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## Audio Transcript

Episode 208 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series  
with Mike Blinder

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**E&P REPORTS VODCAST**

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Founder/ Publisher  
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### [Small North Carolina community is now a two-newspaper town](#)

In this episode of "E&P Reports," we take you to Morgantown, North Carolina, the county seat for Burke County, where Lee Enterprises' News Herald has been publishing for over 120 years. However, it is now a two-newspaper town, as The Paper, a local nonprofit, is in its 36<sup>th</sup> week of publishing both print and online. Appearing in the broadcast is Allen VanNoppen, The Paper's founder and publisher, who speaks to why he decided to start a competing local printed product, how the business is going more than eight months in and what advice he gives to others who may want to start a local, nonprofit, digital and print news operation.

[music]

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.

0:00:19.3 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we start off with a little housekeeping and beg our audience to follow us. If you're on a podcast platform, that means you're just listening to me. If you're watching my face, I apologize for my age and my looks, that means you're on our YouTube channel. Go below me, hit that subscribe button. Hit the bell to the right. Well, don't... Just click it, don't hit it. You'll get an update each and every time we upload this weekly Vodcast series, E&P reports. I do not know this gentleman, Allen VanNoppen. Did I say your name correctly, Allen?

0:00:54.6 Allen VanNoppen: Close enough, Mike. It's Allen VanNoppen. But that is very, very close. It gets tortured every time people say it.

0:01:03.0 MB: Well, every time someone tries to say Blinder they say blinder. So, [laughter] when I was a disc jockey, I used Mike Lawrence, my middle name for years. Just got tired of the mispronunciation. But anyway, Allen came to me in an interesting way. I get this press release that the paper Burke County, North Carolina's only all local digital, oh, excuse me, all local print and digital newspaper expands news and sports coverage with three new staffers. And in a world where everybody's downsizing and firing, we obviously put this up as you know, and you hired three people at an operation I've never heard of, the paper, which is an incredible name for your operation. Allen, you are in Morgantown, North Carolina. You have started over the last year an actual print and digital newspaper. You're in a town where a Lee paper has existed for over 122 years. You look like you might, based on your resume, you don't look as old, but you started in the '70s as a reporter at the News Herald. Am I correct, sir?

0:02:09.3 AV: That's correct.

0:02:11.0 MB: If you're around my age now, 'cause I started in the '70s, you know, as a disc jockey, I assume you wanna slow down a little. I mean, what were you drinking when you decided to start a newspaper in Morgantown [laughter]?

0:02:26.4 AV: Well, I could go on and on about it, Mike, but yes, I was a reporter in my early 20s, started in 1978 and '9 with the News Herald in Morganton. Our current, the paper's editor, Bill Petite, was also there is a new reporter and that's where we first met. At that point it was still



privately owned. It was getting ready to be sold to the park chain. But Bill and I were privileged enough to experience and enjoy a local newspaper in a time when a local newspaper meant something.

0:03:07.2 MB: So basically you watched your newspaper of record family owned in 1979, sold to Roy Park. I used to be a DJ in Ithaca, New York. So a new Park back then. He died, what? '90 something?

0:03:20.4 AV: I don't know Mike, but that sounds close.

0:03:22.6 MB: Yeah. So then Media General picked up all the Park papers, if I remember.

0:03:26.3 AV: Correct.

0:03:27.1 MB: Then Media General in 2012 sold the paper to BH Media, we all know in 2020 that then was absorbed by Lee. Not the real estate, just the paper. Is that... So before we get started into our interview, let me just ask you a question. How many reporters do you know are in the building now, working for your competitor, The News Herald? How many are in there now? Do you have any idea?

0:03:51.6 AV: There are three. There are two in the building and there's one who works remote.

0:03:56.7 MB: And how many do you have now on the street writing journalism for you?

0:04:01.2 AV: We have eight.

0:04:03.4 MB: We're gonna talk about this disruptor, the paper in Burke County, correct? Burke County, North Carolina?

0:04:11.8 AV: Correct.

0:04:11.9 MB: County seat in Morganton. I called it Morgantown 'cause that's how it's spelled, but I now know the proper pronunciation. And we will unpack all of this with Allen, the founder and publisher on the backside of this message.

0:04:24.2 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by Blocks Digital, formerly Town News. Even though the name has changed, their commitment to the media industry is as strong as ever. Blocks 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 Blocks Digital serving over 141 million monthly users who view over 6.5 billion pages of content each year. You can trust Blocks digital to empower you, to connect you at scale with the community you need to reach. Blocks Digital, formerly Town News, now reimaged to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and be beyond. Learn more at [blocksdigital.com](https://blocksdigital.com).

