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How Patrick Soon-Shiong Can Save the Los Angeles Times (Opinion)

L.A.'s wealthiest person has the unique power to keep the region's most powerful institution – the Los Angeles Times – alive, and thereby establish his greatest legacy

CALVIN NAITO • MAR 27, 2024

The survival of the *Los Angeles Times* is critical to the lives of all of us who live in Southern California. For decades, *The Times* has been the most powerful news outlet, serving as the region's watchdog, educator, source of informed knowledge and a common link for all Angelenos. The newspaper's emblem eagle symbolizes an institution that soars above the region with a keen eye for the truth.

While publishers and owners have come-and-gone, the eagle has endured. Today the paper rests in the hands of owner Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong, a local physician-scientist, an entrepreneur who heads a collection of ventures under the umbrella entity named NantWorks, and the richest person in town at \$19.8 billion, according to the annual tabulation of the *Los Angeles Business Journal*.

Like many newspapers across the U.S., *The Times* is losing money, in large part because of the emergence of digital media platforms that have drawn audiences, advertisers and subscribers away from print focused publications and toward online outlets where much of the content can be viewed at little or no cost. In January, Soon-Shiong announced that the paper was losing \$30-40 million a year and, as a cost-saving measure, [laying off 20% of the newsroom](#), one of the largest downsizings in the paper's 142-year history. Given the seemingly huge challenge of creating a sustainable newspaper, many are speculating about whether Soon-Shiong, who purchased the paper in 2018, will hold onto the paper or sell it.

The best hope for those of us who live and work in Southern California is that Soon-Shiong retain ownership of *The Times*, the largest and most influential news organization on the West Coast. He said in a January note to his staff, "We are committed to important public service journalism that our community relies on while accelerating new, novel approaches." Soon-Shiong has the money, intelligence, drive and desire to create a more just world – a unique repertoire of power to keep the paper alive. If he employs those strengths, he can create a more powerful and lasting business.

How can Soon-Shiong achieve this?

Here are three suggestions for him to consider:

First, convert the paper into a public good. Soon-Shiong can create a multi-billion-dollar endowment and run *The Times* as a non-profit, where it could continue to generate fee-for-product revenue, but also rely on outside subsidies (e.g., grants, donations, government financial support). Since he has vowed to give away at least 50% of his wealth through the billionaires' "The Giving Pledge" established by Warren Buffett and Bill Gates, this endowment can be a way to meet that pledge.

Second, become a policy advocate. The creation of digital media has changed the marketplace and world, and the analog media world is a thing of the past. Trying to cut one's way to sustainable profitability through layoffs has not proved successful at newspapers. Most advertising now goes to big tech players like Google and Facebook, who collect huge revenue on their platforms while publishing news content from *The Times* and other legacy outlets for free. Big tech should be required to pay for posting news, as they now are required to do in Australia and Canada. Similar legislative policy proposals have been drafted in California and Washington, D.C., but have not yet been enacted. Soon-Shiong should channel his great wealth and private sector influence into the public sector by creating an advocacy group of his print media peers to persuade the public and elected officials to pass fee-for-use laws that would serve the public interest.

Third, Soon-Shiong should exercise leadership and mobilize group resources to ensure the longevity of *The Times*. Given that he lacks the background and experience in journalism and the media publishing sectors, it is unlikely that he will singlehandedly come up with the revolutionary business model that veteran creative executives have been struggling with for years. He can, however, serve as an orchestrator, convener and benefactor, and source of inspiration. He can hire experts to advise him on the feasibility of, for example, purchasing profitable local TV outlets and transforming *The Times* into a multimedia enterprise with synergies and complimentary revenue streams. In short, he can lead teams with specialized skills to find solutions that he alone cannot find.

The collective pool of creative individuals in the industry can no doubt come up with other suggestions on how Soon-Shiong and his family can keep *The Times* alive. As the owner, he can oversee a process for achieving this, something far more preferable than a scenario where, for example, a conglomerate or an out-of-town investment firm, focused on short-term profits, acquires ownership and control.

Soon-Shiong seems to be a man driven by his roots. He chose the name of his company NantWorks, which has a feather emerging from a circle, after the Apache word "Nantan," whose meaning is "he who speaks for the people." In a past interview, he said, "my job, frankly, is to help the marginalized and underserved," a view probably shaped in part by his birth and early years in apartheid South Africa, where he experienced racial discrimination. He has also stated that he would like to be best remembered as a physician-scientist, an M.D. who understands, no doubt, the physician's oath of Hippocrates, which ends by declaring, "may I gain forever reputation among all men for my life and for my art." He has the potential of being remembered as a physician-scientist who saved the *Los Angeles Times*.

His roots, life mission and humanity can now be channeled to transform *The Times*. We need to collectively communicate to him that he needs to retain ownership of *The Times*, our watchdog, educator, source of informed knowledge and common link. Soon-Shiong is our best hope that the *Los Angeles Times*' eagle will continue to fly above the region, the eagle eye for the truth. If Soon-Shiong — who at age 71 is in the last one-fourth of his life — skillfully and compassionately uses his repertoire of strengths in a focused and sustained way, he can create a more powerful and lasting business that will outlive him — and prove to be his greatest legacy to Los Angeles and the world.

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