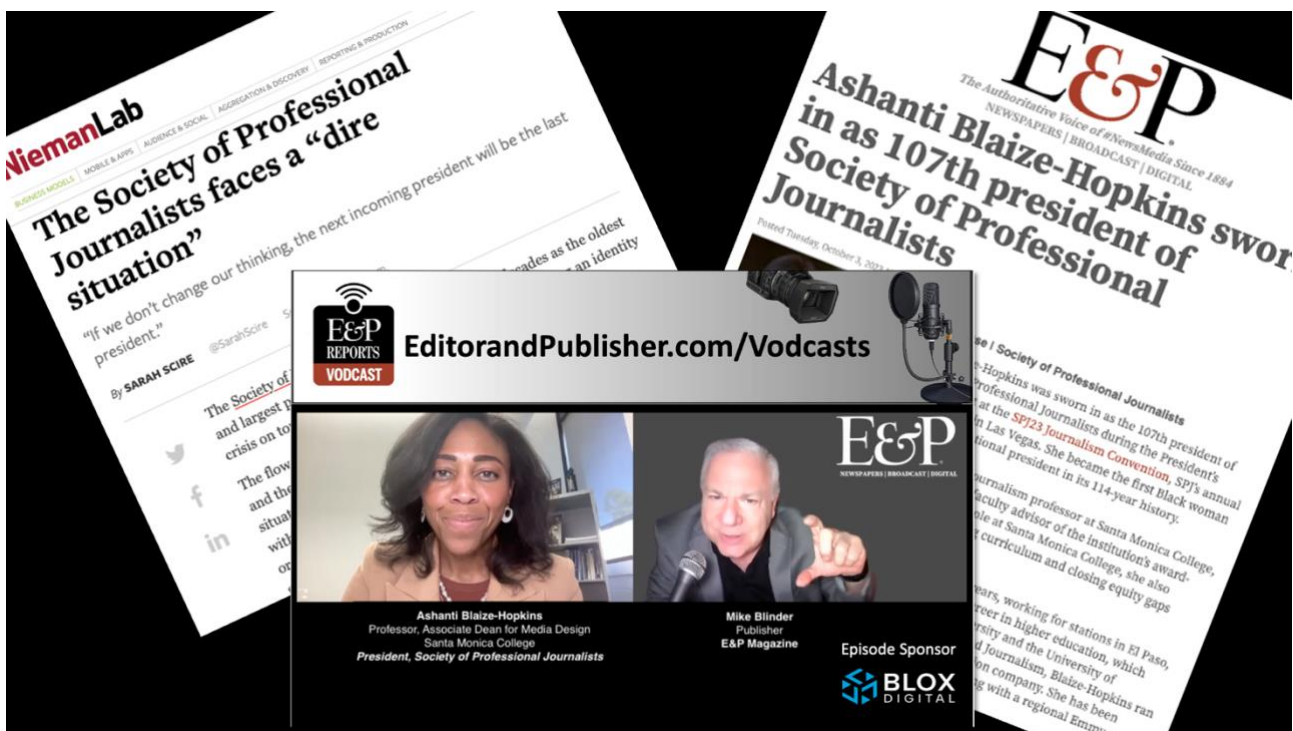


Audio Transcript Episode 214 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series with Mike Blinder

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[Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins. A one-on-one with the SPJ's new president](#)

In this episode of "E&P Reports," we go one-on-one with newly sworn-in Society of Professional Journalists President Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins to discuss how she plans to keep the organization prospering during a time of lagging membership and conference attendance, as well as her plans for SPJ's success. We also hear her views on the news media ecosystem as a whole and how we can define what is journalism in a world of disinformation and "fake news."



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0:00:04.0 Announcer: This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine, the authoritative voice of news media since 1884, serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

0:00:19.7 Mike Blinder: Greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we start off with housekeeping. If you are listening to this program on a podcast platform of choice, we urge you to follow us. Watching on our YouTube channel, there is a subscribe button below, a bell to the right, smash them, click them, interact with them, do something. You'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series, E&P Reports. Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins is my guest. Ashanti, I always thought my daughter had one of my favorite first names, Haven. That's what we named her. But when I saw Ashanti, I'm thinking we may... That's a great... Your parents did you justice. It's a wonderful name.

