

Audio Transcript
Episode 187 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*



The banner features the E&P Reports Vodcast logo on the left, a camera lens and microphone on the right, and the URL EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts in the center. Below the banner are three video thumbnails. The top-left thumbnail shows Emily Barr, Board Member of the Maine Journalism Fund. The top-right thumbnail shows Mike Blinder, Publisher of E&P Magazine. The bottom-center thumbnail shows Bill Nemitz, President of the Maine Journalism Fund. The BLOX Digital logo is in the bottom right corner of the thumbnails area.

[The new MaineJF: Fighting to keep Maine news media pristine and hedge-fund free](#)

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In this 187th episode of "E&P Reports," we chat with two of the founding board members of the new Maine Journalism Foundation (MaineJF). This organization is racing to raise \$15 million to purchase and keep the now-for-sale Masthead Maine out of corporate hands. Masthead Maine is a locally-owned, statewide media company publishing 23 newspapers. In this episode are MaineJF president and well-known retired local journalist Bill Nemitz and board member and Maine resident Emily Barr, who recently retired as the president & CEO of Graham Media Group.

0:00:03.6 Speaker 1: This is E&P Reports, a podcast from Editor & Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884. Serving newspapers, broadcast, digital and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.7 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. As always, if you're listening to this program on a podcast platform of choice, please follow us. Watching us on YouTube, hit the subscribe button below me, hit the bell to the right. Well, don't hit them. Click in them. And you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of E&P Reports. Some of you know I have roots in the state of Maine. I started there in 1984 as a radio morning DJ in Lewiston, an Operations Manager of two radio stations owned out of Boston, WLAM Lewiston, WKZS Portland, known better as KISS 100. And I spent, let me see, how many years was I? I was in radio and TV there for almost 20 years before the Portland Press Herald knew I was a nerd and a geek walking around with a computer, and president of the Ad Club and president of Maine Association of Broadcaster asked me to come on over and start something called a Website. Bill, you were at the Press Herald at that time, correct? This was, you were there.

0:01:22.7 Bill Nemitz: Yes. I remember it well. It was the wild wild West.

0:01:27.3 MB: Now, at the time, the Portland Maine Press Herald was owned by a company called Guy Gannett Communications. They had TV holdings, one in Portland, Channel 13 and some elsewhere, and a number of newspapers and weeklies throughout the state of Maine. But they did not have the second largest city newspaper, the Lewiston Sun Journal, or the Bangor Daily News. And Portland Maine's newspaper of record was huge. It was enormous. We were a big company. And the reason I said, hey to Bill 'cause Bill Nemitz, now your current title, President Maine Journalism Fund is one of my guests today. But Bill, you came to Portland in 1977. No, you came to Maine in '77, moved to Portland in '83. I was stalking you on the internet and you had been off and on. You actually back in the good old days travelled the globe for the Press Herald. You actually went to Iraq, am I correct, sir?

0:02:18.5 BN: That's correct. Yeah. I've made a few trips to Iraq and a couple of trips to Afghanistan during the respective wars there, embedding with members of the Maine National Guard. And, yeah, they were... I mean, it was a great gig. I went to Haiti after the earthquake down there, Katrina after the hurricane in the Gulf, Manhattan after 9/11. It was...

0:02:41.7 MB: So technically...

0:02:42.6 BN: Kind of a dream job.

0:02:43.7 MB: So technically you and I were working for the same company for a couple years, the Guy Gannett Communications, which owned the Portland Maine. I'm gonna close this loop in a little bit to our audience, why I'm setting this up. Now, Emily Barr is our other guest this morning. Emily, you do not have a print background. You are a broadcaster, dyed in the wool. You had senior management positions at Major Market TV stations. Eventually, climbed to the rank of President and CEO of Graham Media Group, which had multiple broadcast operations. I forgot to check, Emily, where was the home office at the time you were CEO of Graham? Where was it out of?

