

Audio Transcript
Episode 190 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder



[One-on-one with the outspoken Evan Brandt, the last reporter left at The Mercury](#)

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In this episode of "E&P Reports," we go one-on-one with the outspoken reporter for Media News Group's Pottstown (PA) Mercury, Evan Brandt, where we explore what it is like to be the last local journalist remaining at this "ghost paper" that serves a suburban Philadelphia community of over 40,000. Brandt offers insight into his 25+ years at The Mercury, the several ownership bankruptcies that created years of serial downsizing, and how today he works out of his own attic to cover beats once reported on by a team of 30+ reporters.

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

0:00:19.4 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always we urge our listening-only folks on podcast platforms to follow us. Those that watch us on YouTube, please hit the subscribe button below, hit the bell to the right. Well, don't hit them, click them or do something. But anyway, if you do that stuff, you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series E&P reports. Evan Brandt. Evan is vodcast a word you can play in Scrabble, I never thought about that. Do you think it's a [0:00:53.4] ____.

0:00:54.1 Evan Brandt: Well, coincidentally, I'm terrible at Scrabble, so I'm the wrong person to ask that question.

0:01:00.0 MB: Darn, Evan Brandt, by the way, whose voice, those who are not watching just heard. Evan Brandt is a Pennsylvanian as I am. I was born and bred in Havertown, Pennsylvania, which is the main line. You sir, live in Pottstown. Am I correct, sir?

0:01:15.6 EB: Yes you do. Although, I'm originally from New York. So I've only been here for 20-plus years, so I'm not sure whether that makes me a Pennsylvanian yet. I'm [0:01:24.8] ____.

0:01:26.0 MB: Pottstown is a borough. Don't call it a city. If you go to Wikipedia, it's a borough in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania, whose the county seat is Norristown if anyone cares. I know that 'cause I lived in Delaware County. By the way, Evan, like it or not, you've got a Wikipedia page now. Did you know that, sir?

0:01:45.1 EB: I did not.

0:01:46.1 MB: Yes. I don't, I wrote a magazine. I wrote a book. You, you know what? I don't... You've gotta a Wiki, you've gotta go claim that puppy 'cause it even names your parents, did you know that? Everybody should go right now. Go to Wikipedia and type in Evan Brandt. You are a star. And the reason Evan Brandt is a star is some of you may remember in 2022, 60 Minutes did a piece about how corporate companies and entities were downsizing newspapers. Those in this audience know that. Kevin has the... I mean, Evan has the unmitigated goal to work for one. You work for Alden Capital, or should we put the right name on it? MediaNews Group, am I correct?

0:02:27.9 EB: I work for The Mercury...

0:02:29.5 MB: You work there.

0:02:29.6 EB: And The Mercury is owned by MediaNews Group that's...

0:02:32.6 MB: There you go.

0:02:33.0 EB: How I look at it.

0:02:33.9 MB: The Mercury and Pottstown PA. You were in 60 Minutes 'cause you are now the only reporter for a newspaper that covers a city of 49,000, I believe.

0:02:45.6 EB: A borough.

0:02:46.8 MB: A borough in a county of close to 100,000. And you're the lone wolf there running it. And we're continuing our series on ghost papers. We're gonna chat with the famous Evan Brandt of the Mercury PA... Of the Pottstown PA, Mercury. I'll get this right Evan, on the backside of this commercial.

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0:04:13.2 MB: Okay, Evan, first of all, I'm glad I was the one to tell you that you have a Wikipedia page 'cause you do, sir. So you should get someone to edit that puppy up for you.

0:04:23.0 EB: I'll have to go look.

0:04:26.1 MB: I did some noodling around to find out if Montgomery County, Pennsylvania is not an unimportant county. Correct me if I'm wrong.

0:04:36.8 EB: That's true.

0:04:37.3 MB: But it's one of the most important counties to be won in years of election. Am I correct that? That it's [0:04:42.1] ____.

0:04:43.2 EB: Once deep red, it is now very purple and run for the last, say about eight years by Democrats, which never was thought before.

0:04:55.3 MB: It is hugely watched. Those counties around Philadelphia can make or break right now, especially...

0:05:03.5 EB: That's exactly right. Montgomery County has a bigger population than some states.

