

**Audio Transcript**  
Episode 206 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series  
with *Mike Blinder*

*Publication date: Monday October 2, 2023*

The banner features the E&P Reports Vodcast logo on the left, the URL [EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts](http://EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts) in the center, and a microphone on the right. Below the banner are three video thumbnails: Tracy Brown (Chief Content Officer, Chicago Public Media), Mike Blinder (Publisher, E&P Magazine), and Jennifer Kho (Executive Editor, Chicago Sun Times). The E&P logo and 'Episode Sponsor BLOX DIGITAL' are also present.

**[Checking in with the Chicago Sun-Times/ Public Media merger.](#)**

In this episode of E&P Reports, we check in with Chicago Public Media, owners of PBS affiliate WBEZ, to find out how their 2022 acquisition of the 149-year-old Chicago Sun-Times is going.

Appearing on the program are **Jennifer Kho**, executive editor for the newspaper and **Tracy Brown**, chief content officer for the parent company, who discuss their new initiatives, collaborative efforts and how the blending of these two major market brands is working to expand their audience.



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.

0:00:18.7 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, Publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we kick off with housekeeping urging our listening-only folks, those on a podcast platform of choice to follow us. Watching us on our YouTube channel, subscribe. There's a button below, a bell to the right. Do something, hit them, smash them, click them, don't ignore them. And if you do that, you'll get an update each and every time we upload. A new episode of this weekly vodcast series, E&P Reports, taking you to Chicago, the Windy City. And I have two guests today. Jennifer Kho, you are not new to this program. This is your second appearance on E&P Reports. Jen, you're Executive Editor of the Chicago Sun-Times. Welcome back. It's good to have you.

0:01:03.7 Jennifer Kho: Thanks. Thanks for having me back.

0:01:06.2 MB: And Tracy Brown, Chief Content Officer, Chicago Public Media. The reason we're pairing both of you together, and by the way, thank you so much, Tracy, for your valuable time. I'm sure you're busy as well.

0:01:18.0 Tracy Brown: Thank you.

0:01:18.9 MB: Chicago Public Media did something extremely exciting about a year and a half ago. January 31st, 2022, out came a press release saying Chicago Public Media picked up the Chicago Sun-Times. This was enormous. This was a big deal. This is a major market, public broadcasting entity acquiring a newspaper brand. First question, Tracy, are you Jennifer's boss? Are you equals? You are the Chief Content Officer. Jennifer creates content, right? So does she report up to you?

0:01:52.0 TB: Yes. So Jennifer does report up to me. The way the structure works is that, as Chief Content Officer for Chicago Public Media, I pretty much oversee all of content across the organization, and that includes the Sun-Times, it includes WBEZ, and our music station, Vocalo.

0:02:14.8 MB: Are you in the same building, the two of you now?

0:02:18.4 TB: Most days, yes. I mean, right now we're not, but most days, I mean we are.

0:02:23.6 MB: Most days you are.

0:02:24.4 TB: Yes, we are.



0:02:24.9 MB: Okay. We're going to explore one year in for Jen, that's why she's on the program. This is your one-year anniversary at the helm of the Sun-Times. We're gonna explore also how this partnership's been working out. We're going to do all that on the backside of this message.

0:02:36.2 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 2,000 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).

0:03:41.2 MB: Let me start with you, Tracy, if that would be okay.

0:03:43.8 TB: Okay.

0:03:43.9 MB: Tracy, you were there during this acquisition of the Chicago Sun-Times, correct?

0:03:48.2 TB: Correct, yes.

0:03:49.3 MB: So someone came into your office one day and said, "Hey, we're public-broadcasting, let's pick up a newspaper." What'd you say? What was the first thing out of your mouth? Did you say, "What are you drinking?" No, I mean, seriously, what was the first thought?

0:04:00.0 TB: You know what?

0:04:01.6 MB: Yes.

0:04:02.3 TB: That's a great question. You know, when we first started, when I was first brought in on the acquisition talks, it was pretty early-on. My first thought was, "What?" And then... And this is coming from someone who had spent... I'd spent more than 25 years in newspapers. I came from the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, had been at the Dallas Morning News, so I knew newspapers. And like most people and like most journalists, I started doing my own kind of reporting on what this might mean for Chicago Public Media and the Sun-Times, and it didn't take me long to realize that it was a win-win for both sides.