0:03:20.1 Emily Barr: So it was in Chicago. Graham had a long tradition of wherever the CEO lived, that was the home office. So we had had home offices in Connecticut, we had them in Miami, we had them in Detroit, and they may or may not have been connected to a national TV station in the same city.

0:03:38.9 MB: Because you came out of, you were running the ABC in Chicago, with Graham? Is that correct?

0:03:45.3 EB: Yes, yeah, I ran the ABC television station in Chicago for 15 years and then I left there about probably now about 11 years ago to run the Graham Media Group, which was then called Post Newsweek. So it was owned by the Washington Post Company.

0:04:00.5 MB: Now, here's the funny thing. Graham doesn't have any broadcast operations in Maine, but you live there now. I assume it was a lifestyle choice.

0:04:07.1 EB: I am a born and raised New Englander. I grew up in northern Massachusetts, right on the New Hampshire border. So when you, if you know your New England geography, I was maybe 20 minutes from Maine. So I spent a lot of time in Maine as a kid. And we would come back here with our kids and we just decided this would be a wonderful place to live the next chapter.

0:04:30.1 MB: Well, E&P is going to take our audience today up, well, I should say down under. I lived in Maine, so you can't get that from here. It's a wonderful place. I loved my 20 some odd years there. I met my bride there, got married by Stephen King's daughter. There's another story, but what we're gonna do is we're gonna dissect what's going on in Maine now, and how non-profit journalism looks like will become pretty much the main journalist, I guess, entity in the state of Maine. And we'll do that together on the backside of this message.

0:05:06.6 S1: 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 as strong as ever. BLOX Digital is now even better positioned to deliver integrated solutions like content management, audience development, advertising revenue, video management and more. Join the over 2000 news publishers worldwide that power their ongoing digital transformation with BLOX Digital, serving over 141 million monthly users who view over 6.5 billion pages of content each year. You can trust BLOX Digital to empower you, to connect you at scale with the community you need to reach. BLOX Digital formerly TownNews, now re-imagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at bloxdigital.com.

0:06:11.0 MB: All right, let me start with you, Bill, 'cause you have the official title. Now, president of the Maine Journalism Fund. You are obviously...

0:06:20.1 BN: Actually it's foundation.

0:06:21.3 MB: Foundation.

0:06:21.5 BN: Maine Journalism Foundation.

0:06:22.9 MB: Excuse me, sir, I have the word fund.

0:06:24.5 BN: Sure.

0:06:25.1 MB: Now, okay. Maine Journalism Foundation. What the heck is it? How did you get involved? How did it start?

0:06:32.7 BN: Well, I'm still asking myself that question, but... [laughter] It's interesting, I retired exactly a year ago. So here I am. I got involved, as did all of us, last year, late summer, early fall, when it became apparent that the owner, Reade Brower, the owner of what's called Masthead Maine, which consists of five daily newspapers, including the Portland Press Herald, and a slew of weekly newspapers, he had owned them for eight years and was a very good owner. He did a very good job of keeping them going, respecting the newsrooms, staying out of the newsrooms. And Reade, like me, is at a point in his life where he decided that he had other things he wanted to do with life. And there's not a lot of time left.

0:07:20.6 BN: So he decided that it might be time to start looking for it. And I like the way he put this. He said, start looking for another steward for these properties. This, of course, in this day and age, sends shockwaves throughout any newsroom when you hear that you're for sale, because we all know some of the predatory tactics that go on with newspaper acquisitions these days. And the hedge funds and various other investment groups that come in and are trying to immediately recoup on a good chunk of their investment, first by selling the real estate, of course, which we've seen in many markets, and then by essentially gutting the newsroom. And that's our biggest fear. So in an effort to prevent that, a few of us got together and formed this nonprofit, the Maine Journalism Foundation.

