

## **Singleton Shoots Straight**

*Media mogul speaks his piece*

By Michael Collins

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*Eightball* had the opportunity to speak with Dean Singleton twice for this article. Following is a transcript of Mr. Singleton's remarks.

*EIGHTBALL:*

What inspired you to become a reporter and what did you report on?

*SINGLETON:*

I started in sports and then went to news, a small newspaper, twice a week, in a small town. I started in sports but everybody does everything so I went to news. I got into editing and so forth and so on.

*EIGHTBALL:*

What newspaper was that?

*SINGLETON:*

The Clarendon Press in Clarendon Texas.

*EIGHTBALL:*

How long did you remain a reporter?

*SINGLETON:*

When I was in the weekly business, even though you are an owner, you are still a reporter. I stayed in the news side until I actually became a news publisher when I was 25. I haven't been a reporter since.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Didn't the *Denver Post* just win a Pulitzer Prize?

*SINGLETON:*

Yes, it did for breaking news. It was an award to the entire staff. It was for several weeks of coverage.

*EIGHTBALL:*

As you know, there has been grumbling at some of your papers, like the *Long Beach Press Telegram*, in relationship to salary cuts and benefit reductions and things like that. But there are some folks like Paul Sullivan at the *Lowell Sun* whom speak very glowingly of you. How do you feel about some of these criticisms?

*SINGLETON:*

I don't think you'll find a lot of criticisms. Criticisms that you will find in recent days is Long Beach. It's, by and large, comes from former employees who don't even work there anymore who are still living in the past and don't really understand living in the future. I just don't really have any comment on that. I mean, let them say what they want to say.

*EIGHTBALL:*

So what's next for Media News? Are you looking for any more media acquisitions?

*SINGLETON:*

We are always looking at acquisitions but we don't talk about them until we make them. We're an expansion-minded company and we will continue to expand.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Are you planning to branch into any other types of media?

*SINGLETON:*

We're obviously knee-deep in Internet in all of our markets but we're also, we've branched into television in Alaska. We're looking at all kinds of media.

*EIGHTBALL:*

What is it about the newspaper media that keeps you in it?

*SINGLETON:*

It's just a fast moving business. It's exciting. You wake up every day and it's a new world with new exciting things to do with so it's the pace. It's a great pace.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Paul Sullivan mentioned that you do read the *Lowell Sun*. How do manage keeping up and reading all your different publications?

*SINGLETON:*

I read them all – some of the smaller ones I scan. Some of my favorites, I read on a regular basis. Sometimes, some of the people around are amazed when I called and talk about a story and they are amazed that I actually read it. But I do read it.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Do you have any generalizations about where print media is going especially with new technologies and demands on people's attention?

*SINGLETON:*

If we are in the printing press business, we are not in a healthy stage. But if we are in the communications business, we are. Readers will begin to gravitate to different mediums and if they do it's really our job to see that they get news and information delivered the way they want to receive it. And as long as we are not stuck in the past and we can look to the future on new ways of distribution, we're okay.

*EIGHTBALL:*

What are the challenges in the media right now?

*SINGLETON:*

The challenges are to make sure that we keep up with the consumers' habits. If the Internet becomes more important, that we stay on top of that and don't try to live in the past. The challenges that we see are consumers: the information they want not the information we think they ought to have. It's a competitive world out there. It's almost like any other business – you've got to give the customer what he wants. In our business, it's hard to know exactly what the customer wants so you have got to stay on top of that.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Going back to that criticism thing, I'd like to give you a chance to just vocalize anything you would have to say about how you feel about editorial, about reporters because you get these grumblings and people think that he's just a business fellow.

*SINGLETON:*

I'm a news guy. The business side is one of the necessary things you have to do to be in this business but I'm a news guy at heart. You know you can't make everybody happy and you can't and we don't try. We took over a newspaper in Long Beach that was withering away and we've made a vibrant newspaper out of it. But we had to shake things up a lot. You've got to break a few eggs to make an omelet. Status quo would have been unacceptable. So often reporters and newsroom people would love to live in the past and live in the status quo but status quo will sweep you under. People in Long Beach, many of them, but mostly former employees – I don't think you'll find it as much with current employees – you look at all the stuff coming out of Long Beach, most of them are from former employees that still have an ax to grind. We have got a lot going on in Long Beach. Talk to the editors in Long Beach and they will tell you we have a lot going on. It's a very aggressive, vibrant newspaper going on today. (It's) growing in advertising, in circulation in a product that the consumers are grasping. The newspaper lost circulation for years and years and we just completed our second year of growth.

*EIGHTBALL:*

When you took it over, what was the circulation and what is it now?

