

Audio Transcript
Episode 182 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
"The Local News Road Show"
with Mike BBlinder

E&P REBUILD LOCAL NEWS
LOCAL NEWS ROAD SHOW
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[Exploring Ogdensburg, NY's two years as a 'news desert' and how the community rallied to bring back its voice](#)

This special "E&P Reports," is part of the new initiative we call "The Local News Road Show," produced in partnership with the Rebuild Local News Coalition. In this episode, we travel to St. Lawrence County, NY, where in 2019, the community lost all four local newspapers, causing businesses and citizens to rally together to help bring them back just two years later.



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0:00:03.0 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a podcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884 serving newspapers, broadcast, digital and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:20.1 Mike Blinder: And welcome to this special edition of E&P Reports. The Local News roadshow, a partnership with the Rebuild Local News Coalition an alliance of news organizations with a common goal to advance a range of public policies that addresses what many agree is the accelerating crisis caused by the disappearance of the authoritative local news voices for thousands of communities across the United States. And I'm Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. In today's roads show, heads to upstate New York to St. Lawrence County, the largest county in the state by land mass. Actually larger than Delaware or Rhode Island. Its largest city, Ogdensburg, serves as a US port of entry via an international bridge and the Port of Ogdensburg is the only US port on the St. Lawrence Seaway. Now the reason for our visit takes us back to June 2019 when due to economic conditions centered on as most publishers experienced major declines in circulation and advertising, the Johnson family the fourth generation owners of the county's four weekly newspapers announced that they would publish them no more.

0:01:36.5 MB: Now, two of those scuttled titles is our focus, the Ogdensburg Journal that ran its first edition in 1868 and the paper of record for the county seat of Canton, the a hundred plus year old St. Lawrence Plaindealer. So for two years the over 100,000 residents of St. Lawrence County experience what it's like to be what we have labeled within this industry a news desert. That's when a local authoritative news voice dies and misinformation rises via social media. Plus the community feels almost naked without a fourth estate watching over the residents, the businesses and the elected officials. Luckily our story has a much happier ending because one elected official, the Republicans St. Lawrence County first District legislator James E. Reagan who spent two decades in the 80s and 90s as editor of the journal.

0:02:34.0 MB: It was Jim who cobbled together a group of civic and business leaders who in 2021 pledged their collective support to the Johnson family to please bring back these legacy titles. So let's head to the banks of the St. Lawrence River and meet the aforementioned Jim Reagan along with Laura Pearson the executive director of the Local Chamber of Commerce, who'll speak for that business community that helped bring back these papers.

0:03:02.6 MB: Also joining our dialogue are Tom Grazer the managing editor for Johnson Newspapers St. Lawrence County along with the current editor of the Ogdensburg Journal, Matt Curatolo. As E&P Reports, Local News Roadshow begins right after this message.

0:03:20.6 Announcer: This episode of E&P reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital formerly TownNews. Even though the name has changed their commitment to the media industry is



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0:04:25.3 MB: Matt, let's start with you. Matt, I wanna talk about the history here. If I may, June 14th 2019 was a big day. That's when the announcement was made that Ogdensburg was gonna lose the journal and a few other the St. Lawrence Plaindealer, right? The Canton, Adams Carthridge, basically the county itself due to economic conditions lost its voice. Where was your participation then? Were you at the paper when this happened?

0:04:52.9 Matt Curatolo: No. I was not at the paper at the time. I had left the paper in 2011 and was working for the city of Ogdensburg at the time. And I remember when the decision came down, it was a shock to the system a little bit. I don't wanna speak for Jim, but we took great pride in the Ogdensburg Journal over the years and losing the hometown newspaper, in my mind, really hurt the community.

0:05:24.1 MB: Laura, I'm just trying to establish that Ogdensburg is like a lot of towns across the United States, right? It's got roots, it's got history, it's got heritage, right? You guys, you were formed back in the 1700s by a land investor out of New Jersey. It's a fascinating community, the county itself. Now, let me focus you on this, Laura, since you are representing the Chamber, the business community, there was a gap. Now I mean this is something we wanna explore here at E&P. We are the publication of record. We're the voices of Communities. 2019 you suddenly heard, bam, no more voice. When I say voice, it could be paper, it could be digital only.

0:06:03.7 MB: In today's world there's many ways to do information Laura. But when a newspaper stops publishing there is no Matt sodium check on power. It's in our constitution that states that we're supposed to have a free and unfettered press as a voice of the community. What was the reaction in your opinion in the town when it shut down? Did people care? Did they say, "Ah, who cares? It's just another business?"

0:06:28.9 LP: Our community was very upset. The journal has been a steadfast communicator and resource for all of our residents. It's where we get our personal stories. It's where we get our announcements for weddings and births and obituaries. It's where we sing the praises of our children for a student of the month or for their sports activities that they're involved in. And to lose the journal really hurt the city. Hurt the city a lot. And I have a great rapport with the journal. I have a great rapport with all the newspaper people in our community. And knowing that I can call on Matt and he'll be there for a ribbon cutting or if I send him a press release about anything just helps the community thrive. And I love reading the journal every week and I get excited when it's coming in the mail for us. So it really hurt our community a lot.

0:07:24.8 MB: See you've had the experience now with fear of loss. You've had the loss aversion, you lost the voice. Does your community feel that now? Do they know good or bad, right or wrong

about politics, the reporting, we need this voice? Do you think that's something that's instilled in the community?

0:07:40.0 LP: I believe so. I believe so. I think our community understands how important the Ogdensburg Journal is to us for everything. Anything you can think of, history, especially events, fundraising, just getting out and knowing what's going on in our community. What's going on at City Hall. What's going on for the election year, everything. And there are a lot of people who subscribe to the journal and I'm one of them and look forward to it every day, every Thursday.