0:08:13.1 BN: And our goal is twofold. One is to, in the short term, acquire these properties, Masthead Maine. And second, beyond that, become kind of a force for good in journalism throughout the whole state, and through various things like targeted grants, reporting projects, what have you. We have a few other nonprofit news entities here in Maine, and would very much like to be working in concert with them. But right now, the big thing facing us is this acquisition. We're trying to raise \$15 million. And we are, as you can imagine, shaking the bushes, large and small, throughout here in Maine, and also nationally. And we're hoping that we can match up some local money with some national money, and pull this off, and preserve the journalism the way it is in Maine going forward.

0:09:04.4 MB: All right. Now, Emily Barr, you obviously have strong respect for journalism. I even, yeah, I did stalk you. I looked at your LinkedIn profile. You were supporting the JCPA. I saw, put the posts up. But you don't have a print background.

0:09:19.2 EB: No.

0:09:24.1 MB: But you do have an affinity for Maine. And I understand that your friend, are you friends with Maddy Corson, who is still with us, whose family ran the Press Herald for generations?

0:09:32.5 EB: Well, I've had the pleasure and the privilege of meeting Maddy. And we have a lot in common, because we both believe in the power of local journalism. And I have always been a big proponent of it, albeit I was on the TV side of things for most of my career. But I've always believed, more importantly, in the importance of a vibrant local press. And whether that comes in the form of what we call a newspaper, or a television station, or a digital property, it almost doesn't

matter anymore, because they're all becoming one. So when we put together a local journalism entity today, much like you're doing here with this podcast, you have video, you have audio, you will do probably a text version. This is what's happened to all media. And I think that for a community to thrive and to inform its citizenry, to hold the powerful accountable, all the stuff you normally read about local journalism, it all starts on the local level.

0:10:39.8 MB: There's no question. There's research now that backs up the fact that when, I like to say, when a community loses its voice, whether it's print, digital, broadcast, or what have you, that the community wanes. Misinformation flourishes, corruption flourishes, at a time people stop voting. It's an amazing thing. So you're feeling the energy now. You said while we were prepping for this that you retired a couple of years ago, too. Now you're back in the game. So you and Bill here, I wanted to give Maddy Corson, she is your honorary chairman of the foundation, correct?

0:11:15.1 EB: Yes.

0:11:15.2 BN: That's correct.

0:11:19.7 MB: A shout out. And you guys now are trying to raise \$15 million. Not that I want to hear the deal points, but you just gave the deal point, didn't you, Bill? I mean, did Reade basically say, great, come up with \$15 million and this nonprofit entity takes over? Do you know the number?

0:11:31.5 BN: I wish it were that simple.

0:11:33.7 MB: No?

0:11:34.1 BN: The situation right now is we have had very good conversations with Reade, I should say. And he's clearly given us the audience that we requested. So that as he looks about and sees who's going to acquire these properties, what we want is a seat at the table right now. We want to be at least in the running for this. I would not go so far as to say that we have anything close to a done deal with Reade on this. It's his decision. He has a process that he's sticking to in terms of how he's going to go about selling these papers. And we are trying to quickly position ourselves at this point so that when the time comes, we will be shoulder to shoulder with any other bidders for these properties.

0:12:24.7 BN: And given the uniqueness of what we're doing as a nonprofit compared to the more traditional for-profit models that they'll be using, we feel that we can offer a better outcome along the lines of what Emily just described, that is preserving local news in Portland, but also in a lot of these small Maine communities that rely on their weeklies for that kind of information. One thing I want to point out that's really interesting about Maine, somebody pointed this out to me the other day, is that Maine, we believe, is the only state in the country in which there is no outside chain ownership of any newspaper, which is remarkable in this day and age.

0:13:06.9 MB: It's remarkable in today's world, yeah.

0:13:12.7 BN: So it's kind of a pristine state right now. And I think a lot of readers here in Maine perhaps don't realize how good they have it, because they've been able to get these products under independent ownership for so long. It's part of our job right now is to try to impress upon people

throughout Maine what's at stake here, and that that voice, as you put it, Mike, that thing that binds the community together is potentially threatened right now and that unfortunately, I wrote a column a week or so ago in which I quoted Joni Mitchell in that famous line, "Don't it always seem to go, you don't know what you got till it's gone." And we're trying to tell people here in Maine that that's the situation they're facing with their local news right now.

