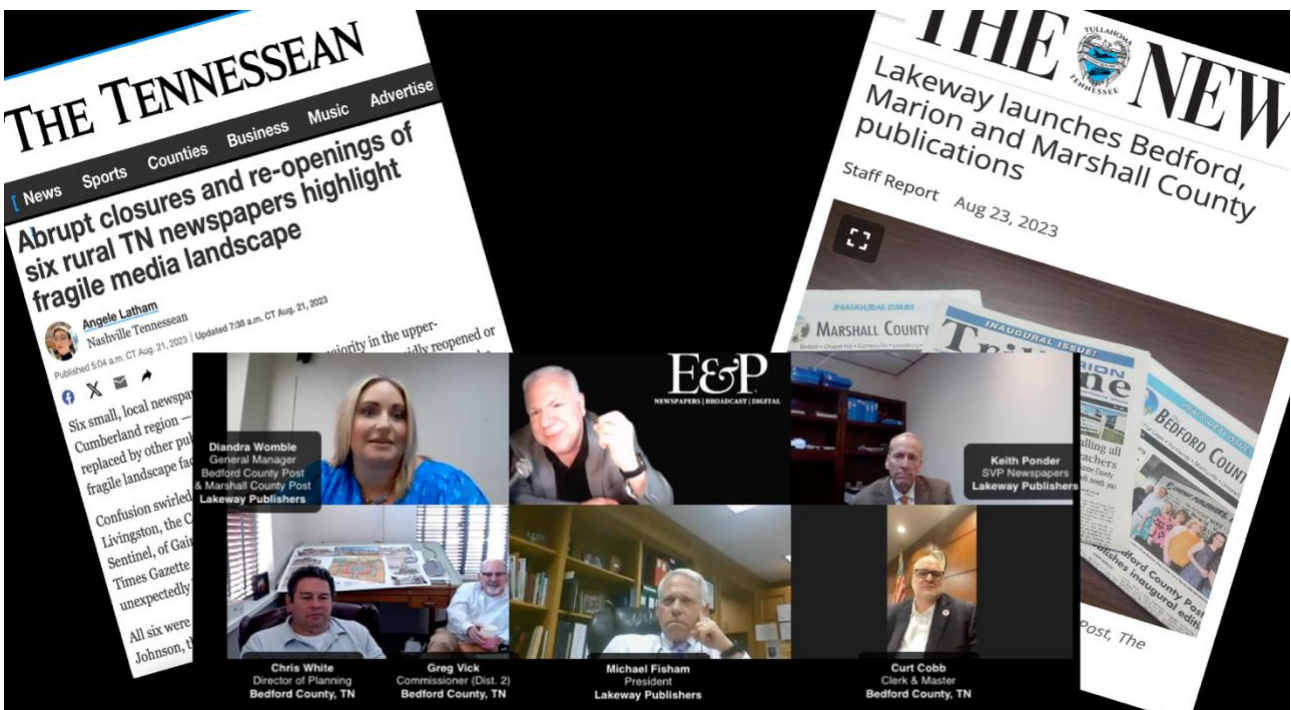


## Audio Transcript

Episode 205 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series  
with Mike Blinder

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Community leaders speak frankly about losing their local paper and having a new publication start within 30 days.



[On July 17th, 2023, Bedford County, Tennessee, and its county seat of Shelbyville lost their 149-year-old newspaper of record, the Times-Gazette, as Holler Media locked the doors and fired the staff of all six community publications they owned that served](#)



**0:00:04.0 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.

**0:00:19.3 Mike Blinder:** And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we kick off with housekeeping. Listening on a podcast platform of your choice, please follow us. Watching us on the YouTube channel, subscribe below me, hit the bell to the right, quickly hit it. Just click it. You'll get an update each and every time we upload a new weekly episode of this vodcast series, E&P reports. I'm in my home State of Tennessee, well, my new home state, I moved here in December. I have old friends, I have new. One of my oldest friends is Michael Fishman, president of Lakeway Publishers. Full disclosure, Mike, in my consulting days, 20 years of generating revenue for newspaper publishers around the world, you were one of our customers at Blinder Group. Am I correct, sir?

**0:01:03.4 Michael Fishman:** Absolutely. And you did an awesome job. And we're still using some of those programs today in some form or fashion.