0:05:07.9 MB: Yes. And the other thing I noticed is there is no other news source serving that county. Patch, it doesn't even exist. It's a shadow. It's nothing more than just programmed stuff being popped up. I caught this one website that calls itself a good news site from Montgomery County, but...

0:05:25.9 EB: Oh, they just steal all our stuff.

0:05:28.1 MB: So you're it. Right?

0:05:29.7 EB: No, that's not entirely accurate. There are three newspapers in Montgomery County that we own all of them. So if you're saying, we're the only news source, that's, to a certain extent, that's correct. And then the Inquirer covers Montgomery County as well. The Philadelphia Inquirer.

0:05:50.7 MB: Okay. That was gonna be my question because I went through that era of downsizing in media. I used to run an AM radio station in Ithaca, New York with a news staff of seven, but that was back in the 1980s, when you went to a school...

0:06:05.7 EB: I was just down the road in Binghamton at that time.

0:06:08.3 MB: Yeah. I gotta tell you, man, it was, those were the days when school boards got covered, when City Hall got covered and there were beats. So you would say that if you guys were to shut down, the MediaNews Group's newspapers... Well let's first discuss them. You got the Mercury, who else is running in that county right now that MediaNews Group owns?

0:06:30.0 EB: So in this county, in Montgomery County, there is also The Times Herald in Norristown. And there is a paper called The Reporter in Lansdale. Now, we also own... We own papers in the Collier County. So also own the Daily Local News, which covers all of Chester County. And then we also own the Delaware County Daily Times, which you are familiar with.

0:06:53.8 MB: Very well, that to me.

0:06:55.3 EB: And we have a couple... We don't own any in Bucks County, any dailies. But we also own the Trentonian over in Jersey. So JRC strategy, which wasn't a bad one, was to try to capture those ad dollars without having the cost of covering the news of the city. So instead their pitch would be, they'd go to a big advertiser in Philly and they'd say, "We're covering all of the school boards in the towns where all the people who buy your products actually live. So buy with us instead of with The inquirer."

0:07:31.8 MB: That was the Journal Register Company that did go bankrupt, correct?

0:07:36.0 EB: Yes, more than once.

0:07:37.6 MB: More than once. And got picked up by MediaNews Group at the time?

0:07:43.3 EB: By Dean Singleton, right, and Media News Group.

0:07:45.5 MB: And they called it Digital First Media. We're going back in time now. Which went bankrupt.

0:07:50.9 EB: Yes.

0:07:51.7 MB: And you guys were kinda caught in the midst of it. When you joined that operation 20-some years ago, how many people were in that one newspaper, The Mercury?

0:08:03.8 EB: Total or just in the newsroom?

0:08:05.7 MB: In the newsroom alone?

0:08:07.2 EB: In the newsroom, I would say about 30.

0:08:11.9 MB: Okay.

0:08:12.9 EB: And we had...

0:08:13.1 MB: Because our county covers [0:08:14.4] ____.

[overlapping conversation]

0:08:14.8 EB: And we had a circulation...

0:08:17.2 MB: Okay. And so then collectively Journal Register must have had over a hundred reporters in the county with the three papers.

0:08:25.8 EB: Oh, yeah. With all the other papers, absolutely.

0:08:28.0 MB: How many are there today?

0:08:32.8 EB: I would be amazed if there were more than 20. And I think that's being generous. So I think it's probably closer to 15.

0:08:40.7 MB: 15 total reporters. Do you have hours? Do you punch a clock? Do you like show up at a certain time?

0:08:47.4 EB: I get paid 37 and a half hours a week.

0:08:51.0 MB: Your offices are in your home, correct?

0:08:53.1 EB: Correct.

0:08:54.1 MB: So, do they compensate you for your attic office?

0:08:57.1 EB: No.

0:08:58.9 MB: So you were just told to find a place to work?

0:09:02.0 EB: No, I was offered a place to work, which is 30-40 minutes away in a windowless office where the printing plant is, in Eagle, Pennsylvania. And they said...

0:09:16.0 MB: Is Eagle, Pennsylvania...

0:09:16.8 EB: "There's office space for you there." It's a corporate park.

0:09:20.0 MB: But that's not in the city you serve?

0:09:22.1 EB: No. So I would... I live in the city I serve or the borough. So I would... To use that office, I would drive from the place I'm covering to the office, punch in, do whatever I was gonna do, drive back to Pottstown, cover whatever I was gonna cover, drive back to the office and I would get mileage, but it's a huge waste of time. So it's better for everyone if I do it this way.

