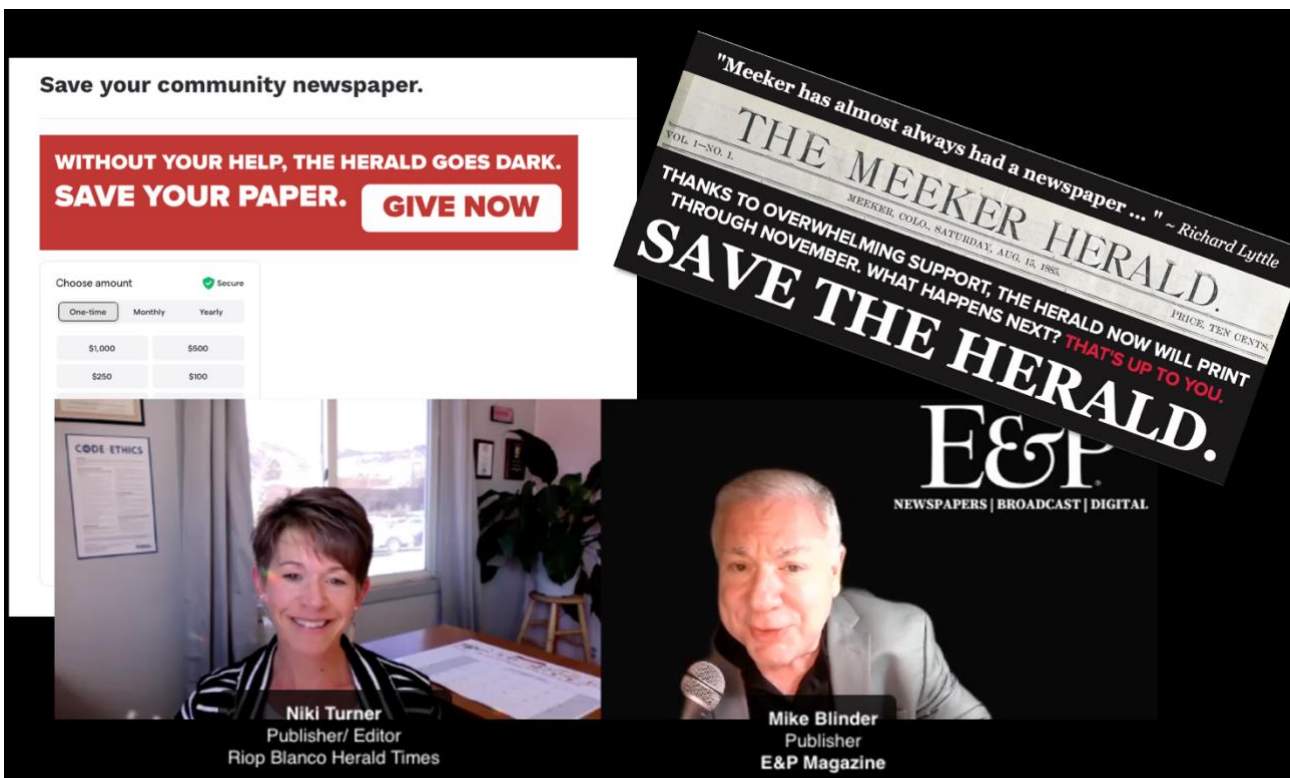


## Audio Transcript

Episode 211 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series  
with *Mike Blinder*

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### [An email cry for help saves this 138-year-old newspaper from extinction](#)

In this episode of "E&P Reports," we go one-on-one with Rio Blanco Herald Times Owner/Editor Niki Turner, who made the difficult choice of offering complete transparency about the newspaper's dire financial situation to the western Colorado citizens they serve. Turner truthfully revealed in an email that the company would cease operation within two weeks unless the community offered their support, which resulted in \$33,000 in contributions that saved the weekly publication, which has been printed since 1885, from extinction.



**0:00:04.2 Announcer:** This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine: The Authoritative Voice of NewsMedia 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're listening to this program on a podcast platform, by all means, follow us. Watching on YouTube, there's a subscribe button below, there's a bell to the right of it. Don't ignore 'em. Hit 'em. Smash 'em, click 'em, do something. You'll get an update each and every time we upload this weekly vodcast series, E&P Reports. I'm gonna take you back to my old stomping grounds, Niki Turner of the Rio Blanco Herald Times. Niki, you're on the Western Slope of Colorado, correct?

