

Audio Transcript
Episode 191 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*

The banner features the E&P Reports Vodcast logo on the left, which includes a Wi-Fi symbol and the text 'E&P REPORTS VODCAST'. In the center, the URL 'EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts' is displayed. On the right, there are images of a camera lens and a professional microphone. Below the banner, two video thumbnails are shown. The left thumbnail shows Jon Schleuss, President of The NewsGuild - Communications Workers of America, wearing a red polo shirt. The right thumbnail shows Mike Blinder, Publisher of E&P Magazine, wearing a light-colored blazer and speaking into a microphone. The E&P logo and tagline 'NEWSPAPERS | BROADCAST | DIGITAL' are visible in the top right of the thumbnails. At the bottom right of the banner area, the text 'Episode Sponsor' is followed by the BLOX DIGITAL logo.

[NewsGuild President Jon Schleuss on TNG-CWA's "most active year" of strikes and walkouts](#)

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In this episode of "E&P Reports," we go one-on-one with The NewsGuild - Communications Workers of America's President Jon Schleuss on why the past 12 months have had more strikes and walkouts than in the history of the Guild. He also offers insights on how hedge fund owners' entry and subsequent downsizing of so many news media properties today are hurting the workers they employ, the communities they serve and our democracy as a whole.

0:00:03.6 Speaker 1: 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.

0:00:19.8 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, I start with housekeeping, meaning if you're listening to this program on your favorite podcast platform, please follow us. Watching on YouTube, well, there's a subscribe button below me. There's a bell to the right, hit them, smash them, click them, do something. Thank y'all. Do anything. You'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series E&P reports. Jon Schleuss. I feel... Did I say that correctly, sir, Jon Schleuss?

0:00:55.4 Jon Schleuss: Yeah, that's it.

0:00:55.5 MB: I feel guilty, sir, you should have been on this program a while ago. We have not reached out to you, we should have. We have editorially, you were part of our February cover story on unions. Jon Schleuss, those of you that don't know him, president of the NewsGuild Communications Workers of America. Jon, welcome to the program and our audience.

0:01:13.5 JS: Thanks so much for having me.

0:01:16.8 MB: My backside's been hurting, and I want you to help me with that. Not physically, but it has... Okay, it's a metaphor. I've been sitting on a fence and [chuckle] the fence hurts. For example, when the Pittsburgh strike, is big news. The Business Journal in Pittsburgh reaches out to me, I guess they found me on Google. "Hey, you publishes the magazine of the newspaper industry, how do you feel about the strike?" Immediately we say, "We'll call them back." We put on a press release. There are two sides to this coin. You see the facts, we support journalism all shaped and strike. We believe in its value, but we understand the hardships of running a business and what have you. I want you to help me during this program to come down off the fence. Do you think you can do that?

0:02:00.3 JS: Oh, as a journalist, my job is just to seek facts and truth and report it out. So I'm here for open minds and bringing facts.

0:02:11.8 MB: Alright. We're gonna do that together as we explore the world of guilds, unions, news publishing, its necessity in our society, and what the heck's going on with all the strikes going on today. With your permission, we'll do that together on the backside of this message.

0:02:30.1 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 reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more @bloxdigital.com.

0:03:34.3 MB: Alright, Jon, before we get into the meat of this thing, let's first discuss your background. You came out into the industry at the young age, what, 21 at one of my favorite newspapers. I worked there as a consultant for five years for WEHCO for Walter Hussman. We're talking about the Northwest Arkansas, a Democrat, right?

0:03:56.8 JS: Yeah, well, the Democrat Gazette. Yeah, but that's... I love how newspapers come through mergers have these big monolithic, meaty names, the Arkansas Democrat Gazette. Yeah. So I was like my first job actually, halfway dropped out of school to take the job as the online editor, I guess, in the late 2000s. And it was really fun, because I was just a guy who knew how to do things on the internet, and I was on Twitter before a lot of other people were and was also an aspiring blogger and journalist. And I got a job basically being like, "Can you help us do this online journalism thing?" And so that was my first job at the Northwest Arkansas Demo Gaz.

0:04:40.4 MB: And then you wound up... I guess this is where maybe the guild or the union and you came together at the LA Times, and that you were there in the digital side at the LA Times.

0:04:50.4 JS: That's right. Yeah. So I joined in 2013, and I think we were still in bankruptcy, when Tribune was still like one company or was just being split up between the broadcasting and the publishing arm of the companies. And I was brought in on the graphics and data teams as a innovator in finding new ways to tell digital stories, online. We were under Tribune Publishing. Tribune Publishing was sort of refashioned as Tronc, which had to been like the most ridiculous name in the industry. We were forming our union in late 2016, really got off on it on 2017. Built a union, basically from scratch working with the NewsGuild, the union now I'm president of, and then we organized, we went public in 2018. The big change at the beginning was the move from the downtown newsroom on Spring Street to El Segundo. So it was, we jokingly called it the Los Angeles Times of El Segundo.