0:01:01.7 Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins: Well, thank you. I will also say I love Haven, that's a beautiful name. So kudos to you and your wife for choosing an equally fantastic name for your child.

0:01:10.8 MB: I'm going to run down your resume quickly. You are an Emmy award winning journalist. You are a journalism professor, associate dean for the Center for Media Design at Santa Monica College, that I know is a temporary position or intermediate... Or you may be permanent, what do I know. You're a tenured professor of journalism there, congratulations. You're an author, you're a public relations expert, you produce content, you consult. Your background is mostly television, right? You were in Texas working TV in El Paso, and then you moved into Vegas, am I right? Do I have that correct?

0:01:43.9 AB: Yes a 100%, El Paso, then Vegas and then back to Texas, Dallas, Fort Worth.

0:01:48.6 MB: There you go. But the most important thing, or at least the reason you're on this program, is history was made on October 1st in Vegas, where you were voted in as the first Black woman ever elected president of the Society of Professional Journalists, the SPJ. Congratulations.

0:02:05.5 AB: Thank you. Thank you so much. It's an honor I take very seriously. And it's... It's, you know, I'm humbled to be able to call myself the first Black president, the first Black female president of SPJ.

0:02:15.1 MB: I am going to share with our audience a picture of the founding members of SPJ. This is actually a fraternity called Delta Chi Fraternity, I'm sure you're aware of this, at Cornell University. I was a morning DJ in that town in Ithaca, New York, so I'm familiar with Cornell. And would it surprise you that none of them are women, none of them are black. They're all men, white men, and most of them have mustaches. Does that in any way surprise you? What do you think? What do you think they'd be thinking today, if they knew that in time, you would be the president of this association?



0:02:50.0 AB: I mean, you know, I like to think that they would look at this and say, "You know what, this isn't what we envisioned, but we're happy that it's here." You know I think that the founders of SPJ were hoping to be inclusive and what that meant at the time. And so I think that they would be progressive and forward thinking enough to welcome the increased diversity and inclusion that we have with our organization now.

0:03:14.4 MB: Well, they first have to give women the vote. That didn't happen when they... We're not going to stay in the past. We're going to kick into the present and the future and chat about the future of SPJ under the tutelage and the leadership of Ashanti Blaise-Hopkins on the backside of this message.

0:03:30.2 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.

0:04:34.1 MB: Ashanti, again, an honor to have you on the program. I was reading about you and your goals for the SPJ. It looks like number one is diversity. I want to tell you a quick story. Do you know Cheryl Smith of I Messenger?

0:04:46.5 AB: I do. I do know Cheryl Smith very well.

0:04:49.7 MB: Cheryl was on this program after she got Hall of Fame status at the NABJ. And I joked with her because I had just finished a 17-city speaking tour, where all the state associations brought me in, I keynoted a lot of those, some national conferences as publisher of E&P. And I said, "Cheryl, would it surprise you that after facing at least a 1,000 people in different rooms, I could count the people of color on two hands?" And her response back to me was, "I'm surprised it took two hands, but that sounds like appropriate." That was her exact response. But... When I first started consulting in this industry in 2001, I was warned that it was an industry run by fat old white men. I'm not sure it's changed much. Is your goal truly to make the entire news media industry more diverse? I mean, how do you see yourself fitting in on this? Because it's so desperately needed. We don't discuss that, right? We should be... We should be... Our newsroom should look like our audiences. Do you disagree?

0:05:46.0 AB: No, I a 100% agree. And I think that's part of why that was one of the goals that I had. You know I think it's one of those things where it's aspirational, where you know you're not going to solve everything overnight or even during my one-year term. But we have to start somewhere, right?

0:06:02.4 MB: Right.

