

Billionaire Owners of *Los Angeles Times* and *Washington Post* Quash Presidential Endorsements, Raising Questions of Journalistic Independence

In October 2024, as the election between Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump entered its final phase, the *Los Angeles Times* and *The Washington Post* broke from recent tradition by not endorsing a candidate for president. The subsequent revelation that the papers' billionaire owners were responsible for the decisions not to endorse sparked debate about journalistic independence and whether the business interests of wealthy media owners tend to compromise that independence.

The *Los Angeles Times*

On Oct. 14, 2024, the *Los Angeles Times* (*LA Times*) Editorial Board updated its list of 2024 political endorsements. The board prefaced its endorsements by writing that, “[the 2024 election] might be the most consequential election in a generation.” The endorsements included politicians running for local, state, and national office. However, the *LA Times* made no endorsement in the presidential election, marking a change for the paper, which had endorsed the Democratic nominee in every presidential election between 2008 and 2020. Prior to 2008 — from 1976 to 2004 — the *LA Times* did not endorse candidates for president. The paper offered no explanation at the time for its decision not to endorse a candidate in the 2024 election. The *Times* 2024 endorsements are available online at:

<https://www.latimes.com/opinion/story/2024-09-10/los-angeles-times-elections-endorsements-2024-november>.

On Oct. 22, 2024, *Semafor* published a story stating that the owner of the *LA Times*, Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong, had personally blocked the paper's editorial board from endorsing either of the candidates in the 2024 presidential election. According to sources within the paper, the editorial board had planned to endorse Kamala Harris, and had drafted an outline of the endorsement, but was told in early October by the *Times*' executive editor Terry Tang that no presidential endorsement would be made. The directive apparently came directly from Soon-Shiong. Soon-Shiong is a multibillionaire who made his fortune in the

healthcare industry. According to *Forbes*, he invented the cancer drug Abraxane, and later sold several drug companies he owned for a combined \$9.1 billion. He bought the *LA Times* in 2018. The *Semafor* article is available online at: <https://www.semafor.com/article/10/22/2024/los-angeles-times-wont-endorse-for-president>.

Soon-Shiong's decision to quash the *Times*' Kamala Harris endorsement was not the first time he had influenced editorial decisions at the paper. In 2020, members of the *Times* editorial board reportedly met with primary candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination and were set to endorse Elizabeth Warren before Soon-Shiong overruled them at the last minute. And in early 2024, according to reporting by *The New York Times*, Soon-Shiong pressured Kevin Merida, the then-executive editor of the *LA Times*, to suppress an article about a doctor acquaintance of Soon-Shiong's who was embroiled in a lawsuit. According to further reporting by *The New York Times*, Soon-Shiong's daughter, Nika Soon-Shiong, has also attempted to influence the *LA Times*' news coverage. Nika Soon-Shiong, who is a progressive political activist, has criticized the newspaper's coverage of crime, policing, and the Israel-Hamas war, at times even reaching out directly to reporters to express her dismay with their work. According to *The New York Times* report, it was sometimes difficult for reporters at the *LA Times* to know whether Nika Soon-Shiong's criticism reflected her own opinions or her father's. The *New York Times* article is available online at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/26/us/los-angeles-times-endorsement-Soon-Shiong.html>.

On October 23, the day after the *Semafor* article was published, *LA Times* editorial editor Mariel Garza resigned in protest. In an interview with Sewell Chan — himself former editorial editor at the *LA Times*, and current executive editor of the *Columbia Journalism Review* — Garza stated "I am resigning because I want to make it clear that I am not okay with us being silent. In dangerous times, honest people need to stand up. This is how I'm standing up." Garza confirmed in the interview that Soon-Shiong had quashed the endorsement. She stated that although she did not think the *LA Times*' endorsement would have changed many minds given the paper's liberal readership, an endorsement was nevertheless the "next logical step" following a series of editorials detailing "how dangerous Trump is to democracy," his unfitness for the presidency, and his threats to jail his enemies. Garza added that she thought the *LA Times*' decision not to endorse would seem "perplexing to readers, and possibly suspicious." Garza's interview with Chan in the *Columbia Journalism Review* is available online

at:

https://www.cjr.org/business_of_news/los-angeles-times-editorials-editor-resigns-after-owner-blocks-presidential-endorsement.php.