0:05:46.2 MB: Alright, so here we are in 2023, and congratulations on your ascension. You are president of a guild that has a lot of heritage and history. Do you feel that when you go to work, do you understand, you know what you gotta say, almost 100 years.

0:06:05.4 JS: Yeah. This is our 90th year in existence. We were formed back in 1933 by a bunch of goofy journalists who were really upset about the idea of consolidation of lack of job protections, of pay discrepancies across the board. Oh, my God, does it sound like today's situation?

0:06:22.7 MB: Not, exactly.

0:06:23.9 JS: But they formed it 90 years ago, so I feel like I'm constantly being haunted by the people who were much better than me, that came before us to found this great union and build it into something that I could plug into. And along with thousands of other members, try to make our mission continue forward.

0:06:40.1 MB: Briefly, give me the elevator pitch. It is huge right now, correct? How many members, how many media companies are you working with right now?

0:06:49.3 JS: So we represent 26,000 members in the US, Canada, and Puerto Rico at 468 different work locations. So that's 50 different newsrooms in Gannett. We represent workers at the New York Times, the Washington Post, the Wall Street Journal, the LA Times, the San Francisco Chronicle.

You name it, most newsrooms in this country are unionized with us, but we also represent small publications like the Boise Idaho Statesman, the Casper Wyoming Tribune, just all across the country, Dallas Morning News, Fort Worth, Star Telegram. And we also represent a lot of folks who are not in media, we represent nonprofit workers and ACLU affiliates or Spanish and other language interpreters in California, Illinois, Minneapolis. So we represent a lot of other different types of workers, nonprofits, staff unions, too. We represent workers at the AFL-CIO as well. So it's a big, good family to be a part of.

0:07:49.6 MB: Alright. I'm gonna take one side of the argument now. I am a publisher right now, and I wasn't a publisher until four years ago. Suddenly I'm a publisher with expenses. I wanna do the best journalism I can, Jon, I really do. I wanna serve this industry the best I can, but when you start working a business, bodies and journalists are just like other expenses. And we're out for a mission, my wife and I. We're a very small company, but we pay quality journalists. I wish I could pay them more, but you understand there are some months where we don't take a dime out of this thing, my wife and I. We made our... But we're looked at as sometimes as the rich guys that bought the magazine, you understand? Where we're just trying to keep it alive. And I know other news publishers who are close friends of mine, who don't make a lot of money. Some of them haven't taken a profit in ages, 'cause they feel the mission. Does that make sense?

0:08:49.6 MB: Like it's not just a business, it's part of our democratic fabric for this republic to have that final check on power, that stated in business. Do you have empathy for that? Before we get into this, do you understand where the industry is today? Big tech blowing off tons of local revenue, the loss of inserts, losing all of that classified revenue or the past 15 years, some of that maybe be self-inflicted by our industry's inability to grow as quickly as we could into the digital space. But do you have empathy for that?

0:09:25.3 JS: Oh, we share the feeling. Journalists are the watchdogs of America's democracy, that is like our ultimate goal. And whether you're the publisher trying to make sure that things are covered at the city council meeting or at the school board meeting or high school sports, or that you're making sure that you're doing a deep investigation into a company that's spilling toxic chemicals into a local river, we have a duty in this country to make sure that we're actually uplifting our communities, telling their stories and holding power to account. And that's true all across the board. I think of myself as an actual team player and trying to forge that future in the future, build a future that we can actually all rely on. You're one of the outliers in the fact that so much of the industry is turned into a financial instrument by hedge funds and private equity, that don't care about the things that you and I care about, so that's been the real issue that comes with that.

0:10:22.6 MB: Let's see, 'cause we're no friend of that either at E&P. We're right now in the middle of doing exposés on ghost paper. Last month, I've done interviews. You know Evan Brandt, does that name ring a bell?

0:10:35.7 JS: Yeah, that's the Pottstown and that's at Alden. Yeah, Evan Brandt, he's one of our great activists and members in Pottstown, Pennsylvania.

0:10:41.7 MB: Right, he's the last living journalist at a suburban Philadelphia paper that used to have 40 or 50 in the newsroom. And he agrees with you that the challenge is corporate greed. I spent about 15 minutes watching you on a YouTube video you recorded two weeks ago. And the message there resonated with me. I'm gonna throw a little smoke your way, 'cause it's my show, I

can do whatever the hell I want. But you didn't just talk about making money for your team, you focused on how Gannett... Because the whole thing was focused on Gannett, correct? Give me the back story.