0:13:52.7 MB: All right. Emily, what do you have to add to that?

0:13:55.6 EB: I gotta say I've lived here off and on for five years. We've had a house here for five years. We moved here permanently a year ago. I'll say, Bill and I basically retired at the same time. But I had been reading just so you know, the first thing we did when we became homeowners here was we subscribed to the Portland Press Herald. And because you gotta figure out where you're living and what's going on and what's important, what's not. And I found it to be an incredibly good paper. It's a very rich paper, a lot of great articles, a lot of good in-depth stories.

0:14:28.6 EB: And I was impressed because having come out of a city like Chicago where we had two major papers but they both went through major trauma, let's just put it that way. So I was really pleased. And that's part of the reason why when I had the opportunity when Bill and I met and then we met our compatriot Bill Burke, who you probably know the name Bill Burke because... And weirdly I worked for his brother Steve. So there's this, I don't know, there's this thing that happened that it just all came together and it made a lot of sense. It was fate, I guess. And I'm really, really hoping that we can instill our sense of urgency in the people of Maine. And I think we are so far and get the necessary funds so we can make this happen.

0:15:17.7 MB: I wanna will stay with you Emily for a second because Bill here is on that journalism side.

0:15:23.7 EB: Yeah.

0:15:23.9 MB: Do you know what I mean? [laughter] He's on that great side, that church and state thing. When I entered obliquely the newspaper industry, I came from the sales side of radio and television. I used to attend NABs. And Emily, I found it fascinating 'cause you and I, maybe you disagree with me but at any radio or TV station the guy in the chair usually came from sales rather than news. Do you know what I mean? Came up from the business side, but in the newspaper industry for centuries since it was just this license to print money, all this automatic classified revenue and inserts as you likely know, it became this machine that was just so profitable that the industry really didn't get the sales side as much. Do you know what I mean? It was always automatic money. Maybe you disagree but that's at least what I saw. It was just this... I remember touring, Bill, the classified department day one that gave me a tour of the building, you know, the old... I guess you have a hotel there now.

0:16:18.4 BN: That's right.

0:16:18.7 MB: And all I saw were hundreds of operators basically getting yelled at because they took too long on the call and someone else was waiting. It was just the same amount of business that was coming through the transom. So here's why I'm bringing up this question Emily, in your press release, you guys cite some nonprofit entities that are famous now and we've had them all on this show. Recently, I had six of them that came together. They now formed their own alliance.

They're called The Alliance of Sustainable News. And I'm sure you know these people now 'cause you've checked them out. Imtiaz Patel at the Baltimore Banner, The Colorado Sun's Larry Ryckman, Eric Barnes the Daily Memphian, Long Beach Post, David Sommers and of course Ken Doctor, Lookout Local. And most of those are nonprofit or have a nonprofit entity. But what came out of that Emily is they're realizing now just being nonprofit is not... You have to have a sustainable business model. David Sommers actually said, "Everyone in our newsroom knows we are ultimately a business. Everyone knows no mission no margin, no margin no mission."

0:17:21.0 EB: Yep.

0:17:21.0 MB: Am I making sense? Do you feel that now? 'Cause you're trying to put together a nonprofit coming from that business side of broadcast. Go ahead.

0:17:31.3 EB: Yeah, but I will tell you this, that even in the nonprofit world, and I've done a lot of work, over my career, I've been on a number of nonprofit boards and I've helped nonprofits, raised money. And even a nonprofit will tell you, they have to have revenue coming in. They may not call it revenue, but they have to have donations, they have to have supporters. And if they don't have it, then they don't have a sustainable model. So I hate to say money makes the world go round, but it kind of does.

0:17:57.7 MB: It does.

