

**Audio Transcript**  
Episode 192 of "[E&P Reports](https://www.editorandpublisher.com/vodcasts)" Vodcast Series  
*with Mike Blinder*



[One-on-one with Peter Bhatia, CEO of the new nonprofit, free-access Houston Landing](#)

In this episode of E&P reports, we go one-on-one with Pulitzer Prize-winning newsroom leader **Peter Bhatia**, who recently exited his post as editor-in-chief of Gannett's Detroit Free Press to lead a new free-access, nonprofit, Texas-based digital local news startup, Houston Landing. We ask Bhatia why he believes this new project lacking paywalls, editorials and local sports can become a sustainable business in today's news ecosystem. We also ask his thoughts on managing newsrooms for over seven years at major market Gannett newspapers and where he sees the news media industry today and the future for its survival.



**0:00:03.8 Announcer:** This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor & Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

**0:00:19.5 Mike Blinder:** And greetings Once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. If you are listening to us on a podcast platform that you love, please follow us. Watching the YouTube channel, I urge you to hit the subscribe button below. Smash it, click it, there's a bell to the right, do the same, you'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of E&P Reports. Peter Bhatia, CEO, your current title, sir, of the Houston Landing, thank you so much for joining our program today.

**0:00:51.5 Peter Bhatia:** Oh, it's my pleasure. Thank you for having me.

**0:00:53.8 MB:** Peter, you may not be aware of this, but you have a Wikipedia page. Did you know that?

**0:01:00.2 PB:** No, not really. [laughter]

**0:01:02.2 MB:** I don't. I wrote a book. I now published this magazine. I've been banned for life, kept trying to update and get myself that distinction. Here's what it says about you. I don't... I'm gonna be the first to show this to you, 'cause this is a huge deal to... You could pay thousands of dollars, Peter. Here's what it says, "You are an American journalist and the editor of the Detroit Free Press. He was previously the editor of the Oregonian." That's it. Your entire life, the work you've done has been... Wikipedia has it as one sentence, we gotta fix that puppy, sir. If I may brag on your background. You recently won an amazing... First of all, congratulations, the Benjamin Bradley, Editor of the Year Award in 2020. That was when you were still working with Gannett at the Free Press in Detroit. Congrats. You state you were with Gannett a few years before that in Cincinnati as the editor and VP of the Enquirer, so basically seven years working for Gannett. Before that, you spent a little time in, I should say in academia, Edith Kinney Gaylord Visiting Professor of Ethics, Cronkite School of Journalism. And then you did 21 years at the Oregonian. Correct me if I'm wrong, you are responsible for newsrooms that acquired 10 Pulitzer Prizes. Do I have this all right, sir?

**0:02:24.7 PB:** Yes, that's all correct.

**0:02:26.6 MB:** And you have two offspring. I really looked you up. [laughter]

**0:02:30.3 PB:** You did. [laughter]



**0:02:32.2 MB:** And you served as president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, a fascinating career...

**0:02:40.2 PB:** Well, thank you.

**0:02:41.5 MB:** In news publishing. So the first question is, what were you drinking or smoking when you had a chance to relax, take a breath, leave Gannett to start this new startup in Houston, we're gonna explore. Was this just some moment where you went, "What the hell, I'll keep working for a living?"

[laughter]

**0:03:01.6 PB:** Well, kind of. When I got to the point or made the decision that it was time to move on from Detroit, my expectation was that I would take a break, work on my book, and then try to find a teaching position, 'cause I really enjoyed my time in academia. But Houston Landing came along in the middle of all that. And I'm a guy who... I've been at this so long, I actually worked in Hot Type for the first month of my career. And, of course, I have to explain to a young journalist what Hot Type is. But and then through the whole computer revolution, now here I am in the nonprofit world which, of course, is the new form of journalistic enterprise. And when the opportunity came along in a dynamic city like Houston and with a really strong support that Houston Landing has from our funders and so on, it was just too good to pass up, frankly, it was just a great...

**0:04:04.3 MB:** But we're gonna...

**0:04:05.2 PB:** Opportunity.

**0:04:06.2 MB:** We're gonna chat with Mr. Hot Type, Peter Bhatia, who is now CEO of Houston Landing on the backside of this message.

**0:04:15.6 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 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.

**0:05:21.2 MB:** Okay. Peter, I'm not gonna have you talk a lot about Gannet, 'cause we've already had all those dialogues and exploring...

**0:05:28.0 PB:** True.

**0:05:29.0 MB:** All corporate, all that and more. You spent seven good years there, but you took the



option of leaving to save other jobs. Is that what I'm reading between the lines is that you took a... How should I put this? This was your choice, you were not asked to leave, correct?

**0:05:49.4 PB:** That's correct. I love Detroit, the city itself is an amazing place. The Free Press was fantastic. My wife and I had just bought a historic townhome and remodelled it. But when I looked at the economic situation and what the 2023 budget was gonna look like, I'm 70. I was in a position to say, "Okay, I'm gonna hang it up from daily journalism and do something else and in that way, can save the jobs of others. Ultimately, it worked out fine for me and the Free Press. The important thing was that the quality of journalism that the Free Press executes day in and day out continues. And I think that's still gonna be the case, I think that is the case.