0:08:11.6 MB: Jim you just heard obviously Laura speak about the void that was created. I want you to put aside your newspaper hat now and I want you to keep that civic leader hat on for a second. I mean it might be hard for you to separate that feeling but where was the city when it lost it? Because this is one of those experiments we can look at now when we went through that two year period.

0:08:36.5 Jim Reagan: Once the journals shut down, many of the people that I know in positions of elected officials felt like there was no one watching them anymore. One of the problems that you had once the journal closed down was so many people were turning to social media, to Facebook, to blogs and many of them, anonymous blogs where people could make whatever accusations and allegations they wanted to without identifying who they were. And there was no one to sort out the truth from the fiction. There was no one to hold people accountable for what they were saying. And rumors would run rampant and be considered fact.

0:09:58.0 JR: And that is one of the important roles of a newspaper at any level, is to sort through all of the craziness that can be spread in any size, community and be sort of the arbitrary fact the voice of reason, the community rallying point. And that's what we lost when we lost the journal. And I would argue that the community suffered a lot and a lot of poor decision making occurred because there was nobody to help sort through it that people could look to.

0:11:07.1 MB: Matt, he's talking about you now. Now that the paper was gone as Jim mentioned and now you're running the rebirth, how are you received at the local coffee shop? What kind of reaction do you get?

0:11:21.3 MC: Well, I've only received for the most part positive reactions from people with the journal coming back. Not everybody's gonna like what you write. I mean that's the nature of the business. But my job, I almost have two kind of hats, okay? One is I cover local government, I cover everything in the community and then I have that editorial hat where I write my weekly editorial. And I have to voice my opinion on certain subjects and certain people may not like it. It's plain as simple as that. It makes it tough on me because I have to wear those two hats. My reporting side has to be neutral, balanced, cover both sides of every issue. But then I have to flip over to the editorial side and cite my opinion. But for the most part, the journal has been really well received. Let's just say I'm not afraid to walk in the supermarket or walk into a restaurant and get heckled. People are glad it's back. I do receive criticism every once in a while, but it's part of the job and I have pretty thick skin, so it doesn't really affect me too much.

0:12:47.8 MB: Tom, let's see you now, you've been sitting in the background during this interview

but you're running the show for the whole county, correct? For Johnson. Moreover you've gone through this transition where there was no voice for the county and now there is one. What in your opinion is the perception of the brands as they've been re-birthed?

0:13:07.6 Tom Grazer: One of the things we heard when we went to relaunch the journal was that not only was... And Jim was involved in talking with Alec and giving him the idea that there was still a need and still a desire for people in Ogdensburg for the journal. And he also got business people together who would pledge to advertise and make sure that the paper would be supported through advertising. And that was a key component of it. We also had this great combination of Matt Curatolo and Dave Shea who you mentioned earlier, who runs the sports side. And Dave's a legend in the community. And having those two guys who just knew where everything was and everybody has made the publication really desirable. In the offshoot of that is that the people over here in Canton where I am saw what was going... They lost their newspaper too and they saw what was going on in Ogdensburg and business people approached us and said, if you did it for Ogdensburg, why can't you do it in Canton?

0:14:18.4 TG: And so a year after the journal started, we went back and relaunched the St. Lawrence Plaindealer. And both newspapers have done well in the community. It's like Matt says, I'm not worried about going into the grocery store here. In fact I get compliments all the time from people who are so happy to have it back, journal.

0:14:39.8 MB: For those of you that are not on our YouTube channel, Laura has been nodding her head through this. Laura, I just heard something very important. A newspaper is a business that's supported by advertisers in the local business community. Fascinating that Jim was able to also lasso in some business leaders, you meet with them on a regular basis, you're their go-to person for coordinating the city. How does the business community in your opinion welcome having that voice back? I mean, is the support outta guilt or are they truly believing now? When I say guilt, well, we gotta buy some advertising to keep this thing going or do they believing in the mission of local journalism and how it does support the pulse of the city?

0:15:26.4 LP: I think it's not outta guilt. I think it's because they understand the value of promoting locally. Because if you're Phillips Diner and you want people to come into the restaurant, you wanna publicize your ads in the Ogdensburg Journal because that's where your fan base is. It's important that our businesses are great people and they understand that the journal takes care of everybody. If their kids are on Student of the Month and they clip that picture out that supports the journal and the journal supports them. So I think it's a win-win combination. And I'm very happy and I praise the journal to everybody. Dude you gotta sign up for our subscription. You've gotta sign up for a subscription. That way you get in touch with everything.

0:16:15.1 MB: Well, the date was June 14th, 2019 when the reports came out at Saints Lawrence County, New York the largest county in New York land mass wise with a population of over 100,000 lost four of its voices including the paper of record for the largest city in the county of Ogdensburg. And it was April 23rd, 2021 when after two years of silence, The Voices came back. And those on this program I really wanna thank for being part of telling us that story. Thank you very, very much, Laura Pearson, thank you again for your service but the executive director of the Greater Ogdensburg Chamber of Commerce.



0:16:57.6 MB: Thank you Jim Reagan. I guess today you've had over 26 years of editorial experience in the area, but today you are the St. Lawrence County District 1 legislator. Thank you for your time. And of course from the Johnson Newspaper group, Tom Grazer. Tom, you are the senior editor, I'd say county editor.

0:17:20.3 TG: Right.

0:17:20.4 MB: But you're also the boss of Matt Curatolo who is working with Dave Shea locally in Ogdensburg to keep The Voice alive. Thanks to all of you for your valuable time. Keep up the good fight.

0:17:35.7 TG: Thank you.

0:17:36.0 JR: Thank you.

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