CITY – The *Salt Lake Tribune's* pending sale to the wealthy Huntsman family unshackles the newspaper from cost-cutting corporate owners and resolves crippling financial uncertainty – but it also raises concerns about whether the influential family will meddle in the paper's coverage.

The same question has come up after other recent newspaper purchases by millionaires – an emerging trend in a struggling industry.

Experts say it's too early to draw any definite conclusions about what the movement may mean for the future of U.S. newspapers. But early reviews are encouraging at three other major newspapers now owned by rich power brokers: the *Washington Post* (Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos), *Boston Globe* (Boston Red Sox owner John Henry) and *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* (Minnesota Timberwolves owner Glen Taylor).

These owners have refrained from interfering in coverage decisions while investing in the search for new audiences and revenue streams, said media analyst Ken Doctor.

Still, there are pitfalls, as evidenced by billionaire casino mogul Sheldon Adelson's ownership of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, which has been besieged by problems since the family made the secretive deal last winter. And concerns linger over whether wealthy new owners will meddle in newspapers' ability to serve as independent watchdogs, especially if they are well-known for their political or religious views.

Paul Huntsman's decision to buy the *Salt Lake Tribune* came as welcome news in Utah. The *Tribune* had been struggling after a

recently revised joint operating agreement with the *Deseret News* cut its share of profits nearly in half in exchange for an undisclosed, one-time lump sum to the company that runs the *Tribune*, Digital First Media.

As often is the case in Utah, religion is fueling some concern about how the Huntsmans will run the state's largest newspaper, which has an average weekday circulation of about 48,000.

The Huntsman family is Mormon, and the *Tribune* has long been a unique and independent voice in a state where more than half of residents and most lawmakers are Mormon. The state's other major newspaper, the *Deseret News*, is owned by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. It still covers news and politics but focuses on faith and family issues.

Paul Huntsman, son of wealthy industrialist Jon Huntsman Sr. and brother of former Utah Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr., said in a statement last week he intends to preserve the *Tribune's* independent voice. He has declined to comment further on his plans.

Tribune publisher and editor Terry Orme said he doesn't expect to talk management plans with Paul Huntsman until the sale closes. But he is optimistic his staff will continue to get the green light to doggedly report on religion and politics while Huntsman puts his stamp on the opinion pages.

Others are leery. State Democratic Sen. Jim Dabakis respects the Huntsmans but worries a newspaper founded by dissident Mormons will lose its autonomy.

"I have serious concerns about this fabulous but astonishingly Republican, astonishingly LDS-loyal family getting control," said Dabakis, who had put together a group to bid for the newspaper. "We need this voice to be strong and to be

unabashed, and to not play into the Republican narrative that so dominates our state's media."

The trend of rich, influence peddlers buying U.S. newspapers, which harkens back to the ownership models of the early to mid-1900s, has been propelled by bargain prices caused by industrywide declines in ad revenue and print readership.

New owners at the *Washington Post*, *Boston Globe*, and *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* are giving their employees breathing room while making investments to experiment with digital products and other initiatives, Doctor said.

"The private owners have provided the gift of more time, not unlimited time, but more time to try and figure it out," Doctor said.

Neal Justin, co-chair of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune Guild, said Taylor has employed a hands-off approach since he bought the paper in 2014 and brought stability to a publication that went through a series of owners that included a huge media company and a hedge fund.

"To have somebody who is from the area, who cares about the area, who is invested in the area, it makes a difference," Justin said.

Adelson's acquisition of the *Las Vegas Review-Journal* is not earning the same rave reviews as the others. Since the sale, the newspaper has seen resignations from a top editor, a handful of reporters including the longtime gambling reporter and last week, a columnist who said he couldn't do his job after the new editor told him he couldn't write about Adelson.

Nevada political journalist Jon Ralston calls it an "ominous start" and said he expects more journalists to leave due to conflicts of interest covering a market where Adelson's business interests stretch widely.

“Almost any story that has to do with business, gaming or politics is going to touch Adelson,” Ralston said. “There’s no way this is going to be sustainable for any journalist with credibility.”

But new *Review-Journal* editor Keith Moyer told attendees at a Society of Professional Journalists meeting last weekend that having a rich owner has its advantages. He said the newspaper is replacing old equipment, adding staff and forming an investigative team. He also said the newspaper’s journalists may soon see a merit-based pay structure.

The Huntsmans, who operate a major cancer research center and whose name adorns university arenas and college programs, are among Utah’s most influential families. The 78-year-old Jon Huntsman Sr. founded a roughly \$13 billion company that refines raw materials that go into thousands of products.

Paul Huntsman, who runs the family company’s private investment arm, made a brief, unplanned visit to the *Tribune* newsroom recently to shake hands and say hello to staff in a gesture that was appreciated, Orme said.

“I’m not going to get worried,” Orme said of the meddling concerns. “But I’m also not so naive as to think that there won’t be conversations ... and perhaps even heated conversations. But that would be nothing new in what newsrooms and owners have grappled with it for a century.”

Associated Press writer Michelle Rindels contributed to this report from Las Vegas.