0:05:29.7 MB: Okay. Allen, you told me you started with ink in your veins, on the journalistic side



of the industry. And I started as a disc jockey, but then got into sales. You had it in your veins, but then you got into the furniture industry. You spent a lot of time working in furniture, but then you became an ad agency, correct? You said a marketing agent.

0:05:49.0 AV: Correct.

0:05:51.2 MB: So you were working with local businesses, and all of this has always been in Burke County. Is your life that county, is that where you've always been?

0:06:00.1 AV: Not specifically. I would say all of my professional life, the bulk of it that means anything has been in Burke County.

0:06:08.1 MB: Let's first of all just unpack what Burke County is. It's right now, according to Wikipedia, it's a county with a population of 90,000. Morganton is the county seat. Correct me if I'm wrong, you're two hours west of Greensboro and I-40, about one and a half hours northwest of Charlotte. This is not a bedroom community of Greensboro or Charlotte. This is a community on its own. Is it a... What drives the economy there? Is it tourism, agriculture? Do you have a university? What's the town like?

0:06:37.8 AV: Yeah, Mike. We've transformed like a lot of rural communities, especially North Carolina. Our community was founded on the textile and furniture industry for decades, if not generations. All the offshoring came along and all those plants closed, all those jobs went away, 20 years ago, the town that exists today does not resemble the town that exists 20 years ago. Morganton and parts of Burke County have reinvented itself, have had injection of new business, lots of healthcare dedicated businesses, lots of high tech businesses, lots of professional services are blooming here.

0:07:26.1 MB: Now, you left this industry for decades, but you were in marketing and media. How did you figure out to get community support and build a community owned newspaper and found it? Where did that idea come from?

0:07:41.9 AV: For maybe eight years or so I wrote a weekly column for the News Herald, which was syndicated by Media General. And so that was from 2000 and let's say '3, up to near 2010. It kept my hand in the game.

0:08:01.7 MB: Okay.

0:08:01.9 AV: It kept my name out in the community as a journalist, if you will. And the discontent with the news deserts that are taking place, the phenomenal lack of local news that exists, no fault of the staff of the News Herald. Mind you, it is the corporate ownership that is stripping these local papers. People kept coming to me on the street and saying, start your newspaper. Because it's something I have talked about casually for 20 years. And my wife said to me, in early, let's just call it in the early part of 2002, that if you don't do this now, you're gonna regret not doing it because you've talked about it for so long. And I'm 68. I had transferred ownership of my marketing company to my daughters. I was looking at some available time and pondered it and pondered it. And one day I found myself in front of a mayor and found myself saying, I'm starting a newspaper.



And when that came out of my mouth, I knew that I had jumped off cliff, correctly.

0:09:23.6 MB: What is the circulation right now? Today as the time of this recording. How many of these puppies do you print?

0:09:28.9 AV: Paid circulation for print is 1870.

0:09:32.4 MB: Okay, 1870. You mail them? Is that how they get delivered to people's homes?

0:09:37.8 AV: Home delivery.

0:09:38.5 MB: Home delivery. You're able to find...

0:09:41.9 AV: Only home delivery. The Charlotte Observer no longer delivers home, Wall Street Journal no longer delivers home, News Herald no longer delivers home, and so.

0:09:53.1 MB: And I went to your website and notice that, and again, maybe this is just I hit it on the wrong day or the right day, that you release the stories on the web the same day the paper is published, right? You don't publish 24/7 your news.

0:10:06.5 AV: Correct.

0:10:06.7 MB: It's a weekly distribution. So it's once... You are what I would call a true weekly.

0:10:12.3 AV: Correct.

0:10:12.5 MB: You're not just saying I publish a print product weekly and I'm 24/7 online. Do you have an email database you've built, sir?

0:10:19.1 AV: We do. We absolutely do.

0:10:19.8 MB: And how large is it? May I ask?

0:10:22.5 AV: Oh, I would say it's on the order of 3500 of a legitimate interested audience. In our website, thepaper.media, you don't read any news outside of Burke County. There's nothing of Charlotte. There's nothing of Asheville. There's nothing of Ukraine. There's nothing of San Francisco. There are no stories about Taylor Swift and her football player.

0:10:46.3 MB: Right.

0:10:47.0 AV: Nothing like that.

0:10:49.0 MB: It's amazing. You have some great journalism. You're writing, I was very impressed with your stories. Some of them are bold. You make statements, you do editorial. You're doing hyper local journalism and making people think and you have a presence. See, in June, you wrote an editorial where you were really upset that your competition, the News Herald left downtown.