**0:00:53.8 Niki Turner:** That is correct. Northwest slope.

**0:00:55.0 MB:** Alright. Now let you for a secret. In 1982, I was the morning man and operations manager of KEXO Radio Grand Junction, Colorado.

**0:01:05.5 NT:** About two hours from us.

**0:01:07.0 MB:** I know the Western Slope. Niki, you are the publisher of the Rio Blanco Herald Times, and you do it with Caitlin Walker. What is the relationship, are you both co-owners? What's the deal?

**0:01:19.0 NT:** We are co-owners, 50/50. Caitlin is my oldest daughter.

**0:01:23.0 MB:** Oh. So this is... Oh, okay. Excellent. So there's actually ink in your blood then, right? This is a family.

**0:01:29.4 NT:** There is definitely... We have ink poisoning. We joke about it.

[laughter]

**0:01:33.9 MB:** Tell me quickly, the town itself, how large is it?

**0:01:37.5 NT:** About 2,500. And it's been right about that for many, many years.

**0:01:42.5 MB:** Rio Blanco Herald Times. How old is this publication?

**0:01:46.0 NT:** So originally it was just the Meeker Herald and it started in 1885, and it was merged with the Rangely Times, that's the other community in our county. Merged in 1998 I believe. Then became the Rio Blanco Herald Times.

**0:02:05.5 MB:** Who did you purchase it from?



**0:02:07.1 NT:** I purchased it from the previous owner, Mitch Bettis, who I worked for. He's now the... I can't remember his official title, Arkansas Business Publishing Group.

**0:02:17.9 MB:** Alright. And what we're gonna talk about is how you took a look at your books just about a month ago, saw that things weren't right and put out a plea to your community for help, and you've got it. Right?

**0:02:31.7 NT:** Yes. In thanks.

**0:02:33.5 MB:** This is an exciting story. We're gonna take you to the Western Slope of Colorado and talk about, hopefully, a Phoenix rising from the ashes and staying in flight, the Rio Blanco Herald Times on the backside of this message.

**0:02:46.6 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 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](https://bloxdigital.com).

**0:03:52.0 MB:** Okay, Niki, so we're now in September. Now I'm reading these notes from an email that I got, telling your story. It says that in September of 2023, you were looking at your bottom line after the publication and you realized that you were at a loss. This was like your worst month ever in advertising or something. Tell us what happened.

**0:04:15.1 NT:** It was actually October.

**0:04:16.8 MB:** October.

**0:04:17.9 NT:** It was middle, second week of October. September was our worst month for display advertising. Our weekly run sheet has been steadily declining with variable advertising. Our stable, our contract people are consistent, but just the variable display advertising that comes in that brings in the majority of our revenue has just been on the decline and by October, we sat down, did the books, and realized we had enough money left to publish two more editions, cover two more payrolls, and then we were gonna be out of cash.

**0:04:54.0 MB:** This is a weekly print publication and 24/7 on the web?

**0:04:58.9 NT:** Yes.

**0:05:00.5 MB:** Completely pay-walled, audience driven online, or do you get the content away, if I may ask?

**0:05:05.8 NT:** It is completely pay-walled now. That is a shift that we made in the last couple of weeks. We switched to a different... We finally found a content management system that we could afford. Before that, we just had a cobbled together mix of WordPress plugins and things, and our paywall was not as strong as it needed to be. And then we were also putting a lot of our content out on social media in an attempt, obviously, to garner subscribers and readers and draw traffic to our website, so we've locked that down a little bit as well.

**0:05:44.0 MB:** A drop in advertising. Any particular reason or just... Is the community going through some form of economic downturn, more competition, or just a change in attitude? What is your best guess?

**0:06:00.4 NT:** There's no competition, really, not in Meeker. I think what has happened is, one, we have not had a dedicated sales rep going around physically, in-person, knocking on doors for quite some time. And two, we have seen, we have one of the best broadband infrastructures in the country, in our little county, and so everybody is online all the time, and I think what we see is a lot of advertisers go, "Oh, I can just post my sale or my event on Facebook, and surely everyone will see it, and it's free." And as a business owner myself, I get that because free always seems nice, but I think that has taken some of our... It's easy, it's simple, and they can do it themselves, they don't have to make any connections. So I think that's where a lot of it has gone. And then not having a dedicated salesperson going out. Yes, and in a town this size, finding... We've joked about it, we've gone through several salespeople over the last few years, and finding a really good salesperson in a community this size is like finding a purple polka-dotted unicorn.