**0:01:09.7 MB:** Lakeway Publishers, multi-state publishers of newspapers, magazines, special publications, you own, operate community newspapers in Tennessee, Missouri, Virginia. Keith I know you from other markets. You are now the SVP for newspaper operations at Lakeway. Ladies and gentlemen, Keith Ponder is joining us. Diandra Womble is with us. You are the GM of the part of the Lakeway Publishers here in Tennessee, Bedford County, and Marshall County Post. Diandra, I wanted to stalk you on your LinkedIn page. I didn't see your background. Where have you... What is your background quickly for us?

[laughter]

**0:01:43.6 Diandra Womble:** I went to college at Cumberland University back in the day. And I actually have a degree in athletic training, sports medicine, and graduated, and started at the local newspaper in Shelbyville, which was the Shelbyville Times-Gazette and started as a advertising assistant. And here I'm today.

**0:02:04.5 MB:** Well, she said the key word here, Shelbyville, Tennessee, which is the county seat of Bedford County, Tennessee. That's why three other gentlemen are joining us who are not part of this newspaper publishing industry. First of all, Chris White, director of planning for Bedford County. Chris, welcome to the program, E&P Reports. It's an honor to have you, sir.

**0:02:26.3 Chris White:** Thank you.

**0:02:27.7 MB:** We got Greg Vick, Bedford County Commissioner, District Two, Greg, do I have that correct?

**0:02:33.4 Greg Vick:** You do.



**0:02:33.9 MB:** All right. And we also have from Bedford County, Tennessee, love your title, Curt. You are Curt Cobb, clerk and master. Does your wife like the fact that you have on your title master? Does that make you a little bit, give you a little juice there, sir?

**0:02:47.9 Curt Cobb:** Well, I will recommend that when I get home to my fiancée.

**0:02:51.5 MB:** Okay, there you go.

[laughter]

**0:02:54.0 MB:** We're going to have a dialogue about news deserts, and a gentleman... The three gentlemen I just introduced Chris, Greg, and Curt, you may not have ever heard that term, but that's one of those euphemisms we're using here in our industry when a town loses its voice or is about to lose its voice and what it truly means to a local community. We're going to unpack all of this and take you to the town of Shelbyville... Excuse me, the county seat of Bedford County, Tennessee, on the backside of this message. Okay, so let's start...

**0:03:24.1 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 at [bloxdigital.com](http://bloxdigital.com).

**0:04:29.5 MB:** Okay, so let's start first with Greg, Chris and Curt. You guys are going to have to battle out who wants to answer this question. Would someone describe to me Bedford County, Tennessee? You are south of Nashville by what, about 45, 50 miles? Chris, start with you. Is that correct, sir?

**0:04:47.2 CW:** Yes. We're about 50 miles south of, not due South, but we're about 50 miles southeast of Nashville.

**0:04:53.3 MB:** And north of... And you're on the I-65 corridor. We call it population industry. What's it like there?

**0:05:00.6 CW:** We're situated in between 65 and I-65 and I-24. Probably the easiest way for us to get to Nashville is due north to Murfreesboro, which is about what, 20, 25 miles to the interstate, something like that. The county and the city of Shelbyville, our county seat is... Has about 25,000 people. And I would say the county, the rural areas of Bedford County and all the other municipalities combined I think probably another 25,000 people. So we're just a little over 50,000 people.

**0:05:37.1 MB:** What is the main industry or how does... What drives the community at least

economically, if I may ask?

**0:05:44.8 CC:** Well, lately it's been tourism. I think we're the Walking Horse Capital of the world. We have the near screen, our Uncle Nearest, the distillery here in Shelbyville, and it is bringing a lot of people in. We have a lot of factories and jobs of that nature. We have a new one coming in. Greg could tell you more about that. He's been working on that project with his involvement with the industrial park out there. But yeah, the tourism has been really, that's what's coming out. Bell Buckle has some events. Next seemed to be the new thing that's coming in, but we had just several different types of industry here. Lot of things happening.