In the days after Garza's resignation, the fallout over the *LA Times* non-endorsement continued to spread. On October 24, two members of the *LA Times* editorial board, Robert Greene and Karin Klein, resigned their posts. According to the *Associated Press* (AP), Greene, who won a Pulitzer Prize for editorial writing in 2021, said that Patrick Soon-Shiong's decision not to endorse, "hurt particularly because one of the candidates, Donald Trump, has demonstrated such hostility to principles that are central to journalism — respect for the truth and reverence for democracy." On October 25, the staff of the *LA Times* issued an open letter to Patrick Soon-Shiong and Terry Tang. The letter noted with dismay that, although the *LA Times*' refusal to issue an endorsement had been covered extensively by other news organizations, the newspaper had yet to cover the story itself. In order to regain the *LA Times*' readers' trust, the staff argued that Soon-Shiong and Tang should cover the non-endorsement in the newspaper and provide a rationale for why no endorsement was made. The AP report is available online at: <https://apnews.com/article/los-angeles-times-editors-resign-af6c077d502c9d4878bee01fa6575450>. The open letter from the *LA Times* staff is available online at: <https://latguild.com/news/2024/10/25/open-letter-from-la-times-staff>.

As the backlash spread, Patrick Soon-Shiong and his daughter attempted to clarify, in several seemingly contradictory public statements, how and why the decision not to endorse had been made. On Oct. 23, 2024, following Garza's resignation, Patrick Soon-Shiong explained his decision in a post on X. He wrote that, rather than an endorsement, he had suggested to the editorial board that it publish an analysis of the positive and negative aspects of each candidate's policy positions. According to his post, instead of taking this approach, the editorial board elected to "remain silent," and he had "accepted their decision." However, this account of events was immediately complicated by further statements. On Oct. 24, 2024, Nika Soon-Shiong posted on X that the decision not to endorse was "not a vote for Donald Trump," writing instead that it was "a refusal to ENDORSE a candidate that is overseeing a war on children." Her post suggested that the paper's decision was motivated by Kamala Harris's continued support for Israel in its war with Hamas. She confirmed this view in an Oct. 26, 2024, statement to *The New York Times*, in which she said: "Our family made the joint decision not to endorse a Presidential candidate. This was the first and only time I have been

involved in the process. As a citizen of a country openly financing genocide, and as a family that experienced South African Apartheid, the endorsement was an opportunity to repudiate justifications for the widespread targeting of journalists and ongoing war on children.” However, Patrick Soon-Shiong rejected this version of events in his own statement, saying that his daughter did not speak for the paper. “Nika speaks in her own personal capacity regarding her opinion, as every community member has the right to do,” he said. “She does not have any role at The LA Times, nor does she participate in any decision or discussion with the editorial board, as has been made clear many times.” Patrick Soon-Shiong’s statement on X is available online at: <https://x.com/DrPatSoonShiong/status/1849217132183060705>. Nika Soon-Shiong’s statement on X is available online at: <https://x.com/nikasoonshiong/status/1849676214941679831>.

Following the Soon-Shiongs’ statements, *LA Times* staff members contested Patrick Soon-Shiong’s assertions and cast doubts on his and his daughter’s motivations. According to the *AP* report, Karin Klein cited Mr. Soon-Shiong’s initial October 23 statement about what happened as the reason for her resignation. She wrote in a post on X, “[t]he decision to resign was made simple and easy when [Patrick Soon-Shiong] posted on X yesterday about his suggestion that the board create an analysis of the positives and negatives of each candidate and let the voters make their own decisions. News side does an excellent job of neutral analysis. That’s not an editorial.” In its open letter, the *LA Times* staff wrote: “Our newspaper’s owner publicly blamed the members of the Editorial Board for his decision not to endorse, saying incorrectly that ‘they chose to remain silent.’ They did not. They planned an endorsement — one that was rejected. The owner’s action unnecessarily made Editorial Board members vulnerable to harassment, impacting their ability to effectively perform their jobs.” Speaking to *The New York Times*, several senior editors at the newspaper speculated that Patrick Soon-Shiong’s decision could have been politically motivated. They noted that he had often been critical of the Biden administration, had bragged about having dinner with Donald Trump shortly after he won the presidency in 2016, and often has approvals pending before the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The Washington Post