0:11:21.6 JS: Yeah, it was for shareholders, yes.

0:11:24.0 MB: Right, it was basically saying Mike Reed's gotta go.

0:11:26.1 JS: That's right.

0:11:26.3 MB: And you did not throw punches. You said, "I am the president of this huge guild. This guy's ruining..." But you didn't say he's ruining the company as much as he's ruining democracy. That was your real core message, was it not? That's what you were trying to really get out. Then you said, of course, and your share prices are down because this company is not doing its job. Is that how you really feel? Is that... Give me a little background on that, put some meat on the bone.

0:11:52.6 JS: It is, it goes back to my roots growing up in rural Arkansas. I grew up in a town called Harmony Grove, which you would struggle to even find on Google Maps. And it's not much of a town, it's like a four-way stop, there's no stop lights in that town. There's a gas station about a mile away and a school and a couple of churches. But I grew up with a grandmother who was an avid news consumer, so she would watch the evening news or the nightly news with Peter Jennings. And she subscribed to a morning paper, the Arkansas Democratic-Gazette, and an afternoon paper, the Camden News, both owned by WEHCO or WEHCO. And anyway, so I grew up in a culture where she was extremely plugged into her community and that really affected me.

0:12:35.5 JS: She also was a volunteer at the Methodist Church every election season to make sure that she was there as a poll supporter and a poll staffer to make sure that people got to vote in their democracy. And so I grew up with a really amazing role model who made me realize that, "We have a duty to promote democracy, if we wanna have American way of life." We have to make sure that we're supporting free and fair and open elections. And we also have to make sure that we're providing the news to the people who actually vote, so that they know what issues they should stand on and how to stand and what's affecting them in their communities. So to me, any part, if it's Apollo Global Management, which created this situation by funding the GateHouse, Gannett merger and Mike Reed's mismanagement of Gannett.

0:13:19.8 JS: Any threat to that, whether it's them, whether it's Apollo Global Capital, whether it's even the Block family in Pittsburgh, which is a family owned newspaper, those folks are actually fighting our very democracy by hurting journalists, by affecting journalists. And when journalists unionize across the board, and we've had more than 6,000 unionized in the last five years, that's just not happened since our founding back in 1933. But when they unionize, they usually have a mission statement, and typically that mission statement says that "They are trying to unionize to safeguard their publication for their community." And that's huge.

0:14:01.5 MB: But the backbone of unionization, let's go way back now, goes back to an unregulated government. And the fact that the rich got richer, the poor got poor, no one was working out for the working man. Let's hear it for Jimmy Hoffa, rah, rah, rah. You see what I'm saying? Back in the '20s you'd be called a communist, if you get my drift. You're saying now with

that statement, that add comma, despite the publisher in control, that maybe we have to help continue this mission, because ownership doesn't see it? What say you?

0:14:34.9 JS: Yeah, that's why we unionized at the LA Times. I remember when my colleagues... We're in a chat, we had just experienced like a series of new management and a bunch of cuts to our benefits and wages. And my colleague, put into like the Slack channel at work that we were losing our paid-time-off accrual, which was just a benefit that we had that was just stripped away unilaterally, and it was sort of the last straw. And my colleague said, "Maybe we should form a union." I think he threw it out there as a joke. But I got up and walked over to him and I was like, "Yeah, how do we form a union? What's that?" [chuckle] I didn't know anything. And so we just started asking questions, because we wanted to have a say in our workplace. We wanted to be able to actually have a voice, because we love the Los Angeles Times. We wanted to care for it, we wanted to save it for the community in Southern California. But we know that it was such a heavy hitter in terms of the democracy and the fabric of society in Southern California and all of California. We wanted to save it, so that's when we started building a union.

0:15:31.4 MB: Alright, here's my conundrum. In a perfect world, management and workers would see this common goal, correct? And there would be no need to form that union, you would work together, because the logic would be there, that the LA Times requires all of us to hold hands, sing "Kumbaya" and move forward with the mission. As a manager, as someone with a lot of equity invested in publishing a news product, you're basically calling me stupid. You're saying, "You can't do this on your own, you don't see the trenches we're in." Is that what I'm hearing?

0:16:09.4 JS: I think these are the stages of grief you're experiencing, right? Where it's like... And this happens whenever a new group unionizes, it feels like a personal attack, right? That like, "Oh, they're unionizing because I'm stupid."

0:16:20.3 MB: I'm stupid.