0:17:57.9 EB: It does. And the difference is that when you're in a nonprofit situation, and particularly when it comes to news in journalism, you are less beholden to the shareholders. You obviously still have to have supporters, but you're not in a situation where you're trying to maintain a stock price. You're not trying to keep a bank happy. You're really just trying... Someone said to me the other day, what did they call it? They said something like, break-even is the new black. [laughter] Which I thought was a great line. And I think the reality is that for the news industry, and I saw this by the way, when I worked at the Washington Post, because I had a front row seat to what happened with the Washington Post and the difficult decision Don Graham had to make when he sold it to Jeff Bezos. He didn't want to. It was the core of his being, that newspaper. And in many ways, still is. But I think he realized that he needed a steward who could run it in a way that was gonna keep it sustainable for many, many years to come.

0:19:05.1 MB: So my last question, I don't know which one of you guys is in charge of getting the money or both of you, how is it going? Emily, let me start with you, are we getting some cash in? I mean, there's a lot of rich people in Maine, you know? [laughter]

0:19:18.5 EB: Yeah, and by the way, if you or any of your listeners wanna tell us who those people are, we'd be happy to talk to them.

0:19:24.2 BN: That's right.

0:19:25.2 EB: We are having some very, very encouraging conversations. It's early days. It's always a bit of... You have to get people to sort of say, "Yes, I'm excited and yes, I'll put my money where my mouth is." And I will tell you this, we're taking a lot of meetings. People are very, very welcoming. They really believe in what we're doing. We've had a lot of encouragement from some really important Mainers, so I'm enthusiastic and I'm optimistic, but it's early days.

0:19:56.1 BN: Yeah. I agree, one thing I've noticed since we went public a couple of weeks ago is, or leading up to that, it was all outreach on our part. We were... I compared at one point in a moment of despair, it was like trying to find Bigfoot, you know they're out there, you have to find them. But what I've noticed, the dynamic has shifted quite a bit since we went public. And rather than us reaching out to folks around the landscape here in Maine, we're finding nets reversed and we're starting to have folks reach out to us instead. And that, I think is a very promising sign because we have their interest and we're asking them for just a few moments of their time so we can instill some of our passion into them. And that's not a hard sell, not in a state like Maine, where people are very involved in their local affairs, government and otherwise, and where people care deeply, I mean, deeply about their communities. So that's our mantra, and I'm confident that as we go forward we're gonna do better and better.

0:21:03.9 MB: Bill Nemitz, who has mistakenly labeled himself as retired from Maine journalism and well known, but now with his new gig president of the Maine Journalism Foundation, along with... I have to use the same thing, Emily Barr, who mistakenly labeled herself as retired from Graham Media Group, who has taken on a new gig as well as a board member of this foundation, are working together along with others we should mention. You have other already put together some really key great people to help. Well, as we all reported here in at E&P, that Masthead Maine was looking to sell to make sure it stays local, it stays in force, it stays... How should I say this, Bill? It stays useful to the citizenry of the state of Maine. That's pretty much your mission, correct?

0:21:55.4 BN: Exactly, exactly. And if people wanna learn more, I just urge you to go to mainejournalism.org and you'll find all the background information you need to see more about what we're doing. But that's what it's about. And you know what it is, Mike? It's not... Ultimately, it's about upholding democracy because that's really what this is all about. And we know what happens when information dries to a trickle or evaporates altogether. We've seen all too graphically in this country in recent years, what happens to the democratic process, what happens to trust in government and what happens to just community cohesiveness. So this is a lot... This is about a lot more than just preserving a newspaper. It's about keeping a linchpin in our social structure that I think is critical.

0:22:42.8 MB: That's great. Emily, thank you so much for your time as well.

0:22:45.4 EB: Thank you, Mike. It's been a pleasure.

0:22:48.6 MB: Keep up the good fight. You guys, I'm excited. We're gonna stay on top of this and keep reporting on it. And thank you both of you for your valuable time today.

0:22:56.1 BN: Thank you, Mike.

[music]