[laughter]

**0:07:22.6 MB:** The biggest problem I have sometimes in these programs is getting the right poll quote. Thank you for supplying it. I'll sleep well tonight. All right, so let's get into the meat of this thing. You guys are looking at the books. The last thing you wanna do is shut down.

**0:07:36.2 NT:** Right.

**0:07:37.0 MB:** I've read... I've looked at your content. You guys are super serving this community. You obviously are a fixture. You're over a hundred and some odd years old. You're providing the Madisonian mission of being that final check on power. I bet there's times where the mayor hates you and the school board or what have you, because you're telling the truth and you're also covering the church suppers, right? You're just part of that town. You have a location downtown? A place people could stop by?

**0:08:02.3 NT:** I have a location that... Actually, the location that we are currently in is the same location that this newspaper has occupied for almost 138 years.

**0:08:13.1 MB:** Amazing.

**0:08:13.5 NT:** We were able to go back and buy the building in 2021.



**0:08:18.9 MB:** So here you are, the fixture of the area, and you tell your audience in an email. Was it an email, a letter in the paper, what did...

**0:08:28.0 NT:** We put out a weekly newsletter via email. And so the weekly newsletter that week was a cry for help.

**0:08:35.6 MB:** It was quite a cry. Advertising is the primary income source for newspapers, 85% is revenue. It's been declining for years. September was our worst month for advertising we ever had. Some would say that's a bad business move. Who wants to invest in a business that isn't sound and you're basically telling the community that you're may not be around for a while longer. So people rather than turn away from you, supported you. What happened? Give us the story.

**0:09:07.5 NT:** So the way I see it in the way we have framed this since we bought the paper is that we see ourselves as the keepers of the flame. This is not our paper. This paper predated us by many, many years and we hope it to extend far past our lifetimes. So we're just, we're the stewards of this community resource and obviously a newspaper is a business and a public service. We do provide a public service by providing information, by going to meetings so that everyone else doesn't have to go to all of the meetings. We accomplish those things, and so we put that out there. We always, as journalists, we're always talking about transparency, we're always talking about demanding that the government and special districts that they be transparent, particularly about their finances. And yet we often are not, as businesses, small business owners. So because it's not our paper, it felt like the right thing to do to reach out to the community that we serve and say, "Hey, this is the situation we're in. We need help."

**0:10:19.2 MB:** How much money did you raise and how long did it take?

**0:10:23.1 NT:** So we're about three weeks in now. We put out that newsletter on Friday the 13th. October was a fun month around here. Yeah, we put in that Friday the 13th. And then, so we're coming up on... One, two. Yeah, this is the third week. In less than two weeks we've had local community members in a town of 2,500 bring in \$37,000.

**0:10:52.8 MB:** That's mind boggling. That's amazing.

**0:10:54.1 NT:** Yeah, that's a good way to put it.

**0:10:57.0 MB:** I have a theory, if you don't mind. My theory is that we as an industry, not you and I, because you feel the same way about E&P. I don't... I'm just stewarding a brand that's been around since 1884. You just trying to keep the hope alive and keep it strong and hand it off to someone else. So I get where you're coming from, but my theory is that because this industry got so fat and lazy for over a century, that we never really explained who we are to our readers. Do you agree?

**0:11:26.5 NT:** Absolutely. Yeah.

**0:11:28.4 MB:** And we just took the money, the classified revenue, we were that... We had this massive penetration, and we got fat and lazy. Do you agree as an industry?

**0:11:37.5 NT:** I would agree. I think journalists are really bad at telling our own stories. We're not likely to... We're focused on other people's stories, we want to get those stories out. So we don't tell our own, we don't tell our own journey, our own business story very well. And I think that's... And again back to the discussion about being a small business and you don't want to tell your community, "Hey we're in trouble, we're struggling." But sometimes I think you have to.

**0:12:08.7 MB:** How hard was it for your readership, your community to immediately equate in their brain what I call loss aversion, fear of loss. I come from a sales background, and the entire sales process is really based on creating fear of loss. That's why they call it the solution-based or need-based sales process.

**0:12:27.7 NT:** Right.

**0:12:28.3 MB:** What you did was create that in the mind of your customer. You said we're not going to be here. Now, I love your message on your support us page because it not only says, "Please contribute," it says, you say it right here. "If you're a business, advertise. Help us, support us." Is it working? Are you picking up your advertise... Are people coming up?