On Oct. 25, 2024, William Lewis, publisher and CEO of *The Washington Post* (*The Post*), announced in an editorial that the paper would not endorse a

candidate in the 2024 presidential election. Lewis framed the decision as a return to the paper's roots. He noted that during much of the 20th century, *The Post* had not endorsed presidential candidates until, "for understandable reasons," it chose to endorse Jimmy Carter in the 1976 election. And although the paper continued to endorse presidential candidates in all but one subsequent election (1988), Lewis wrote that the paper "had it right before," and would no longer make presidential endorsements. In support of the decision, he quoted approvingly from a 1972 editorial in which *The Post*'s Editorial Board explained its decision not to endorse a candidate in that election: "In talking about the choice of a President of the United States, what is a newspaper's proper role? . . . Our own answer is that we are, as our masthead proclaims, an independent newspaper, and that with one exception (our support of President Eisenhower in 1952), it has not been our tradition to bestow formal endorsement upon presidential candidates. We can think of no reason to depart from that tradition this year." Lewis further wrote that while he expected that the decision would be interpreted in a variety of ways, including both as a tacit endorsement of one candidate and a repudiation of another, ultimately *The Post* hoped to support its "readers' ability to make up their own minds on this, the most consequential of American decisions — whom to vote for as the next president." Lewis's editorial explaining the decision is available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/10/25/washington-post-endors-ement/>.

According to a report from *The Post*'s news division that ran the same day as Lewis's editorial, the decision not to endorse was made by Jeff Bezos, the paper's billionaire owner who also owns the space exploration company Blue Origin and the mega-retailer Amazon. Bezos made the decision even though members of the editorial board had already drafted an endorsement of Kamala Harris. The report also noted that although *The Post* would no longer be endorsing candidates for president, it would continue to endorse candidates in other elections.

As detailed in *The Post*'s report, condemnation of the decision was swift. When it was announced to the Editorial Board, several members reportedly expressed "vehement opposition." Robert Kagan, a longtime *Post* editorial writer and editor-at-large in the opinion department, resigned in protest. He described Bezos's decision as a "preemptive bending of the knee to who [Bezos] may think is the probable winner." He continued, "[a]nybody who is as much a part of the American economy as Bezos is . . . they obviously want to have a good

relationship with whoever is in power. [It's] an attempt to try not to be on the wrong side of Donald Trump." In an editorial that was also published on October 25, twenty-one *Post* columnists condemned Bezos's decision, calling it a "terrible mistake" that "abandon[ed] . . . the fundamental editorial convictions of the newspaper that we love." The editorial continued: "This is a moment for the institution to be making clear its commitment to democratic values, the rule of law and international alliances, and the threat that Donald Trump poses to them . . . There is no contradiction between The Post's important role as an independent newspaper and its practice of making political endorsements, both as a matter of guidance to readers and as a statement of core beliefs."

The decision also caused uproar in *The Post*'s newsroom, and was bitterly criticized by distinguished alumni of the paper. Carol D. Leonnig, a Pulitzer Prize winner and *Post* staff reporter wrote in an email: "I don't care who the Post opinion section endorses. . . . For me, and for the readers and sources who today have flooded me with calls and messages, what's curious is the timing and odd explanation of this endorsement change. It raises concerns about the thing I *do* care so deeply about: whether our ownership will continue to let my colleagues and me pursue hard-hitting reporting, independently, without worrying who is upset with our coverage." In a statement, The Washington Post Guild, the union which represents newsroom employees, wrote that it was concerned by the fact that the decision was made so close to the election, and further worried that the announcement by Lewis suggested *The Post*'s management was trying to exert control over the paper's editorial division. In a text message, former *Post* executive editor Martin Baron called the decision "cowardice," and predicted that "Donald Trump will celebrate this as an invitation to further intimidate The Post's owner, Jeff Bezos (and other media owners)," while former executive editor Marcus Brauchli wrote in an email that, "the decision looks craven." *The Washington Post* report is available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/style/media/2024/10/25/washington-post-endorsement-president/>.