**0:06:41.5 MB:** We're not gonna... As I said, We're gonna talk about the future now, where you are today. Why is the Houston Landing very different and ain't any other of the nonprofits we have explored in depth on this platform? We've had Ken Doctor on this, we've had the Daily Memphian on this. We've had... Of course, we've dissected the Baltimore Banner, up and down, had every player in... We're all about this. We under... This is like getting a lot of ink about the brand new, [chuckle], exciting, different, this is nothing you've seen. I read your mission statement three times, [laughter] and I've gone through... Can you give me the elevator pitch on this? Why do you believe this Houston Landing project is just completely, totally a new concept in hyper-local journalism?

**0:07:32.8 PB:** Sure. And I wouldn't want to tell you that we're reinventing the wheel, we're learning a lot from peers. Well, I hope they'll be our peer or will be their peer with places like Texas Tribune and things like that. But there are some key differences here, one of them that's obviously very important in the nonprofit arena is the funding that we have. We have three solid fundings, we have three years of funding. Our first-year budget is roughly \$7 million. And we've got runway to try to figure out what a nonprofit journalism site can be successfully in Houston. But a huge part of it, too, is Houston, we have, of course, very well established, traditional media here. And Houston Landing is not about taking them on or taking them down as some other nonprofits and other places have talked about.

**0:08:34.5 PB:** There's an avenue here in Houston. In Detroit there were multiple really good nonprofit startups, not as much here in Houston. And because of the vastness of this place, Houston likes to sell itself as the most diverse city in America, I don't think that's true, but it's incredibly diverse. The city itself is like one third white, one third black, one third Latino, very round numbers. And, of course, the metro area is exploding in population, so there's a vast underserved market here that we are targeting. It's not gonna be easy because a lot of those are communities of color that have some understandable and well-earned hostility towards mainstream media, that's ignored them for decades. But we're trying to carve out a different kind of niche, while still doing hard-hitting investigative reporting. Not doing as much daily journalism, we're not doing sports, I don't have to worry about the Astros' starting rotation or whatever. And really really focused, trying to focus in on the issues that define this place. And I think because of the unique nature and the dynamic nature of Houston, it's different than other undertakings like this.

**0:09:52.0 MB:** Alright, well, I'm now lied to you because I am gonna circle back to the past, 'cause you just said a cotton-picking mouth full.

[laughter]

**0:10:00.5 MB:** You're like me, you have spoken on numerous stages around the world, I'm sure. And as soon as the pandemic was done and I had just taken over E&P 2019, I did 19 conferences, you know what I mean? As they opened up, again, I just wanted to get the brand out there. And I just sent... Even the Wyoming press, I'd go anywhere, just so I could get out there. And I must have seen about 1000 different individuals in the audience out of which I could have counted the faces of color maybe on two hands. Does this make sense?

**0:10:31.9 PB:** Mm-hmm.

**0:10:32.5 MB:** You just said a cotton-picking mouth full, you said a legacy media, so I'm not picking on Gannett, I'm talking everywhere...

**0:10:41.3 PB:** Everywhere.

**0:10:42.0 MB:** In this industry. You cut your chops in and we're talking Hot Type days, right? It's not changed much, has it?

**0:10:47.1 PB:** Well, I think that for certainly justifiable business reasons, and I'm really talking more about print media, because that's what I know. I've worked in it for 50 years and naturally what happened in the '60s is with the migration to the suburbs and the movement of dollars to the suburbs, inner cities were generally abandoned by newspapers. And those communities today have some hostility towards newspapers, even as good ones are trying to find their way back into those communities, understanding that in the digital age, the reasons that we went to the suburbs, because that's where the ad dollars were, doesn't really matter anymore in that context. The revenue model is completely different, and it's not as geographically based as it was in the old print days, when you were trying to lock up the suburban car dealers or whatever the case might be.

**0:11:47.3 PB:** So it really makes sense, I think for newspapers, legacy newspapers, but also for us as a startup with no legacy to really target those communities of color. And it's not just hiring staff of color, which we're doing very aggressively, because how do you cover a city as diverse as that without a diverse staff? But it's also about figuring out how we cover those communities with authenticity, that's been lost over the decades and break back in, because they're not gonna welcome us back with open arms, because we haven't been around for 50 years, whatever. So it's a challenging task for sure, but I think it's really, really important, especially given the changing demographics of the country, etcetera.

**0:12:37.3 MB:** Alright. I read your manifesto, your first editorial, your launch letter, whatever you wanna call it. Was this like you unburdening yourself, 'cause you basically... And I'm paraphrasing here. I'm not gonna quote you because I'm putting that on the page. Anybody listening now on Spotify go to [editorandpublisher.com/vodcast](http://editorandpublisher.com/vodcast). You'll get a link to this puppy. It's brilliantly written, but I almost feel like you said the shackles are off now, because you said you kept saying between the lines, independent, independent, independent. You know what I mean? Like, "I'm not reporting to a board. I'm not reporting to... We don't... We're taking funding, but they ain't telling us what to do." Do you feel now at the ripe young age of 70 that the shackles are off? What were you...