**0:12:49.2 NT:** We have picked up. Yes. In the last, I'd say in the last two weeks we've picked up a couple thousand dollars in additional display advertising revenue and about at least 25 new subscribers or returning subscribers who had expired, some of them a decade ago, before we bought the paper, who have stepped back up and resubscribed.

**0:13:17.6 MB:** Would you suggest this strategy about... I'm assuming the message has traveled far and wide, and your phone's been ringing.

**0:13:24.0 NT:** Oh, yeah.

**0:13:25.8 MB:** And a few other owners like yourself are calling you up saying, "How did you do it? What should I say?" Because they have the same fear. "I don't wanna tell my business community that I'm having trouble meeting the bills or I'm dragging some payments." They don't wanna say those words. What do you say? I'm giving... Okay. Let's do role playing. "Help me Nikki. How did you do it?" What advice would you give me?

**0:13:52.0 NT:** So we've, Caitlin and I have talked about this. Number one advice is don't wait until you only have two weeks left. Start telling that story now. That was probably the most stressful two weeks I've had in a very long time. Start telling your story now. Tell people how the sausage is made, so to speak. Tell them... I still explain on a regular basis the difference between an ad and an article, or what is an opinion. What is a public notice, how do you explain to people? People need to understand what these things are and we're dealing with a different generation that is not necessarily accustomed to having their paper in front of them every day. We need to introduce new readers, how newspapers work, how does this industry work? What are the costs? Be open and upfront and transparent with your costs, and what you do to keep this industry and this institution. In these small towns, this is an institution. We're one of the oldest running businesses in the county.



**0:15:01.0 MB:** My last question is this, rumor has it or at least what I'm getting from the reporting we're doing is you're thinking of switching to nonprofit. Is that correct?

**0:15:10.8 NT:** We are exploring all options at this point. So what we would really like to do... We spoke with the previous owner who is a friend, and asked him and he said, "I like capitalism." I said, "Well, yeah, I know." We know several newspapers in our area that are nonprofit, so we kind of understand how that works. And so we're looking at that, we're looking at maybe a hybrid model. We're also looking at some way to create a fund, whether it's a foundation or a trust. We don't have all of the logistics in place yet, but we're looking at some way to create like an emergency fund for the community, for this institution where people who let's say, they're a subscriber but they'd like to do more. Let's say this newspaper has meant a lot to their family over the years for whatever reason, and so they'd like to donate extra, above and beyond their subscription. Or let's say it's an advertiser, and we have a few of these who say, "Well, I don't need to advertise because I'm so busy I can't keep up with the clientele that I already have, but I'd like to support the paper."

**0:16:18.2 NT:** So that would give them an opportunity to contribute to a fund so that one, if we find ourselves or the next set of owners finds themselves in this situation again, where things are so tight where we're not gonna be able to print a paper this week, we have a fund we can draw off of, and then also from that fund we'd like to do some community good back and give back to the community and by way of scholarships or funding, helping out different local groups, different organizations, something that we can do help our local historical society stay afloat. Just continue to keep that going, so that there's something available in case something like this happens again.

**0:17:06.6 MB:** The town is Meeker, Colorado. Just a hop, skip and a jump from Rangely, if I remember correctly. The paper itself is the Herald Times. You'll find it at [theheraldtimes.com](http://theheraldtimes.com). Niki, what's your email address for anyone who's interested in reaching out?

**0:17:24.2 NT:** It's [editor@ht1885.com](mailto:editor@ht1885.com).

**0:17:28.8 MB:** There you go, [editor@ht1885.com](mailto:editor@ht1885.com). Amazing story. Congratulations on making one of the toughest decisions, I think, of your life, right? To just be completely transparent, but look at the upside once you did it. Now you have a community that understands your value a little bit more. And maybe it's time to get that...

**0:17:49.0 NT:** And we understand...

**0:17:51.2 MB:** Go ahead.

**0:17:51.3 NT:** We understand our value to them and that's helped us a lot.

**0:17:55.0 MB:** With all this momentum going, may I give you a little free advice?

**0:17:58.6 NT:** Sure.

**0:17:58.9 MB:** Go out and try to get that salesperson right now, okay?



**0:18:01.8 NT:** Yes.

[laughter]

**0:18:04.0 MB:** Thanks, Niki for your time.

**0:18:06.5 NT:** Thank you, anytime.

[music]