

Tribune Company on the Block

Sale of media group could change journalistic climate for the worse

Daniel Zarchy
World/National Editor

The journalistic world faces a shakeup in coming months, as the Tribune Company, the nation's second-largest media conglomerate, changes hands. The company will go private, adding to the assets of real estate mogul Sam Zell.

The Tribune Company, established in 1847 with the Chicago Daily Tribune, owns 11 daily newspapers, 24 television stations, and many other assets, including the Chicago Cubs. Most prominent among its holdings are the Chicago Tribune, Los Angeles Times and New York Daily News.

Zell, chairman of Equity International and host to a fortune of roughly \$4.5 billion, will pay about \$315 million out of pocket for a 40 percent investment in Tribune, which will reform as a private company with Zell on its board of directors.

In a Tribune press release, Zell expressed his pleasure to work with Tribune.

"I am delighted to be associated with Tribune Company, which I believe is a world-class publishing and broadcasting enterprise," Zell said. "As a long-term investor, I look forward to partnering with the management and employees as we build on the great heritage of Tribune Company."

Jeff Cohen, longtime media critic and founder of the nonpartisan media watch group Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, is skeptical about the Tribune's new ownership, although he already takes issue with the Tribune Company.

"Tribune's current ownership has been so atrocious that it's hard to imagine worse, more anti-journalism ownership," Cohen wrote in an e-mail to City on a Hill Press. "But every time I think we've reached rock-bottom, and can't get any worse, it does get worse. Real estate guys and investment firms taking over news outlets is not

generally good news."

The massive sum of cash that Zell invested in the company raises a number of red flags in the journalism community, as many fear that he may go to extreme measures to recoup his investment.

John Nichols, Washington correspondent for The Nation magazine, is worried that Zell's main concern is finding a return for his investment. According to Nichols, this goal could compromise the integrity of the newspapers owned by Tribune.

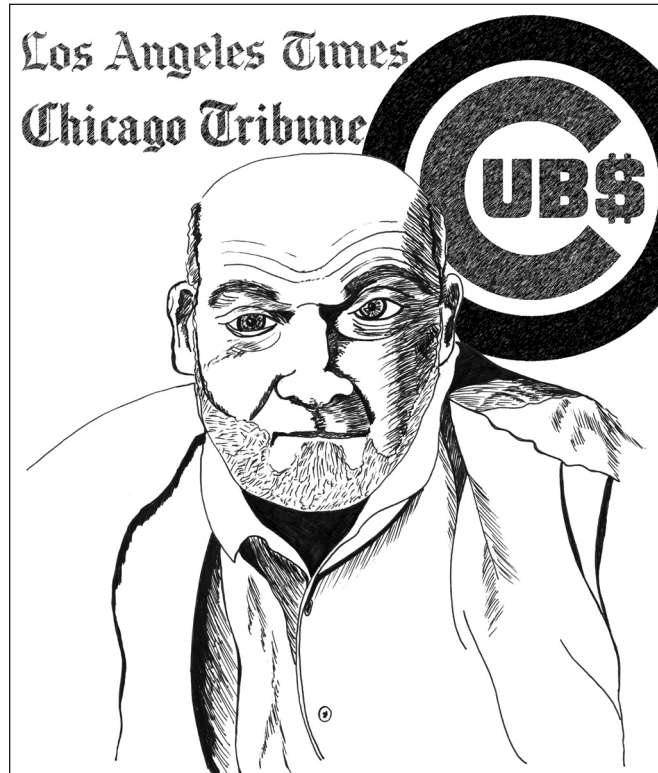
"The way that they get that return is not by improving the quality of journalism; I wish it were," Nichols said. "I think it's extremely unlikely that Zell will improve the quality of coverage or improve the quality of journalism. When you have chain ownership that is owned by investors, whose goal is to take money out of the operation, it's very destructive."

Critics argue that media companies attempting to make a quick buck might downsize staff, cut departments, limit resources to reporters, and altogether squeeze expenses in an effort to increase profit margins.

Nichols, a frequent writer opposing media consolidation and commoditization, explained that a better move for Tribune would have been a breakup, and that media outlets better serve the community when owned locally, rather than by a corporate entity.