**0:06:30.7 MB:** Curt on August 21st, you found out that Holler Media was shutting down your newspaper. Out of the blue, the staff was told they were going to be fired. You had a voice, I call a newspaper a voice, you guys are elected officials, or at least appointed officials. You guys have decided to become public servants, which in a way is one of the toughest jobs in the world. There's no if, ands or buts, 'cause everybody's watching you. And then it gets political. And you got people that are fighting you. And then you got people who aren't fighting you and trying to support you. You get into the making of the sausage. Curt, am I saying that about right? I mean, you go home at night, you want to have a drink and just relax and everything's... Been a hard day. And you had a paper there in your town for over a 100 years suddenly shutting down. That's what happened. It just... Nobody knew what was going to happen. How'd you think? What happened to your... What did you say to yourself? Thank God? Maybe there'll be less on me? Go ahead.

**0:07:26.6 CC:** Well actually, with my job, I was almost in a little bit of a panic, because I'm the clerk and master. And so part of that job as the clerk, I'm the administrator of Chancery Court, and I'm responsible to make sure that we get legal publications out, which are required by law.

**0:07:46.7 MB:** By law?

**0:07:47.0 CC:** And if you don't have a local newspaper, then you have issues. Fortunately for us, Lakeway stepped up and hired a lot of local people, which we appreciate them investing back into our community and putting with... By hiring local people. And I got with Diandra Womble, and we got everything straight and started putting our legal notices and our publications in the Bedford Post, which solved our problem. For me, I'm just an administrator, but it affected our citizens because people that are... Somebody's trying to adopt somebody or if they have some kind of court case, it put things on hold. Yeah, there's other avenues by law, but it's shaky. You really need that publication to put notice out to the public to say, "Hey, speak now or forever hold your peace."

**0:08:38.6 MB:** Chris. There's a map behind you. You're a director of planning. You're trying to get a job done. You got people who must fight you every day 'cause you're wrong. I'm sure you have a political party affiliation. I don't even want to know what it is. The paper is there can sometimes be a pain in your... You know what I mean. When it said it was going to shut down, did you take a sigh of relief? Did you go, "Wow, this is great. Now I don't... No one's watching me." How did you feel, Chris, when you heard out of the blue, you were losing this 100-year old thing that was just there. There's nowhere that it says in the constitution, there has to be a newspaper in a small town. What did you think, Chris, when it said it was going to shut down?

**0:09:15.7 CW:** Honestly, it is one of those double-edged swords where it's complicated when... Because the public generally, they're not educated. They don't... I'm not saying educated, but they're not educated on the topics.

**0:09:28.1 MB:** Never.

**0:09:28.4 CW:** And a lot of times they're... It's complex. You're trying to have a civil meeting and you have a... There's a lot of angst in the world today. And there's a lot of divisive media today. Today it's media à la carte. And so whatever you subscribe to your ideas, you can find a news source for that. And because of that, our public meetings sometimes can get quite tumultuous. And so for me, what I was saying the other day, or last week in the other meeting was that we need to do a better job of public engagement because we really want the people and the public to understand, not just to hear the issues, but to understand them. And if we're not doing a good job of public engagement, then they have very little chance to fully understand these issues.

**0:10:16.8 MB:** Greg, the Constitution states that we need a free and unfettered press as a final check on power. And Greg, you guys have power. You might say, "Oh no, we're just a little town on I-65." You are spending public money, and then you've got this voice keeping an eye on you. Is it necessary in our society, Greg? Do you believe these founding fathers had the right idea? Because let me... Greg, I don't want to bore you. I'm going to give you some quotes. This is Thomas Jefferson, 1776. "When it left to me to decide if we should have a government without newspapers or newspapers without government, I should not hesitate a moment to prefer the latter." But he said later in 1800-something, "Nothing can now be believed which is seen in the newspaper." Because they were picking on him. They were going after him. Greg, is this a necessary part of your job to have a free and unfettered press in a small community in Tennessee? You can say whatever you feel, sir.

**0:11:13.6 GV:** It is the most critical component we can possibly ask for and need. Because like Chris was saying, if we can't explain views to people, if we don't have a voice, a mechanism, a way to bring to the public what we're trying to do, then they're going to go on Facebook, or they're going to hear somebody who thinks everybody in government is a crook. Everybody's a thief. Everybody's a dumb you know what. And we stand up there and try to explain thing, and they take it down to the lowest common denominator. And that's why you've got to have a critical, free, unfettered press that can report on issues. And even if they're incorrect, they got the best part... The most, the best and part of the story correct. It is critical we have a presence of a local... Nobody gives a hoot in Nashville about Bedford County or even in Murfreesboro, but we do here.

