

# [***The Baltimore Sun is returning to local ownership — with a buyer who has made his politics clear***](https://advance.lexis.com/api/document?collection=news&id=urn:contentItem:6B43-Y4H1-DYMD-60HR-00000-00&context=1516831)

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**Body**

A local buyer taking over a struggling newspaper in the 21st century is normally cause for some celebration. But The Baltimore Sun’s newly announced owner has a very specific political background, and some are concerned about what the 187-year-old publication could become.

David D. Smith, executive chairman of the Sinclair broadcasting chain and an active contributor to conservative causes, has [*bought Baltimore Sun Media*](https://apnews.com/article/baltimore-sun-sale-david-d-smith-9f9cefe838ca6f17830ca051a5c1efcb) from the investment firm Alden Global Capital. The purchase price was not disclosed.

Smith met with employees of The Sun on Tuesday to talk about his plans, saying he hopes to make the newsroom more profitable. He was not made available for an interview with The Associated Press.

In a [*Sun story*](https://www.baltimoresun.com/2024/01/15/baltimore-sun-media-sold-david-d-smith/) announcing the sale a day earlier, Smith said that he was in the news business because he believes “we have an absolute responsibility to serve the public interest.” He also criticized the city’s “mainstream media” while acknowledging that he began reading the paper regularly only a few months ago.

“Have no fear of me,” Smith told the Sun newsroom on Tuesday, according to someone who was there and relayed the statement on condition of anonymity because it was a private meeting. “What you should fear is the marketplace.”

**THE NEW OWNER**

Smith serves as executive chairman of the Maryland-based Sinclair Broadcasting Inc., which owns or operates 185 local television stations across the country and is known for infusing a right-wing sensibility into its news products. In 2018, the company ordered its anchors across the country to [*read a statement*](https://apnews.com/article/c342968053e443b995fca9855b94c72d) that largely echoed what former President Donald Trump had said about “fake news.”

The company was founded as the Chesapeake Television Corp. by Smith’s father, Julian Sinclair Smith, and changed its name to Sinclair in the 1980s as it began expanding nationally.

Smith made clear that he used his personal resources to purchase The Sun, which will not fall under the Sinclair umbrella and will be under local ownership for the first time in 38 years. Smith told the newspaper he had one partner: Armstrong Williams, a commentator who hosts a show on Sinclair’s affiliates.

The Sinclair-owned Fox station in Baltimore frequently airs coverage blaming the city’s Democratic mayor, Brandon Scott, for gun violence and failing schools. And Smith has become a prominent player in local ***politics***. In 2022, he helped finance an effort to impose term limits for some Baltimore officials.

Tax records show Smith’s foundation has donated to the conservative group Project Veritas, which is best known for making hidden camera stings on media and liberal figures.

“As a lifelong Baltimorean and reader of The Sun, I believe that a free and fair — unbiased — press is critically important,” said former Baltimore City Solicitor Jim Shea. “I hope that The Sun will not be controlled by those who want to spread their own partisan views.”

Others celebrated the sale. “A late Christmas present for common sense people in Maryland looking for honest and fair reporting. Embrace a new day Baltimore!” Republican state Delegate Kathy Szliga posted on X, formerly Twitter.

**THE CONTEXT**

History is replete with media owners who have strong political opinions; Rupert Murdoch is only a recent example. What resonates is whether they use their products to push those views.

“If the owner invests in it and truly cares about local news and how it is reported fairly, it could be a great thing,” said Marty Kaiser, who worked at the Sun decades ago and now runs the Capital News Service for the University of Maryland. “But his background sort of makes you pause.”

Alden Capital, the investment firm that took control of the Sun with its purchase of Tribune Publishing in 2021, is notorious for its cost-cutting. Newspapers with local ownership — the Philadelphia Inquirer, Boston Globe and Seattle Times among them — tend to invest more in their product, said Tim Franklin, senior director of the Medill Local News Initiative at Northwestern University.

But while the Sun has shrunk, it has remained a credible news organization, winning the Pulitzer Prize for local reporting in 2020 for its stories on a book publishing scheme that led to the former mayor’s resignation.

It is also now competing with The Baltimore Banner, a digital-only news organization started in 2022 by hotel magnate Stewart Bainum Jr., who tried unsuccessfully to buy the Sun before launching his startup. The Banner employs more than 75 journalists — about 20% hired directly from the Sun over the past two years.

While the region certainly has people with conservative views, turning it into a rigid conservative publication would not seem a wise business decision, said Medill’s Franklin, who was editor-in-chief of the Sun from 2004 to 2009. “One of the most important rules is to know your audience,” Franklin said, “and Baltimore is not a conservative area.”

Smith has exhibited a pointed attitude toward the business he’s getting into. In 2018, Smith told New York magazine that he dislikes and fundamentally distrusts print media. He said the industry is so left wing as to be meaningless and that accounts for its decline. “Just no credibility,” he [*told writer Olivia Nuzzi in 2018*](https://nymag.com/intelligencer/2018/04/sinclair-chairman-entire-print-media-has-no-credibility.html).

When asked about those comments by a Sun staffer Tuesday during a contentious meeting that left many staff members feeling depleted, Smith said he largely stood by them, according to people in attendance.

David Simon, a former Sun journalist who later gained fame as creator of television’s “The Wire,” said Tuesday that The Sun was already a “hollow shell” of its former self before the recent sale.

“There are no great cities without great news organizations,” Simon wrote on X, formerly Twitter, “and absent an entity that truly covers its region independently and without ideological cant, corruption and grift will be unceasing.”

Baltimore Sun Media, winner of 16 Pulitzer Prizes, employs more than 150 people and publishes seven other publications aside from the Sun, with more than 230,000 paid subscribers total. The largest newspaper in Maryland, the Sun was founded in 1837 and was locally owned by the Abell family until the 1980s.

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Bauder, AP’s media writer, reported from New York. Skene reported from Baltimore.

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