"There are an awful lot of indications that [Zell] will be worse," Nichols said. "He has no experience in journalism. If your goal in owning major daily newspapers is to make a fast buck, you will do damage to the quality of those newspapers. That's an absolute guarantee."

Conn Hallinan, analyst for think-tank Foreign Policy In Focus and former journalism lecturer at UC Santa Cruz, echoed the sentiments expressed by Nichols and Cohen. Many mainstream newspapers, he said, tend to streamline their coverage and rely more on sharing stories between



Dylan Murphy | CHP

themselves and syndicating national stories to save money.

"One of the things with newspapers is that the profit margins of newspapers tend to be higher than the average Fortune 500 company," Hallinan said. "These companies are making plenty of money on newspapers. What they do is they skim them. The chain system allows them to share the news, so they can have smaller news staffs. They do cheaper stories; investigative journalism is expensive."

He also criticized many newspapers for not providing enough local news, a responsibility of theirs, because "local reporting is expensive."

"People need to realize that newspapers are profit-making enterprises," Hallinan said. "If they don't make a profit, they go out of business. The question is: can you find the balance between making a profit and fulfilling your constitutional duty to keep the electorate informed?"

Independent Journalist Released After 226 Days

Video blogger Josh Wolf served time for refusing to disclose information he caught on tape

Darren E. Weiss
World/National Reporter

Freelance video blogger Josh Wolf, who spent over seven months in jail for refusing to comply with a subpoena, was released from a Dublin prison last week after cutting a deal with federal prosecutors to post his notorious footage on his website.

According to the agreement, Wolf will not have to testify or identify the people in the video. The previously unreleased footage he shot in July 2005 of a street demonstration against the G-8 Summit in San Francisco, is now posted on his website, joshwolf.net. During the protest, a police officer was struck in the head with a pipe and an attempt was made to set fire to a police car. The footage showed no evidence of either offense.

Wolf, who served the longest sentence of any journalist in American history, insisted all along that the footage contained nothing significant to the investigation headed by U.S. Attorney Scott Schools. He claimed it was his constitutional right as a journalist to protect his sources and to not assist authorities.

Part of the deal mandated that Wolf answer two questions under penalty of perjury. He was asked whether he saw anyone throw anything at a police car and if he saw the person that San Francisco Police Officer Peter Shields was

trying to arrest when he was hit on the head. He replied "no" to both.

Dozens of organizations and advocacy groups, including the Committee to Protect Journalists (CPJ), supported Wolf and called for his release.

"We're pleased this has finally ended," said Joel Simon, Executive Director of the CPJ. "But we're concerned that the actions of the federal prosecutors could have a lasting impact on independent journalism."

Simon said that the case sends a message to bloggers that they don't have the same protection extended to traditional journalists.

California has a shield law to protect journalists from testifying in state court. However, no such law exists in federal court.

The federal government prosecuted the Wolf case on the grounds that federal funding paid for the San Francisco police car in question.

However, questions of Wolf's legitimacy as a journalist have surfaced as a result of his case. In 2006 the Society of Professional Journalists awarded Josh Wolf—a self-proclaimed anarchist—with the Journalist of the Year award "for upholding the principles of a free and independent press."

Debra Saunders, a conservative columnist for the San Francisco Chronicle, attacked the credibility of his arguments.

"He's a blogger with an agenda and a camera," she wrote in a February column. "He does not work for a news organization. He does not answer to editors who fact-check."

Lowell Bergman, professor at the UC Berkeley School of Journalism and correspondent for PBS's Frontline, interviewed Josh Wolf on the program before Wolf's stay in prison and believes that Wolf falls under the accepted definition of a journalist.

"Because of the First Amendment and the broad definition of it, anyone who is writing or publishing to an audience is considered a journalist," Bergman said in an interview with *City on a Hill Press*. "My observation is the Josh Wolf case raises issues that people in the blogosphere are going to have to confront."

Wolf's release from custody was "without prejudice," meaning the federal government could issue a new subpoena in the future. Wolf could also be held in criminal contempt, which carries separate penalties. However, according to his attorney, this occurrence is very unlikely.

Jeff Cohen, media critic and author of the book *Wizards of Media Oz: Behind the Curtain of Mainstream News*, defended Wolf.

"Without the ability to protect sources and unpublished materials from the government, journalists are turned into arms of the state," he said. "Wolf's tenacity is a model for independent journalists."