0:06:03.1 AB: You know so to me, it is a marathon, it's not a sprint, right? This is going to take time. It's going to take energy and it's going to take hard work. But if we don't, at least, start the conversation, then nothing ever happens. We can't move the needle if we're not talking about what the issue is. And so for me, I set that as one of my goals so that we can start the conversation, and with the hopes that the presidents that come after me, pick up the mantle and keep going with it. And I think that at SPJ, we're kind of walking the walk. We have had insane amount of diversity in our boards over the last several years, including the first Latina president, including myself as the first Black female president. And we've had some of the most diverse boards in the last couple of years than we probably had in the organization since its inception. And I think that that is a testament to how important inclusivity and diversity and equity and inclusion is for our organization. So we have to start the conversation, but we're not going to solve it overnight.

0:07:11.7 MB: Recently, Penny Abernathy was... I don't know... At Medill, her famous 'News Desert' report just came out. And it really shows that we're still losing voices in local communities. And the challenge is obvious. I know you're aware of it, it's sustainability of local news. I mean, CNN is not the issue right now. It's small communities that are now void of that final check on power of our society. At the time of the recording of this interview, Canada just came up with amazing legislation where Google has agreed to compensate local news, the news that they monetize, 2% or 3%. But that's a lot of money. The challenge here, in our society... At least down here, is the definition of journalism. I mean, when our founding fathers put that document together, they wanted a free unfettered Press. In Canada, they have a definition of news. It's actually a tax structure.

0:08:08.5 MB: I mean, It's easy to say, "You're a journalist", "You're not." Down here, it's more difficult. How do you foresee yourself in this role now in a world where there's actual real source journalism going on, and people blogging in their pajamas in their basement calling themselves journalists? Not that I'm against people blogging in their pajamas, but you understand where I'm going with this, don't you?

0:08:30.9 AB: Yeah, no, no, no. I totally do understand. And I think that that is a question that will continue to be asked. But I guess I would challenge folks to think about as an industry, how are we reaching out to the public. And not only informing them about what we do and how we do it, but also educating them on journalistic standards, and ethics, and how to be a journalist. So that if we do have folks that want to create their own blogs, or do the work of being a journalist, that we are educating them and training them in ways that they are doing so with the standards and ethics in place that SPJ holds so dear. So I think it's a matter of, "How can we make sure, if we are going to have folks that are going to dip their toe into the industry, whatever that might look, how do we ensure we're reaching out to those public members of society that want to do so, and offer them the training that they may need to do it in a way that is impactful, and that falls in line with the journalistic standards that our industry has been known for, for so many years?" And I think it's really that; we have to expand what it means to educate the public on journalism, and what we do and what a journalist does.

0:09:46.0 AB: I often say that we have one of those professions that people see a lot, but they don't really know what it is and what the process is, right. You have a firefighter. You know exactly what



a firefighter does. There's a fire, they go, they put the fire out. But if you ask folks what a journalist does on a day-to-day basis, I think that is a heavier lift for folks to be able to answer, if you're not already ingrained in the industry.

0:10:07.3 MB: I agree completely. And by the way, we get inquiries all the time because we're E&P and we optimize well on Google, and someone's, you know... "What's a journalist?" they ask us. We always point them to the SPJ standards. I mean we... I'm not that we're anointing you, but I think it's there in black and white. Do those standards still apply in a social media, "fake news", world? Are you still comfortable with them as president? Do you see a chance to alter them or are they still written in stone?

0:10:33.9 AB: I mean to me, I think they're kind of a guiding light. They're a beacon, right?

0:10:38.7 MB: Right.

0:10:38.8 AB: And I think it's also important to stress that this is not a rule book that we've created; It's a guideline. And so there can be interpretations based on the situation that you're applying it to, there's context to every single issue that comes up where the code of ethics are front and center. And so it can also serve as a conversation starter in newsrooms, a conversation starter to the public, if we do a better job of educating them about what the code of ethics are and what they aren't. And so for me, I don't think there's ever really a need to change the code of ethics at the heart and the foundation of what they're trying to do. There may be tweaks when it comes to how technology is impacting our industry and how we may have to reconsider the platforms by which content lives on. But the gist of what the code of ethics is trying to provide, is a blueprint. And that blueprint, again, I think is solid and there's really no reason to deviate from it in extremes.