**0:12:08.6 GV:** And that's why we need you guys here, desperately need you here. We've fallen into this category with news media and it started in the '70s. You and I remember well with the Watergate and we got you. Everybody's a crook. We got you. And that filters itself down. We've got to... We've been accustomed now to this USA News report where everything's going on in the world. And now we've got Fox on one side and CNN on the other. People want to hear what's affecting them locally. They want to know about Aunt Millie's dinner party and the kids that got a honor students at certain schools and how the sports are doing and who died and when's the funeral and what's our local government doing. We can't keep going to this USA Today model. It's just vanilla regurgitated stuff that nobody cares about because they see it every single day. We need





local stuff from local people to help us as we move through here. So we... I can't express to you. When you said a news desert, we have a food desert, we have a news desert. We desperately need local people here to build that... Make an oasis for us in that desert.

**0:13:19.9 MB:** Keith, you and I were in the green room. There's no green room. You and I were chatting before I started recording on Zoom, and you said words to me like, "Our philosophy at Lakeway is to do local journalism." What is local journalism to you, Keith? Is it... Come on, you're there at Lakeway now working for Mike here, running the papers. When you get up in the morning, what's your mission?

**0:13:45.4 Keith Ponder:** I think it starts with service. I think that we're telling stories in local markets that you're not going to find anywhere else. And I'm really proud in our group of nine papers in Middle Tennessee, we've got 22 journalists. But there are stories to tell in each of these communities. And in my career, I had opportunities to go the Metro route. But I love the community journalism side of our business, because it's an opportunity to have an impact. These stories that we're telling, and Curt and Greg and Chris hit on all of them. These stories matter to people being impacted by the work of the planning commission. Zoning issues are some of the most contentious issues in a local community. And having the ability to tell the story based on facts and based on getting both sides of the story is critical. And that's our bread and butter. And this goes back, way back to when Mike's dad founded the company in Morristown of serving these communities by telling these local stories.

**0:15:05.0 MB:** Jack Fishman, just so I can inform our audience, is Mike's dad. Mike Fishman, Jack's email address, is it still Copyboy, if I remember correctly?

**0:15:14.9 MF:** Yes it is.

**0:15:16.1 MB:** Man, he has ink in his veins does he not?

**0:15:20.1 MF:** He does. He got that. Just a quick little funny story. All of us remember the days of CB radios.

**0:15:28.5 MB:** Of course.

**0:15:30.1 MF:** And all of us, maybe except Diandra...

**0:15:33.4 DW:** I do.

**0:15:35.9 MF:** Had a handle at one time. And his was Copyboy and he created that because he was running copy back and forth for the Memphis newspaper, The Memphis Commercial Appeal, back when he was putting himself through school at Memphis State at the time.

**0:15:54.7 MB:** Well, I know you and Jack very well. I've been in your boardroom in Morristown a few times over the last 20 years. You had me in when the internet was young and new, try to figure out what this wacky world was going to become. I had no crystal ball. But I'll tell you one thing I do know, Mike, you and your dad are businessmen. You are trying to run a business. Why the heck are

you still in it Mike? Why didn't you sell out when the... You must have had an offer from GateHouse, right? Someone must have come to you back in those good old days and said, come on, I'll give you some money. You're out of this deal and took over and sliced and diced your company away. You went through a lot of hardships, Mike. You could, you made Lakeway survive through some of the toughest times. What the heck was your motivation, Mike? Why do you stay in business?

**0:16:43.3 MF:** Well, I think it goes back to comments that we've made this morning. One, Keith commented to the founding of the company, and then basically you commented on ink in our blood, so to speak. And it really just boils down to that service concept. When we started the company, Dad's still the chairman of our industrial board. He's served as our industrial board chairman here in Morristown for 50 plus years. It's probably going on close to 60 now. And so, he understands, and our company is founded on that. The importance of local news for all the reasons we've talked about this morning. And it's just exciting to hear the folks, and I want to thank Chris and Greg and Curt for their support.

**0:17:40.9 MB:** All right, I'm going to swing it back to the three gentlemen who represent the community that you invested in, Mike. What I'm asking you now is, is there a better feeling about the newspaper now that you've had that loss aversion? Let me start with Curt. Your count for a second, just assume the paper would always be there, right? It was there for over a 100 years. Suddenly you hear it's gone and then someone else comes in. Does the community now have a little bit more appreciation for the service it provides rather than it's just another business down the street? Curt, what do you think?

