

Baltimore Sun newspaper sold to right-wing media conglomerate

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The *Baltimore Sun*, the largest daily newspaper in Maryland in terms of general circulation and online readership, has been purchased by David D. Smith, the millionaire executive chair of media conglomerate Sinclair Broadcast Group. Smith arranged a private deal with hedge fund Alden Global Capital to acquire a majority stake in the *Sun* and various smaller local newspapers in Maryland.

The *Sun* is one of the longest-running newspapers in the United States, having been founded in 1837 in Baltimore, at the time the second-largest city in the US. While Baltimore's relative status among US cities declined over the next 150 years with the rise of Chicago, Philadelphia and Detroit and other cities, throughout Maryland's history the *Sun* has remained the leading journalistic institution in the state, winning 16 Pulitzer Prizes for local and international reporting.

The *Sun* created the first television station in Maryland, WMAR, in 1947. For most of the 20th century, the newspaper produced morning and evening editions and at one point had no fewer than eight international bureaus—from London to Moscow to New Delhi—and more than 500 newsroom staff at its peak. Journalists with the *Sun* on their resumes include *New York Times* columnist Thomas Edsall, former PBS anchor Gwen Ifill and David Simon, creator of the fictional TV series *The Wire*, which is set in Baltimore.

The *Sun* was owned by a local Baltimore family for a century and a half after its founding. In 1986, the descendants of founder Arunah Shepherdson Abell sold the newspaper and its affiliates to the Times-Mirror Company, the owner of the *Los Angeles Times*, for \$600 million.

In 2000, the Times-Mirror Company was acquired by Tribune Media Company, owner of the *Chicago Tribune* and other newspapers, which placed the *Sun* under its Tribune Publishing subsidiary in 2014. Tribune

Publishing was itself acquired by Alden Global Capital in 2021, which had been increasing its stake in Tribune Publishing for years and through its MediaNews Group subsidiary already owned hundreds of local newspapers across the country.

The Times-Mirror Company closed three of the *Sun*'s foreign bureaus in the 1990s. Cost cutting continued under the Tribune regime, with staff layoffs and the closing of the rest of the foreign desks by 2008 during a period of downsizing. When Alden Capital picked up the Tribune-owned papers, it further intensified the staffing cuts.

With a reputation for maximizing profits, Alden's MediaNews Group (MNG), also known as Digital First Media, laid off 75 percent of employees at 12 newspapers represented by The NewsGuild-CWA between 2012 and 2020. The strategy pursued by Alden President Heath Freeman—who reportedly once blurted out, “What do all these people do?” when touring a newsroom, and questioned why investigative journalists could not be replaced by freelancers—is to “milk its newspapers until they run dry,” according to Ken Doctor of Harvard University's Nieman Lab for Journalism.

Doctor estimated MNG's fiscal 2017 operating margins were 17 percent, the highest in the industry and approximately double those of its peers such as the New York Times Co., Gannett and McClatchy. In addition to the draconian headcount reductions, Alden stripped newspapers of their real estate and printing assets to boost profits. Through all of this, Alden treated MNG newspapers as a cash cow for hundreds of millions of dollars in money transfers to fund investments unrelated to journalism, such as cobalt and coal mining.

When Alden bought out Tribune Publishing it was reported Alden would be selling the *Sun* and other Maryland publications to Stewart Bainum Jr., the billionaire Marylander who chairs Choice Hotels.

Tribune and Alden both balked at the proposal from Bainum, who went on to found the *Baltimore Banner* in response in 2022. The *Banner* hired away many former *Sun* staffers and currently has a comparable number of digital subscribers, although the *Sun* still outranks it in terms of online visits.

As noted by multiple outlets covering the sale, the *Sun* is again in the hands of a local owner, as Smith and Sinclair are both based in the suburbs north of Baltimore. This marks somewhat of an unusual situation in contemporary American journalism, as between the *Sun* and the *Banner*, Baltimore now has two locally owned newspapers with at least 70 journalists (the *Sun*, 91; the *Banner*, 73).

There has been a decline in local news coverage in the US over the last two decades, with new online outlets not making up for the decline in print newspapers and media operations increasingly concentrated in key cities such as New York, Chicago and Washington D.C. Last year, Alden Capital's MediaNews Group bought up even more local newspapers, acquiring essentially all the local papers in northeastern Pennsylvania, including the century-old *Scranton Times-Tribune*.

Smith's purchase of the *Sun* brings to mind Amazon founder Jeff Bezos' purchase of the *Washington Post* in 2013, Sheldon Adelson's purchase of the *Las Vegas Review-Tribune* in 2015, and Elon Musk's private buyout of Twitter/X last year. These three billionaires put Smith's wealth to shame, as his net worth is estimated to be about \$50 million. Smith's purchase of the *Sun* also exposes the claim that local ownership in journalism, in itself, can act as a remedy to the decline in local news and investigative reporting across the country.

While Smith, who is the son of late Sinclair founder Julian Smith, says he intends to keep the *Sun*'s operations separate from Sinclair broadcasting, his political intentions in buying the newspaper are clear. Admitting that he only started reading the *Sun* a few months ago, Smith told his new employees that the "mainstream media" does not "cover things that affect everybody" in Baltimore and that his purchase of the newspaper stemmed from the journalistic aspiration to "serve a greater public interest over time."

In 2018, Smith told *New York* magazine, "The print media is so left-wing as to be meaningless dribble which accounts for why the industry is and will fade away. Just no credibility." He added that at Sinclair the executives "don't talk to the print media as a general principle as we find them to be so devoid of reality and serving no real

purpose."

In contrast, Sinclair has taken upon itself the "real purpose" of promoting fake news and conspiracies. Smith told then-presidential candidate Donald Trump in 2016, "We are here to deliver your message. Period."

In its infamous "must-run" syndicated segments, which are programs and messages Sinclair demands its TV stations broadcast, the media group pushes the views of Q-Anon-curious Sharyl Attkisson and has promoted programs echoing Trump's attacks on the media.

In his new venture, Smith has a business partner in frequent Sinclair commentator Armstrong Williams, who is taking a minority stake in the newspaper.

Williams, a campaign adviser to former presidential-hopeful Ben Carson, is notable for his nationally syndicated program in which he defended Trump's illegal actions in Georgia during the 2020 election and derided protesters as "terrorists."

In one 2018 study, Emory University professors Gregory Martin and Josh McCrain found that local news stations bought by Sinclair had "substantial increases in coverage of national politics at the expense of local politics" and "a significant rightward shift in the ideological slant of coverage."

Nieman Lab founder Joshua Benton said the sale to Smith raises the "question of whether there can be a worse newspaper owner than Alden Global Capital," while the *Sun*'s longtime media critic David Zurawik said, "As if being owned by Alden wasn't enough of an insult to what was once a great Baltimore journalistic institution, now comes an even deeper moment of degradation with David Smith."

Simon, the former *Sun* reporter turned TV creator, wrote in a lengthy thread on X/Twitter last week, "The Baltimore Sun is now owned by someone who has delivered a news product that begins with a hard ideological premise and then tailors all coverage and editorializing to fit." Simon continued, "In the end, there are no great cities without great news organizations and absent an entity that truly covers its region independently and without ideological cant, corruption and grift will become unceasing."



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