Because it really was [laughter], you nailed it. Is that what's going on?

**0:13:29.1 PB:** Oh, thank you. I think my past bosses would, would certainly tell you that I'm a rather independent fellow anyway, and that I found ways to do good work within the shackles, if you will, of a corporate environment. But, yeah, one of the things that's so exciting and really delightful about this experience so far is that, yes, we have a board. Yes, we have funders. They're incredibly supportive of us, but they're also incredibly supportive of the idea that we know how to do journalism. And so we have the opportunity to really build this from ground zero, if you will. Probably not the best analogy, but you know what I mean. And so it's nobody's mad at us, because who we endorsed for president last time around.

**0:14:28.7 MB:** 'Cause You ain't finna do that. It was right there, "We ain't endorsing candidates." We're not going down that road is what you're saying.

**0:14:34.7 PB:** Yeah, yeah. We're trying to be... Journalism is journalism, but we're not approaching this from the point of view, we don't have an editorial page. We will rarely run op-eds. And it's all about doing journalism of impact that, as we talk about a lot, improving Houston one story at a time.

**0:14:56.3 MB:** Alright, so now the other thing that you've stressed is almost with caps, "no paywalls", which is anti, where a lot of... Okay, you keep using the term nonprofit, nonprofit, where we've actually done exposes on this, that non-profit is not that much different than profit in today's world. You know what I mean? My favorite quote from one of the nonprofits, we interviewed, I'm trying to remember which one it was, "No margin, no mission." In other words you're gonna have to eventually bring in revenue, to get this thing churning in some way, shape or form. Whether it's just donation-based or what have you, but you are not locking this thing down where most of the other nonprofits are basing their success on subscriber revenue. What gives here is it's because of the fact that you know that your target audience isn't going to subscribe, or this just part of your vision?

**0:15:49.8 PB:** No, I think it's part of the vision that the founding folks of the site had in mind. They really wanted to do something that was for all of Houston, that really had the opportunity to get into corners of this community that had been traditionally underserved by media. For sure we have to raise money. I've been chuckling to board members and friends about saying, "What do I know about revenue?" You know, I've hired a development staff for you know... I wish my late father-in-law was still with us, because he was in university development, and he would have been a tremendous help to me. Although I can hear his voice in my ears regularly, but it's a really interesting challenge for me. I joke and laugh and say, "Hey, the more money we raise, the more journalism we can do," but that's true. And fortunately, as compared to a lot of our friends in the nonprofit world, we started with a lot of money in the bank. So we have the runway to figure out how to do this well, both from a journalistic point of view, but also from a fundraising point of view.

**0:17:04.2 MB:** Alright. So let's look at your newsroom. It's not the whole newsroom, but I went down your staff on your website, and I counted 33 faces. The recent reports are that almost 24 of them, 25 of them are now on the newsroom side. Is that about right? So that's what you got working for you right now. You've got senior editors, you've got all the stuff that most newsrooms don't have



today. They've been stripped, stripped, stripped. What's going on?

**0:17:34.8 PB:** We're in this process of hiring up a staff, we've still got a dozen more hires to go this year, hiring a bunch of reporters but also hiring product people, development people, audience people, executives, etcetera, so it's really a work in progress. My job is really about pulling it all together and also being a face for the community, and I'm working on that day by day. But the journalists are engaged in, in what would feel like a pretty familiar routine to people, they're planning stories, they're executing stories, they're posting stories. And since we went live, fully live, 'cause we'd soft launched a few months before, the flow of stories and the quality of stories, a lot of watchdog in it, a lot of attention to important institutions from city hall to the management of the jails and so on. I'm very pleased with, as an editor, I can... As I said to somebody the other day, "I've never read a story that couldn't be shorter." But we're off and running and I feel good about the pace of things.

**0:18:55.0 MB:** What is the web address for the Houston Landing? So anybody who's just listening to this and too lazy to look at the page and click at the link, what's the URL, sir?

**0:19:04.4 PB:** Houstonlanding.org.

**0:19:06.4 MB:** There you go. And, Peter, are you hiring? You just said it. Should people who are maybe a little frustrated and they think they have the chops for you, are you building and growing?

**0:19:17.1 PB:** Yeah. You mentioned we're in the 30s now, we plan to be at 50 people by the end of the year, all things being equal. And on our website, there's the jobs link and people can go there and see. But we're still hiring for a number of positions, both journalistic and in different capacities.

**0:19:39.2 MB:** Peter Bhatia, the CEO, newly, the new gig, the new CEO of Houston Landing but many years of serving our industry and responsible for 10 Pulitzer Prizes, we appreciate your valuable time today. Thank you for participating in the program. And be sure to know that E&P will be reporting on your growth and your progress.

**0:20:04.5 PB:** Thank you. Thank you so much for the time, I appreciate it.

**0:20:07.5 MB:** And put a little bit more meat on the bone on that Wikipedia page when you have a chance. Okay?

[laughter]

**0:20:10.2 PB:** I'm gonna go look now.

[music]