0:04:50.7 MB: Let me ask you a question. You came from two, and I know you have a deeper background in that, two highly respected broadsheet, what we would call iconic brands, real... And the Sun-Times was one of my clients. When I was consulting multimedia, I spent a lot of time in the building that was at the hotel. Remember that one when they had the... It was the first time I ever took an elevator where you can't press a button in the elevator, you just press which floor you go. I mean, I remember those days.

0:05:16.9 TB: Right.



0:05:17.6 MB: And I spent five years consulting them. The Sun-Times was a tabloid. I mean, this was the world of tabloid... Not it was totally, I mean, you could go up into Canada and then you get the girls in there in the bathing suits in each issue. It's not a stodgy broadsheet. You're public broadcasting.

0:05:35.3 TB: Yes.

0:05:35.4 MB: You see why? Did you immediately say, "Why are we picking up this one?" I mean, I'm not being negative or painting with a broad brush, but did that enter your thinking at all that the brand of that... That that was a sports publication in a way, you know, heavy on the sports coverage. And that's not exactly what you were doing on your side.

0:05:51.2 TB: You know what, actually for more so it wasn't like, "If we're going to buy the paper, is this the one to buy? Why would we buy this one say versus a [0:06:00.4] \_\_\_\_?" But for me, it was really bringing together those two worlds. You know, having spent decades in newspapers, I know the culture of newspapers and I know the culture of public radio. And does that make sense? And in my last few years at... Even in newspapers we were cutting every year.

0:06:23.1 TB: And that was something that we had not done prior to the pandemic, at least here in public media. So I did have some concerns about that. But I will say this, once I did my own due diligence in terms of like I was already experiencing the Sun-Times, had a subscription so I knew what the news and the experience of being a reader for the Sun-Times was. But for me, the thing that really made it sense was a couple of things. One was, when I looked at the demographics of who the Sun-Times is serving.

0:07:00.2 MB: Yeah.

0:07:00.6 TB: A more diverse audience.

0:07:02.4 MB: Yeah.

0:07:03.1 TB: And interestingly, a much younger audience than, or relatively younger audience, than the EZ, it just made a lot of sense. I felt like the Sun-Times, the collaboration and partnership between the two would give WBEZ the opportunity to reach an audience. We do a lot of impactful work that impacts a lot of the very same people who are Sun-Times readers and... But who don't come to BEZ. And so there was that opportunity too.

0:07:37.2 MB: But I wanna circle to Jen, 'cause you've been sitting there very patiently. Jennifer, we interviewed you when you got the gig. Remember that? It was so exciting. You were the first woman to run that brand, the first person of color to run that brand. It was a big move. It was secret. You remember... I remember you contacting us 'cause you were doing some writing for us, going, "I can't tell you but things are changing." I can't tell you that things were changing. You had a wonderful column about looking for jobs and how to find jobs. Your background was strong, Huffington Post, Guardian US. How's it going in one year in, in Chicago now, running the team at the Sun-Times, obviously in this now blended environment. What's the gig been like for you?

0:08:18.8 JK: My perspective has been going really well. When I started, I really wanted to find ways to right away, get to know the community, really understand how we could bring the community even closer to the newsroom. And, figure out what did the newsroom need to be able to do its best work, have the best collaboration, be a really good partner. And then, when I came back to Chicago in September and moved here, we started doing these community listening sessions and working with our Chief Audience Officer, Celeste LeCompte's team. We pulled together a bunch of research on our audience, tried to understand more about the community through these listening sessions. And the team also did a reader survey, which was great.

0:09:07.7 MB: Okay, so let me... You're doing a lot of asking and learning from the community. Tracy, you're obviously involved in that process. So October comes along, and you've been there now what? June, July, August, September, sorry, five months. Bam. You drop a paywall, which is anti where a lot of this industry's trying to move now, everybody's talking about the three stools. One is advertising revenue, the second one is reader revenue or audience revenue, I.e. Subscriptions. Third is maybe philanthropic or join the club with revenue. You drop the paywall Tracy, did that come through the research or did you realize in order to get into some of those, how should I say, new demos that the paywall was stopping you from getting that audience? What was the rationale, Tracy, of the paywall drop?