On October 28, Jeff Bezos published an op-ed in *The Post* responding to the criticism. He wrote that the decision was motivated by a desire to restore Americans' perilously low trust in the media. According to Bezos, political endorsements do not influence voters and only enhance the sense that the media is biased. Further, this sense of bias causes citizens to turn to potentially inaccurate alternative forms of media for information. Bezos wrote that he was unwilling to let *The Post* "fade into irrelevance — overtaken by unresearched

podcasts and social media barbs.” Addressing accusations that he made the decision not to endorse to protect his own interests, Bezos assured readers that “no *quid pro quo* of any kind is at work here.” One could view his wealth and business interests as a “web of conflicting interests,” or as a “bulwark against intimidation,” he wrote. “Only my own principles can tip the balance from one to the other. I assure you that my views here are, in fact, principled.” Bezos’s editorial is available online at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2024/10/28/jeff-bezos-washington-post-trust/>.

Reactions From Readers and Free Press Advocates

Criticism of the *LA Times* and *The Washington Post*’s non-endorsements was not confined to the papers’ respective newsrooms and editorial staffs. In the days after the announcements, thousands of readers canceled subscriptions. Reports varied, but according to NPR, it is likely that the *LA Times* lost between 10,000 and 18,000 subscribers because of the non-endorsement, whereas *The Washington Post* lost 250,000 subscribers, or nearly ten percent of its subscriber base. The NPR report is available online at: <https://www.npr.org/2024/10/29/nx-s1-5170939/more-than-250-000-subscribers-have-left-washington-post-over-withheld-endorsement>.

According to journalism ethics experts, Soon-Shiong and Bezos’s decisions to exert influence over the news organizations they own raised pressing ethical concerns about journalistic independence. An October 28 report on the non-endorsements from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) noted that “acting independently is one of four core principles of ethical journalism, and that journalists should ‘Deny favored treatment to advertisers, donors or any other special interests, and resist internal and external pressure to influence coverage.’” (Quoting from the SPJ Code of Ethics). The SPJ worried that the non-endorsements marked the beginning, not the end, of ownership interference in journalism. Lynn Walsh, former ethics committee chair and former SPJ National President, warned that, “it’s [not] far-fetched that publishers or part-time owners might try to exert more control over editorial decisions in the future. If ownership begins dictating what stories can or can’t be published, it sets a precedent for compromising journalistic independence, which could lead to deeper restrictions on news coverage over time.” The SPJ report is available online at: <https://www.spj.org/news.asp?ref=3041>.

Press advocates further noted that the danger of ownership encroachment on journalistic independence is magnified by the far-reaching nature of Soon-Shiong and Bezos's business interests. For instance, although Bezos claimed in his op-ed that the non-endorsement was not part of a *quid pro quo* arrangement, as the independent journalism watchdog *Popular Information* noted, his assertion was belied by the fact that Amazon and Blue Origin's business prospects are inextricably linked to the procurement of lucrative federal government contracts. Worse, on the same day that Bezos quashed the planned endorsement, executives from his space exploration company Blue Origin reportedly met with Donald Trump, further heightening the sense of impropriety. Unlike Amazon and Blue Origin, *The Post* is a money loser that reportedly operated with a \$100 million deficit in 2023. Further, there is evidence that *The Post*'s reporting has affected Bezos's bottom line — or at the very least, that Bezos believes it has. In 2019, Amazon sued the federal government alleging that it awarded a \$10 billion computing contract to Microsoft instead of Amazon because of then President Trump's personal dislike for Bezos and *The Washington Post*. As *Popular Information*, a news site authored by Judd Legum, the founder of *Think Progress*, noted, Bezos "faces an even more acute threat to his business interests" in a second Trump term given the former president's alliance with Bezos's competitor Elon Musk, and his well-documented disdain for Bezos and *The Post*. The incentive for Bezos to avoid this risk by influencing *The Post*'s coverage of Trump is plain. Accordingly, his decision not to endorse struck many as corruptly motivated. And the same conflict of interest is potentially present for Soon-Shiong, who, according to *Popular Information*, regularly has business interests before the FDA (a fact that was also noted by editors at the *LA Times*). The *Popular Information* article from which this information is sourced is available online at: <https://popular.info/p/the-billionaire-media-complex>.