**0:18:15.7 CC:** Well, I believe that we do have a more of appreciation. I think the prior paper had changed hands several times, and there wasn't a lot of stability. As you know, Lakeway had many papers in our region for years and there's a lot of stability with them. But yes, I think that when we didn't have, when people were calling us all the time wanting information, just basic information, if anybody had passed away, if we heard this or that. And just to go a little bit about what we were talking about earlier, about Facebook, a lot of information that's put on on Facebook is correct or accurate, but a lot of it is not. But whoever's posted on Facebook is not accountable to subscribers.

**0:19:08.9 CC:** They're not accountable to advertisers, where a newspaper is. And I think that's... What's important is, is their word, a reputation is what their whole foundation is on with a newspaper. So we've got into this opinion based world now that if you look at TV, any of the channels, they have program... I call it programming. They get on there and they give one side of an issue. They give the other side. You don't have the old Walter Cronkite person on TV that just tells you, "Hey, this is what happened today." And I think you get that more with the newspaper, especially a local newspaper than you do with anything else.

**0:19:47.9 MB:** Diandra, I'm going to leave it with you now and and sum some things up. You are lucky in my opinion. I'll tell you why. Mike and Keith know me for decades. I'm a sales guy. I did not come from the editorial side. Please I'm coming from the dark side. I'm the publisher of E&P not the editor. The editorial team smacks me down every day. They yell at me about things. But one of the keys to sales is called loss aversion. That's why they call it a solution-based sales process or a needs-based sales process. Loss aversion, you create fear of loss. You're in a good place right now



because you have that in your back pocket.

**0:20:25.0 DW:** Right.

**0:20:25.9 MB:** One of my customers is a paper out in the specific northwest. One day I published all of their 25 editions with a blank front page. Do you see what it did, to just to show a community what it might be like not to have the voice. So now you before all this happened and I know it must have killed you when you found out you were fired.

**0:20:45.0 DW:** Right.

**0:20:45.8 MB:** And now you're still in the seat. Is there a difference when you walk into a local diner? Do people...

**0:20:54.7 DW:** Absolutely.

**0:20:54.8 MB:** Okay, hey, that's the question. Is the community having a different impression of your role today as opposed to what was four months ago?

**0:21:04.4 DW:** Yes, there is excitement, there... I know I had mentioned last week to a coworker that in sales you make those calls. You continuously might call one, might call five times. But when the news went off the Bedford Post and we're publishing our first publication is August 16th. I had many advertisers that I've known for 10 years or known personally for many years reach out to me wanting in the paper and [laughter] that's not a normal. But it was exciting for me, and showed me that we're going to have their support. And nothing has slowed down yet as far as subscribers, advertisers, and just the positive comments of how the paper looks, the work of the editorial staff and everything in between. So there was a loss there, and since word of we are the Bedford Post it has just been overwhelming in a great way.

**0:22:23.1 MB:** Keith, Mike thank you. On behalf of Editor & Publisher, thank you for keeping up the fight guys 'cause you didn't sell out. You stayed and you're fighting to serve your communities. I don't know who else is... Mike keep it up, okay? And say hi to your dad for me.

**0:22:40.3 MF:** Will do it. And I want to thank you, Mike for allowing this forum. Like I said earlier, it's... I'm just excited that everybody on this call has the same enthusiasm and we're going to do our best to serve your region and serve your community. So certainly, Keith, I visited with you already and I hope to meet y'all in person soon myself.

**0:23:03.1 GV:** I know Curt and Chris and I really appreciate you taking the gamble on us and betting on us. And I hope that we can help you in any way down here because we really do need you.

**0:23:16.6 MF:** Thank you Mike.

**0:23:18.2 MB:** All of you, thank you for your valuable time. We'll be keeping an eye on Bedford County, Tennessee, Lakeway Publishing and making sure that we see this community grow and





prosper thanks to a free unfettered press. Everyone have a good day, thanks.

**0:23:34.9 CW:** Thank you.

**0:23:35.0 MF:** Thank you.

**0:23:35.0 GV:** Thank you.

[music]