*SINGLETON:*

It was flirting with falling below 100,000 when we got there. They are just reporting their March numbers and it's probably well north of the 108 to 110,000 range. It's grown two years in a row after, literally, ten years in decline. It's because it's putting out a different newspaper, a local newspaper, one that the consumers are grasping. I was in Long Beach over the weekend and talked to a lot of community leaders who really liked the paper and liked what's happening. It's not the same paper it was five years ago. It's moving rapidly, it's alive, it's exciting, the graphics are good and it's healthy – it's growing. Is it the paper that some of the old editorial hacks of old would put out? No. But that paper was dying. This paper is thriving.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Finally, on a personal note, what do you do when you aren't working? Do you have any hobbies? How do you unwind?

*SINGLETON:*

Actually, I am never not working. We're in the news business. I don't know about you but I'll be working this weekend.

*EIGHTBALL:*

People ask me what I'm doing this weekend. I tell them that I am catching up on everything I missed during the week.

*SINGLETON:*

What's the gist of the story?

*EIGHTBALL:*

(I was told to give the Press Club) a fair and even-handed piece.

*SINGLETON:*

If you look hard enough, you'll find a lot of happy people. A lot of people that are very excited about what we are doing. You'll find some grumblings but we bought his (Paul Sullivan's) paper three year's ago and we've had a lot of fun there. They are doing a great job. We've got a lot going on. You'll find that our newspapers are vibrant. They are alive and are looking to the future and not the past.

*EIGHTBALL:*

What was your take on the *Chicago Tribune's* purchase of the *Los Angeles Times*?

*SINGLETON:*

I think this transaction was such a win-win for both parties. From the *Tribune's* standpoint, they have bought some of the most priceless newspapers in American history for a reasonable price. But from the seller's standpoint, especially the Chandler family, those who took stock will now own stock in one of the best run, diversified companies in America as opposed to just having stock in a newspaper company. The growth that will come out of the diversification (that) the *Tribune* brings will be much more rapid, I think, than newspaper growth alone would have been. So it's one of those great deals where both sides won. I don't see really any major effect on us. The *Times* was a formidable competitor before this transaction as they will be after the transaction. We have some alliances with them that worked well and I'm sure will continue to work well.

*EIGHTBALL:*

The *Times* has put a lot of effort into increasing circulation. What are your plans to do the same here in the Southland?

*SINGLETON:*

If you look at the March circulation numbers and the September numbers and last March (1999), you'll find one thing that is common to all of our newspapers in Southern California and that's they all grew in circulation. We don't think there is any need to grow rapidly but we do have solid growth and will continue to have solid growth. I feel very good about our strategy. It's not one of rapid growth; it's one of steady growth.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Some newspaper people have voiced concern that you try to maintain profit margins too high for the industry. How would you respond to that?

*SINGLETON:*

I would disagree with that. There are sixteen public companies that report numbers in the newspaper industry and you can see what their profit margins are. Our profit margins are in the lower tier of that group. We're not a public company but I can take our profit margins and compare them to what the public companies do. We're in the upper lower tier. There are more newspaper companies that have higher margins than we do than there are that have lower margins than we do. We spend a lot of money on 'news hole'. Our news expense is somewhat higher than the industry average. Our promotion expense is higher because we do believe in growing circulation. Well again, if you use the public companies, there are more companies that make higher margins than we do than those who make lower margins than we do.

*EIGHTBALL:*

When Stern Media put the *L.A. Weekly* on the block, folks were wondering why you didn't go after the *Weekly*.

*SINGLETON:*

It's a different kind of business. The alternative weekly business is just a different kind of business than the daily newspaper business. It's not a business that we know or understand and we try to stay out of areas that we don't know or understand.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Of course there have been reports of interesting things that you've said. There was one quote attributed to you that you said you'd rather please one investment banker than a thousand reporters and we were wondering if you did say that and why? In that context,

where do you see investigative reporting considering that in another quote attributed to you, you said that investigative journalism was (essentially) dead.

*SINGLETON:*

The first quote you mentioned – I did make that quote. My job as a newspaper owner is not to please the newsroom or any department. My job is to please the reader and the customer. I started in the newsroom. Newsrooms, by nature, are somewhat disgruntled. I mean I was disgruntled when I was in the newsroom. That's part of their job. A newsroom's job is to be skeptical, to question everything. That's what they do for a living, that's what we want them to do for a living. We want them to question everything. It's not for a news reporter or a newsroom employee; fortunately for them, they don't have to make the hard decisions to run a business. Those are made somewhere else. The point I was making is that once you access the capital markets, whether it's through selling stock or placing debts, you have an obligation to those who you raise capital from. If you are public company, you have an obligation your shareholder. If you a private company, you have an obligation to lenders. I don't expect my newsroom to have to be burdened with business decisions. I expect them to be questioning and skeptical and asking the tough questions of those they cover.

*EIGHTBALL:*

Can you give us an idea of how much you are approximately worth?

*SINGLETON:*

I have no earthly idea and it doesn't matter to me. I'm in this business to have fun. I'm in the business build and create things and I really don't sit around counting the score.