They moved to some place called Drexel, like outskirts. They're not even in the downtown area where the commerce is. And they put the building for sale. And you're downtown, right? You have a presence.

0:11:33.0 AV: Correct.

0:11:33.7 MB: Is that important? Do people like having a building and seeing the paper there? I mean, is that still important in today's I'm looking at my phone world, in your opinion?

0:11:42.7 AV: Critically important. We made a point of being downtown with people in the office from 8:00 to 5:00 Monday through Friday. And from 8:00 till noon on Saturday. We made a point of having our door open. We have invited anybody to come in any time to have coffee, share a story, complain, introduce themselves to us. We want community engagement. We want to rebuild what a local newspaper is, what it means to a community. And there is a tremendous thirst and hunger for that around the country.

0:12:21.7 MB: So I'm going to ask a question you don't have to answer. Can you give me an idea of the three stools of philanthropy, advertising and reader revenue, the percentage you're getting from philanthropy? Would you mind telling me that?

0:12:36.7 AV: Nope, the business model long term is a third and a third and a third.

0:12:41.6 MB: There you go.

0:12:42.9 AV: Right now, as it is today, off top of my head, I would say that it is 40 advertising, 40 subscription, 20 philanthropy. But we need to increase the philanthropic portion of it because we are not breakeven yet. I am proud to say Mike, that we are losing exactly as much money as my P&L forecast, we would lose at this point in our...

0:13:17.4 MB: It's only been... You've only been publishing for less than a year. Your first issue was in February of 2023. Correct?

0:13:22.7 AV: Correct. Yeah.

0:13:24.3 MB: And you formed the 501 [c] [3] about a year ago.

0:13:26.9 AV: Correct.

0:13:27.0 MB: And then you started doing, you started hunting for journals. You have an editor you've already mentioned that came from the Lee newspaper. You have a sports columnist, you have an education reporter, and you just added three more.

0:13:42.9 AV: Correct.

0:13:43.3 MB: What kind of response are you getting from the community? How do the readers react now to what you're doing?





0:13:52.1 AV: It's extraordinary. It is absolutely extraordinary. We knew that if we did a good job, it would be successful. Our goal is to not do a good job. Our goal is to set a new standard for how a local newspaper needs to look, conduct itself, cover, write, everything about it. So I would say that we're doing a great job and we've won some North Carolina Press Association awards that reflect that. And the response from the community, I can't tell you how proud it makes us feel. We hear something every day. People come into our office to thank us. If heaven forbid I were to get hit by the bus after this zoom meeting, I will move on a very, very proud and content and happy man. I feel like we are contributing to the community.

0:14:53.4 MB: Final question. When you get those calls from other community leaders or community participants like yourself who say, I wanna follow your lead, I wanna do this in my town, what advice do you give? What five or three bullets do you... 'Cause I'm sure your phone rings and people ask you, I want to do this, I want to do this. What do you say to them as the entrepreneur who put together this 501 [3] [C] put together this whole concept and is now employing people and generating journalism and building your bottom line? What do you tell those people who give you a call?

0:15:37.5 AV: I tell them, are they sure there is the appetite for local news? And to tell me why they think so statistically. What was the main newspaper and why is it not there? What attempts have been tried and have they succeeded or failed? The other critical thing, Mike, is you get one chance at a first impression. When we were going around and saying, we're gonna start a newspaper, the reaction 100% was, that's great. We need it. You are insane. I mean, it was that, and it wasn't until the third or fourth edition that people started to say, maybe these guys are serious about this. But the key of success to this is the team you bring together. Invest in your team. The reason we are so successful is we have an experienced, credentialed team of journalists. That was very important. That first edition sent a shout out into the community that these guys mean business and they know what they're doing.

0:16:49.6 MB: Allen, I'm gonna try to say it again. Allen VanNoppen. I got it, right?

0:16:55.1 AV: Correct.

0:16:55.8 MB: Allen VanNoppen, founder and publisher of The Paper. If anyone wants to get ahold of you or see The Paper, it is thepaper.media. Am I correct?

0:17:05.5 AV: Correct.

0:17:06.0 MB: And what is your email address, Allen?

0:17:09.5 AV: It is Allen A-L-L-E-N @thepaper.media.

0:17:15.8 MB: Thank you so much for your...

0:17:16.5 AV: And we call it The Paper because that's what people say. Where can I get The Paper?



0:17:20.8 MB: The Paper.

0:17:20.8 AV: Or I read about you in The Paper. So we called it The Paper.

0:17:25.5 MB: Thanks Allen, for your valuable time. We'll keep in touch.

0:17:28.5 AV: Thank you very much, Mike. It's been a pleasure. Appreciate it.