0:09:55.3 TB: The rationale actually, is that we're public media and that our mission is access to all. And so from the very beginning, we didn't know exactly when we were gonna do it, but we went in to the acquisition knowing that our goal was gonna be to drop the paywall.

0:10:17.0 MB: So from the start, you said, "Okay..."

0:10:19.3 TB: From the start, we knew that it's gonna be...

[overlapping conversation]

0:10:19.4 MB: We're taking the brand in, we're gonna broaden our brand, we're gonna broaden our audience so we can blend these brands together and we're gonna give it for free to all. And then we'll mostly get support for us through donations. Make sure we do it that way through sponsorship."

0:10:32.3 TB: Mm-hmm. Your donations, the members. Exactly. Now you still pay for the print edition, but the digital paywall offers free access to all. Yes.

0:10:40.5 MB: All right. Now here comes June recently, I'm doing a timeline here, I hope you don't mind. But now we're talking June, 2023, you started an initiative, which is most interesting, the right to be forgotten. Now this is fascinating because one of the things that everybody's realizing, we realized it in the digital age, is things live forever now. It's not the good old days where something got printed in the paper and then if anyone wanted to see it... Remember the days of micro... You're too young Tracy, Microfilm, does that... Remember? [chuckle] You go to the library and read the old issues.

0:11:10.8 TB: Oh my God.

0:11:10.9 JK: We actually still have microfiche machine in our office. Yeah.

0:11:16.1 MB: Really? So Tracy, everything lives forever, right? Tracy, Jennifer, you put up a story about a woman who gets arrested, maybe it was a mistake, maybe it was expunged from her record, but that story's now living on Google. It's coming up over and over again. She loses a job, it shows up, someone's trying to dis her online. Where'd this idea come from to give people the ability to lobby you? Is that what this is Tracy, to say, "I want my stories taken down." Is that what's going on?

0:11:44.5 TB: Well, you know what? I'm gonna let Jennifer talk about...

0:11:47.4 MB: Okay.

0:11:48.1 TB: That effort 'cause she has led... Which I'm very proud that we are are doing it, but I'll let Jennifer talk about it.

0:11:53.4 MB: Jennifer, where'd this idea come from?

0:11:55.6 JK: Yeah, so originally it was brought to me by the Journalist of Color Caucus at the Sun-Times, actually like my first week or so, at the paper and, me, Norm Parrish and Mary Mitchell, we did some research to figure out, well, how are other people handling this? It is something... We had versions of it also at The Guardian and HuffPost, but it was not this sort of really transparent, like, "here's a form", that kind of thing. But we obviously talked a lot about what should live forever and what should we consider changing.

0:12:38.8 JK: And so taking that kind of the will and desire from the Journalists of Color Caucus, we did a bunch of research to find out, how do other people handle it? What were some of the risks and things to consider and things like that? And how can we make sure that it has the biggest impact? And Norm and Mary had proposed making this transparent process. We figured out how we could do it and then launched it.

0:13:03.6 MB: Here's the list. Who's eligible? Juvenile offenders, nonviolent criminal offenders, people named in stories about crimes which charges were dropped, dismissed, reversed, or expunged, those names and stories about arrests that did not lead to conviction. There you go. Domestic violence victims. Who's ineligible? Current or past elected public officials. Fair game, right? That's what you guys are doing. People seeking public office, people convicted of most felonies or violent crimes. So if someone's got a story living in there, but let's be very clear, it's only coming off of your site, you're not phoning the others who picked it up either, right? And saying, "Hey, take it off." This is just one newspaper bringing them down. Correct, Jennifer?

0:13:42.6 JK: We're not taking the stories down, but we're de-indexing the stories. So if we have created the stories, we're telling Google, we're de-indexing it from Google. So the archive remains, 'cause we don't want to whitewash our history either but we also want to reduce that impact. Where, if we wouldn't have covered it today, because having had a lot more thinking about equity and



understanding more about the impact and the kind of inequitable impact that these stories can have, we will take it down from Google so that it's not the first thing that comes up when someone searches for somebody's name.

