Dan Kennedy
The Return of the Moguls
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The newspaper industry has been turned upside down throughout the last couple of years. We all know what happened, and still happens to the print business: shrinking budgets, layoffs and readers as well as advertisers turning to social media. In the midst of this turmoil, three incredibly wealthy men came along and bought three U.S. newspaper flagships: first, the greeting-cards and Boston-based entrepreneur Aaron Kushner goes West and buys the Orange County Register in California. On the East coast instead, the Red Sox Owner John Henry buys the Boston Globe. And last but not least, currently the richest man in the world, Amazon owner Jeff Bezos, buys the legendary Washington Post. Dan Kennedy, former media watchdog for the Boston Phoenix now turned journalism professor at Northeastern University, focuses on these three case studies – although in the subtitle only two moguls are mentioned – in order to analyze whether and how a "wealthy civic-minded owner" might offer rescue in these troubled times for newspapers.

The first part of the book takes a deep dive into the reasons that brought to the selling of all three newspapers. In the first chapter, Kennedy thoroughly analyzes the disruption that happened to the American newspaper market. Amidst layoffs, dwindling newsrooms budgets, stumbling media managers and papers going bankrupt, the narrative offers a pretty gloomy and dark atmosphere of an outdated industry. Kennedy perceives the Web as the main cause that brought to the decline of newspapers: they could not ask for the same advertising dollars online as in print, although advertising increasingly moved online. But instead of remaining with the online version of the newspapers, advertising revenue moved to specialized classifieds platforms first, and to social media second. Kennedy points out that the newspapers' main fault in the crisis was offering their content for free while customers had to pay for the print version. In doing so they cannibalized their own business model that had sustained the production of newspapers for a long time.

From chapter two to nine, Kennedy then closely follows the work of the three entrepreneurs and analyzes their strategies as the owners of newspapers with a longstanding tradition. Jeff Bezos definitely takes center stage in Kennedy's book. In Kennedy's study, Bezos' activities at the Washington Post since the acquisition are seen as essentially positive. This conclusion is partially grounded on the heavy investments in the Post's digital infrastructure, integrating it also with Amazon. This decision profoundly reflects Bezos' belief in "the bundle": people like to buy a package that offers many different contents for many different tastes. Bezos' vision seems to work, especially with younger readers. In addition, Bezos operates the paper as an active manager *and* as a swashbuckling fan of journalism and nostalgia. Even if staffing remains low compared to the previous ownership era, the huge investments in digital journalism seem to be paying off in terms of returns.

The second case involves the purchase of the Boston Globe by Red Sox manager John Henry. Like Bezos, the baseball team owner tried to apply fundamental changes to the newspaper by reducing staff and telling people to pay more, but the new era of the Globe was off to quite a bumpy start and some ups and downs. This might also due to the fact that, unlike Bezos, Henry never seemed to have an overarching vision about what to do with the newspaper – except for the conviction that people had to pay for news.

Compared to the first two moguls, the third case study can be seen as a cautionary tale. According to Kennedy, Aaron Kushner's experiment with the Orange County register is a complete and utter fail. The entrepreneur that made his fortune among other stuff with greeting cards, attracted several important investors and supporters. Kennedy explains in great detail how Kushner's vision to "dramatically improve and expand the paper, and the customers would flock to it in such numbers that revenues would quickly offset the cost of creating that improved product" was foolish, particularly if there is no Plan B.

The book's main question, whether these new media moguls – although so radically different from their predecessors like Pulitzer, Hearst or Murdoch – are the true saviors of an industry in decline, remains unanswered. Kennedy declares that there is no one size fits all-answer to the question. Instead, the author quotes Marshall McLuhan's seminal book "Understanding Media" that contains the famous but cryptic phrase "the medium is the message", by which McLuhan meant that we should pay attention to the impact on the world and the changes that a medium exerts. Every new media mogul is different in his approach and his impact on a news organization. In this sense, the mogul is the message.