0:09:51.3 MB: You are it then. And you've been loud and proud about this 'cause you're union-based and I mean, the story's out and you're pretty safe. You're not gonna get fired. So you have made yourself more boisterous where most people have been very quiet about their frustrations at their job. You went on 60 Minutes, you told the story on 60 Minutes of going to the CEO's home in the Hamptons. Tell us about that. And banged on the door and asked to go in and ask what this guy thought about local news. Is that true?

0:10:20.7 EB: Well, that makes it sound very dramatic. What I had resolved to do, my father and my stepmother live in Sag Harbor out on Long Island. And I had just read that Heath Freeman, who is the CEO of Alden Global Capital, had just bought and expanded a vacation mansion in Montauk, which is about a half hour away. And I had just read a story by Julie Reynolds, who is the reporter that the Newspaper Guild has hired to investigate Alden Global Capital. Almost everything you know about Alden Global Capital is because of Julie Reynolds' work. And she had just written a piece in The Nation which revealed the location and the price obtained through land records of this house that he had just bought. And they had just laid off a whole bunch of reporters at The Denver Post, which they also own.

0:11:21.0 EB: And so I am sitting in traffic on the Belt Parkway in Brooklyn on my way out to see my dad having just read this article. And what did I tell that guy from the Times? It was grilling my onions thinking about all the people who got laid off so that Heath Freeman could put another wing on a mansion and a house that he visits maybe 10 times a year. So when we got out there... And at the time, The Denver Post was negotiating a new contract, the guild out there was negotiating a new contract with Alden. So my first idea was to just do a little Twitter stunt. I would get a sign, our motto at the time was, 'Invest in us or sell us.' So I had my wife; this was a family operation, so I had my wife write a sign out 'cause she's artistically inclined. And my stepmother, who is a former journalist and newspaper glass ceiling breaker herself volunteered to take the photograph.

0:12:28.0 EB: My father, who's a writer, insisted this was a bad idea. And then we... So we went out and I stood in his driveway and I held the sign and they took the picture and we were gonna put it on Twitter, and that was gonna be the end of it. But as fate would have it, his wife came out to the end of the driveway in her car. She and the kids were going somewhere and she said, "Can I help you?" And I did what newspaper reporters do, I started asking questions. I said, "Is Mr. Freeman home?" And she looked... I was wearing a shirt that said, "Save local news." And she looked at me and she said, "No, he's not home." And I said, "Okay." And she drove off. And then I heard music playing from the deck of the house and I thought, "Yeah, he's home." So I did what newspaper reporters do, I walked up to a stranger's door and knocked on the door.

0:13:27.1 EB: I had 30 seconds to figure out what I would ask him. And I got to the door, a woman I presumed to be the housekeeper opened the door. She said, this man's here to see you and he took a look at me and my shirt and just shook his head, and that's the whole story, so to speak. And the question that I decided I wanted to ask him was, "What value do you place on local news? Not

what's it worth to your bank account, what value do you place on it?"

0:13:58.7 MB: Well, you actually gave in an interview and I read it, I think it was with The Times, I think.

0:14:04.1 EB: It was. Dean Barrett.

0:14:06.0 MB: You said that sharks... They're a shark and a shark does what sharks do. Right? I imagine you gave them the least... And you spelt it out. When a hedge fund takes over a newspaper property, they don't think in terms of the heritage and the Madisonian constitutional final check on power that we provide for the community, they look at your assets and you actually spelt it out. So they sell off furniture, they sell off people, they sell... They just basically look how much property...

0:14:35.6 EB: Primarily real estate. It's a real estate operation for them.

0:14:38.8 MB: It's a real estate. Yeah. Rather than looking at the heritage of it. And that's what happened to... And bravo for at least giving them... That's what they did. But then what is the value of local news? So let me ask you this, what is the value of local news to the town that you've spent two decades serving? Why do you keep this up? And why haven't you just thrown your hands in the air and said, "I give up. Let's turn this county or this town, or... " Excuse me, "This borough into a desert." They may not replace you, they just let the rest of the cluster guys drive in and out with...

0:15:13.0 EB: Yeah. Yeah. They very rarely replace anyone. Although it happens sometimes in sports. I don't know what's magical about that, but more power to them as far as I'm concerned.