0:14:24.0 MB: Excellent. All right, so we got three brands we're having here today. We got WBEZ, we got Chicago Public Media, we got Chicago Sun-Times. Those are three separate brands. Both of those, WBEZ, Chicago Sun-Times lives under the Chicago Public Media brand, brand, brand, brand. You're doing collaborations now. Certain projects are being duly brand. For example, I was checking out that April 2023 voter guide, where you released both in broadcast and in print a chance to better help the readership make logical decisions in the elections and the Runoffs. Correct, Tracy? Are there other examples of this co-branded universe that you've done in your purview, Tracy?

0:15:07.6 TB: Yeah, I mean, certainly we've done a lot of big stories together. One of the biggest projects that I would say, in addition to the way that we covered the election under one kind of big huge umbrella is a project that is started in May, the Democracy Solutions Project. We are not only, it's BEZ, it's the Sun-Times, it's also Vocalo, but it is us doing, for the next more over a year leading up to the election of 2024, are really looking at solutions and threats against democracy, but solutions as well.

0:15:49.0 MB: Running out of time, I want to hit Jennifer with this last topic. Jen, our cover story, and I know you read it and devoured it 'cause you're such a fan of E&P Magazine, right, Jennifer? But cover story at the time of this recording was all about citizen journalism. And we got a lot of feedback on that one, because some consider citizen, when I say citizen, you can define it a million different ways, like you can sponsor content, but basically some were, "This is how we can grow without having to have payrolls.

0:16:14.5 MB: We can bring in some of our readers to help contribute content." Others were commenting on it and giving us feedback saying, "This is ridiculous. You should be a qualified journalist. You should go through journalism school." there's some that say that's the problem in our society. A journalist must be defined and almost not licensed, but it's somehow credited. Jennifer, you just did an amazing thing while you were doing your outreach, you were asking people to contribute their stories, and you just picked guest columnists, correct? You now have what? Is this 12? Is that the total new faces? This is really recent.

0:16:49.0 MB: This is like a month old at the time of recording this episode. You brought in 12 new faces, and I went through their bios. They're everything from scholarly to just average, and I don't mean average, people that just work for a living. How did you do this? And why did you do this? And where are these new voices? And how do you describe this initiative?

0:17:10.3 JK: Yeah, so one of my goals is really to interconnect the community more closely with the newsroom. Part of that is coming out to the communities, like we were just talking about with all the community listening sessions and part of it is bringing more of the community into the Sun-Times pages. And so one of the things we did was a contest to try to find Chicago's next voices, and we asked people to write on the topic of kind of what's next for Chicago, based on personal experience. What do they think is next? And then we had a panel of judges who helped us to select



the winners. And we ended up picking 12 new voices and new guest columnists as you pointed out.

0:17:54.8 MB: Final question for you. Were you in favor of this expansion of citizen journalism or bringing in these new voices? Was this all part of a [0:18:02.4] \_\_\_\_ that you were all in favor of on your side of the game?

0:18:06.8 TB: Is that question to me?

0:18:08.0 MB: Yeah.

0:18:09.5 TB: Oh, most definitely. I think that trying to, which is when I mentioned before about community engagement, just part of that is like we have to build relations with the community, the listening sessions, the giving them a voice and a platform to share stories. Even on WBEZ side, we have an effort of audio storytelling workshop where we go out in the community and train people to tell audio stories. So what Jennifer is doing with the Sun-Times is... It's exciting and it is mission-driven. It's the thing that we want to do more.

0:18:47.8 MB: Tracy Brown, Chief Content Officer, Chicago Public Media, the parent company now of WBEZ Chicago and the Chicago Sun-Times, which brings in and loops in Jennifer Kho, Jen Executive Editor of Chicago Sun-Times. Both of you, thank you so much for sharing your story. Why don't we just do this every year, guys? Is that okay? We'll circle back 12 months from now and see how things are going. But I wanna thank both of you for your valuable time and sharing your story with our audience.

0:19:14.0 TB: All right. Thank you, Mike for the opportunity.

0:19:14.2 JK: Thanks so much Mike.