In light of this, the media reform advocacy group Free Press responded to the non-endorsements by calling for the end of billionaire ownership of journalism organizations, writing: "[W]e must demand that our elected officials put the public's needs above corporate profits. We should stand with the workers in these newsrooms committed to doing good work despite the actions of their bosses. We must invest in the independent and locally controlled nonprofit outlets reinventing local journalism." The Free Press report is available online at: <https://www.freepress.net/blog/washington-post-los-angeles-times-save-journalism-from-billionaires/>.

In an editorial on the non-endorsements, Monika Bauerlein, CEO of *Mother Jones*, encouraged readers to support local and non-corporate owned newsrooms. She wrote, “[t]hese journalists are incredibly hard-working, efficient, and fearless — I know because we often partner with them.” She further acknowledged that independent journalism is chronically starved for money, and that “this time of the year means losing sleep because I don’t know how we’ll put together a budget for the following year to maintain a newsroom.” However, she wrote, she took courage from the fact, “when we are ready to publish, no one can tell us not to.” The *Mother Jones* piece is available online at: <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2024/10/billionaire-owned-news-is-not-our-only-option/>.

Silha Center Director and Professor of Media Ethics and Law Jane Kirtley characterized *The Post*’s decision not to endorse as a “body blow,” saying that she was “stunned” and “devastated” by the decision. Speaking on Minnesota Public Radio’s *Minnesota Today* program, Kirtley stated: “Jeff Bezos [in his op-ed] . . . said ‘I’m not an ideal owner of The Washington Post,’ and many of us today would agree with him on that. . . . [T]o undertake this kind of action, so close to the election, is, to me, really unconscionable, and reflects the fact that he’s not a journalist, that’s not his background, and he really doesn’t understand the core mission of the news media.” Although Kirtley acknowledged that there is a long history in the United States of news organization owners directing editorial content, she argued that Bezos and Soon-Shiong’s cases are distinct insofar as both billionaires had previously stated that they intended to steward the news organizations they own in the public interest. And yet, the timing of the non-endorsements — so close to the election — and their apparent connection with the billionaires’ business interests, called the owner’s earlier commitments into question. “Because of some unfortunate revelations in the last few days about Mr. Bezos, and Blue Origin, and meetings of his employees with members of the Trump team, it is really hard to avoid the appearance that this is all about amassing power and influence,” Kirtley stated. “[R]ather than take a stand, [Bezos and Soon-Shiong have] chosen to take no stand at all.”

Speaking further about the non-endorsements to WGN Radio in Chicago, Kirtley characterized the decisions in one word: “cowardice.” “If you’re going to be a major news organization’s owner, I think you have an obligation to help to guide public understanding. . . . [An endorsement is] a statement of where you stand. And I’d like to think you stand for democracy. That’s not biased.” Kirtley concluded by stating that, “It is important for news organizations to [take a

position on the 2024 election], not because I think that they will turn the election one way or the other, but because they have a stake in democracy that's perhaps unique — the First Amendment is so important to what they do — they ought to be standing up and being counted on this point.”

Kirtley's interview with Minnesota Public Radio is available online at: <https://www.mprnews.org/episode/2024/10/29/minnesota-now-oct-29-2024>, and her interview with WGN is available online at: <https://wgnradio.com/john-williams/>.

— Stuart Levesque
Silha *Bulletin* Editor