0:15:22.4 MB: What's your motivation? Why are you still doing it?

0:15:25.7 EB: So I think that local news provides, and you put your finger on it, a very important constitutional function. So there isn't a first... One other business is in the constitution, the very first amendment is about a free press. That's an important function. And it's one that I think of it and I call it the Joni Mitchell moment, you never know what you've got until it's gone. Everyone takes the local paper for granted, everyone complains about the local paper. That's just the way it works 'cause the... We all make mistakes, we're not the New York Times, we don't have an army of fact-checkers and you're doing the best you can under the circumstances, but you're providing the common set of facts that a community faces the world with. And so if Pottstown is down on its luck financially, and it has been, but it's on the way back, then the local paper provides you with the specifics of that.

0:16:38.7 EB: This is what your tax base is, this is what your local government wants to do about it. This is how they want to change the zoning to attract business. Whatever all of those things, if people want to be informed about it, if they're gonna vote about it, if they're gonna vote for people because they espouse a particular position, then you need to have a set of facts that you operate off of. And it's one of the... And I call it the Joni Mitchell moment because all of the studies that show how important local news is, look at what happens when it's called.

0:17:13.9 MB: Well, how do they perceive you now that you're a star? You've been on 60 Minutes, everybody saw you, you are local news, you've got a Wikipedia page out of this. Do they look at you and say, "Thanks for sticking around." or do they just not think that way? What...

0:17:27.8 EB: They didn't use to, but frankly since the New York Times piece and since the 60 Minutes piece, I do have strangers come up to me and say, "Hey, I know who you are and I know what you do, and I think it's important and I thank you for still doing."

0:17:44.9 MB: Why hasn't your parent company; this is your opinion now, I'm not a lawyer, I'm not trying to have you be subjective here, but why hasn't your parent company taken advantage of that, made you a star? Why haven't they said, "Wait a second, this is all good now 'cause maybe the local business community will come up and support us because we got national attention for the troubles." Or they just don't want to take the blame for all the cutting? What's going on?

0:18:10.4 EB: I don't know what your language guidelines are here on your podcast, but I guess you can edit this out. From what I am told, after I paid my visit to Mr. Freeman's house out in Montauk, at the next negotiation session out in Denver, the attorney for the company said to the guild representative, "And then you got some fucking guy from Philly out there going and knocking on Keith Freeman's house, what's that all about?" And so at this point, unless something better comes along, I've decided my epitaph will be some fucking guy from Philly on my gravestone.

0:18:51.9 MB: We're gonna leave that in 'cause I don't... Luckily I don't lease Spectrum to do this, as you see, so I have no FCC looking over my shoulder asking. But we do have an audience that I think would appreciate that. We'll put an editor's warning foul language. You can smoke a cigarette now.

0:19:10.1 EB: Guest is from Philly, language warning.

0:19:12.7 MB: But you can have a wardrobe malfunction now, smoke a cigarette and have a scotch if you wish. I gotta say there's times that we always end this program when I sometimes say keep up the good fight 'cause we're doing our best to drill into communities now that... This is gonna have that headline, 'Ghost paper town' and 'News deserts.' I don't know how many more metaphors we can come up with to describe the state of local journalism, but I'm gonna use this line for you now out of complete respect. Evan, you keep up that fight 'cause there is a lot of Evan Brandts out there. You just happen to be...

0:19:44.9 EB: Yes there are.

0:19:45.6 MB: There are tons of them.

0:19:47.1 EB: I'm just the one who's lucky enough to get listened to because I'm willing to run my mouth and 'cause I did something stupid one time.

0:19:55.2 MB: I don't know if it was stupid, but it definitely got attention. But moreover, there's a lot of Evan Brandts right now working their tail off, not just to make a buck, but to serve the community, the town.

0:20:09.1 EB: I don't know too many people who get into community journalism to get rich.

0:20:14.0 MB: Ah, that's another, it's a whole different ballgame. But thank you. Thank you for your service, thank... And again, let me... Yeah, I'll use that line. Thank you for your service. Thank

you for continuing the good fight. And moreover, keep it up. Just do it because if anybody should appreciate your work, it's the people of the community you're serving and thank you.

0:20:36.4 EB: Well, and they do. And thank you for your kind words.