0:16:22.1 JS: Yeah, but it's usually not the case, right? It's a question of that Kumbaya, how do we actually get to the place where we actually work together collectively? And there's this handy tool in American labor law that allows folks to come together and say, "Here's what we're thinking. Here's what we want to do. We want..." Say at the New York Times, "We want raises of 10.6% for everyone at minimum. We want a minimum salary floor of \$65,000. We've been having conversations with our colleagues, and we think these are the best things that we'd like to do." We come to the table, management comes to the table, we negotiate, we get to an agreement at some point. We don't win everything. We don't win all the things that both sides want, but we try to build something collectively together knowing that the power dynamics are radically shifted in one way, usually for management, right? So we come together as a collective, but that's really a collective for the entire news company to try and move things forward to try to safeguard something.

0:17:18.8 MB: We're running out of time, and I'm honored to have you here, sir. So I'm gonna do a little speed dating with you now, if I may, or speed interviewing not to take too long.

0:17:26.9 JS: And I'm taken. So I'm not on... I'm off the market.

0:17:29.0 MB: So am I. I'm happily married and she helps me run the business. But I'm gonna discuss recent strike issues going on. One of the things I love about you, I'm blowing more smoke,

is I read that you're rarely home. I'm sure you're constantly on the road. You're supporting a lot of your members by going into those cities and spending time there. Pittsburgh, we just mentioned the Block family, Jon Block himself, that strike is still ongoing in Pittsburgh, correct? Are you spending a lot of time there? What's the skinny, what's going on there?

0:17:58.7 JS: Yeah, so the strike has been going on nine months. When it began... I basically, I'm back in my apartment literally, probably for 36 hours back in DC. But that strike began in October of last year, I was immediately there, we had a bunch of staff there. We were basically building a plan to quickly support our members and support the journalists in Pittsburgh to fight back. The company, it seems to be clearly focused on exhaustion and exhaustion of the workers, of the journalists but then also exhausting their legal mechanisms, which are very slow, right? The company violated the law by illegally imposing terms, we have a federal judge who said so. They also illegally stripped people of their health insurance, including a single mother of two kids and folks who have cancer. And so they've acted in these unilateral ways. We're continuing to support them. We're fighting them in every single front that we can, including the legal mechanisms, because that seems to be where they're focused on is just, "Let's just go through the legal mechanisms completely."

0:19:01.0 MB: Alright. And finally we'll bring it all home with Gannett. You didn't get a good vote, right? You guys went nuts? Not nuts, excuse me, I'll edit that out or maybe leave it, so I can have my own mistakes. You did a lot on the day of... You guys had a one-day strike, correct? You put out that webinar for the shareholders, your goal was to have a vote of non-confidence for the CEO, Mike Reed, and he's still in power, right? Are you giving up? What's going on?

0:19:30.1 JS: Well, I'd question what still in power is. If you run a company and all the journalists completely despise you, I wouldn't say that's power. So, yeah, his title is CEO of Gannett for now. But I think he's pretty much a clear disgrace to the entire industry. So we've lobbied shareholders, we increased the withholding vote, a little bit from last year, but he only needed one vote, which probably could have been at one of his shares to continue in this position. We're gonna continue to be laser-focused on Mike Reed. We just had a huge win with his former family over at TEGNA, that used to be part of Gannett. And we just, beat a hedge fund back, which was funded by Apollo Global Management, the same private equity firm that funded this disastrous merger between...

0:20:19.3 MB: Well, Jon, I gotta tell you, I'm off the fence. Alright. You did an amazing job for me, breaking down why it's not a question of right versus wrong, good versus bad, workers just calling the owners fat cats. You did a good job convincing me, hopefully some of my audience as well, that maybe there's a day coming, should I say this, that we're all holding hands and singing "Kumbaya" and working together, and maybe that would put you out of a job.

0:20:49.4 JS: Oh, that would be my dream. I really just want to get back into working in a newsroom, honestly. I feel honored to be able to represent America's journalists and I love doing it. But this keeps me up at night, this is 100-hour-a-week job. And just last week on Friday for the insider strike, I flew, I drove to the airport, got there, left at 3:00 AM got to the airport, flew to New York, was there for the rally and the picket, and the start of the strike, and then flew back home, to be there with our members. It's a lot. But that's the power of America's journalists, they are fed up and they are hungry for something good to happen in our industry. And so, I am optimistic. I'm always optimistic, 'cause I think that there is the potential for us to find revenue solutions out of it. I am constantly thoughtful on like the fact that we can come together with really good ideas to solve

our problems because damn it, it's our democracy that's at stake, like you said.

0:21:44.3 MB: Alright. Jon Schleuss, right, I got that right, president of the NewsGuild Communication Workers of America. Thank you for your valuable time, and we'll be staying in touch.

0:21:55.2 JS: Thanks so much for having me, and I'm happy to be back anytime.

[music]. And thank you for your kind words.