0:11:45.8 AB: So again, it's a guiding light. It's a beacon and it's a blueprint. But there is some wiggle room within it to have these conversations and to be able to, as a newsroom, to make decisions that make sense for the situation and the issues that arise.

0:11:57.8 MB: There's another issue with defining journalism. On this program, we had Mickey Osterreicher. You may not know him...

0:12:05.8 AB: I know Mickey very well.

0:12:07.5 MB: Okay, good. Well, he's a wonderful guest. He's hilarious. But he's also the general counsel for the National Press Photographers Association. I think that's your counterpart in a way. And...

0:12:18.0 AB: I would say it's our partner.

0:12:18.5 MB: Partner, okay.

0:12:20.5 AB: Yes.

0:12:21.8 MB: Alright. And Mickey... You may or may not know this, maybe you do, is also a

sheriff.

0:12:24.3 AB: Yes, I do.

0:12:25.9 MB: So he wears the badge. And he was saying that the police are begging our industry to define journalism because they got to know who's inside the rope line and who's outside the rope line in today's world. In the old days, you carried a big camera. Or you were there with that little press thing in your hat back in the 1940s. It doesn't exist anymore. Do you think there's a chance that we as an industry could police ourselves someday, and say, "We define this as journalism. Join our club. And we'll be happy if you run through the standards, and understand them, and source and all that?" Is it possible or do we have to just all kind of make it up as we go?

0:13:05.8 AB: So here's what I would say to that. The reason why I know Mickey so well is because here in the state of California, we work together quite closely in a coalition that helped get a bill passed here in the state of California to increase press freedoms, especially for reporters who are covering issues of civil unrest on the ground, to prevent law enforcement from detaining, arresting, journalists as they were covering those types of stories.

0:13:30.4 MB: Right.

0:13:31.2 AB: And so, one of the things that that we brought up as we've had numerous meetings with the chief of police of LAPD and other law enforcement agencies throughout the state, is when you think about journalism and you're out in the field, and there are situations where emotions are running high, and maybe there's a dispersal call, and all of these things, look at the actual behavior of the person. If they are standing there and they're taking notes, and they are recording interviews, or they're taking pictures, they're in the midst of an act of journalism, then I think you can safely say that this person is a journalist and I should probably leave them alone so that they can do their job. Now, on the flipside, if you see someone who is calling themselves a journalist and they are engaged in illegal behavior, well, then by all means arrest them.

0:14:18.0 MB: Well, by all means, of course.

0:14:19.3 AB: Arrest them. And I think that's always been our sticking point when we have been engaging with law enforcement who say, "Well, I can't tell who is a journalist." Look at the behavior. What are they doing? And we've also heard, "Well, we have people who are saying they're journalists, but they're not. They're there to influence bad behavior, or incite riots", or what have you. And we always say, "OK well, then arrest them." We are not advocating for folks to be able to use press or say they're a journalist, to get out of bad behavior. But law enforcement, in general, they're a very smart group of folks. They know the difference between a rock and a notepad. That's very, very simple. And so I think we have to really look at the behavior. Is someone in the act of doing journalism? You can tell. And I think that's the standard that we have to apply.

0:15:15.6 MB: All right. Finally... I don't mean to do a gotcha question, but it must have been hard. On September 28th, Sarah Scire, you know her at Neiman, put out an article. And this is right before you're getting sworn in or whatever, elected in... Just a few days before, headline, "The Society of Professional Journalists faces a "dire situation"". "If we don't change our thinking, the



next incoming president", you, "will be the last president." And she went off and cited all this stuff about how financially hurting the association is. That's why I reached out and said, "We got to give you guys a voice here because it's... ", you're necessary. And I think more than ever, right now, the survival of associations that stand for what journalism integrity is, should be blessed by God at this point. I'm giving you my... This is my show, so I'm allowed to pontificate. What say you, in this criticism of the association? And how do you plan to spend the next 12 months? And I hope I'm not using a bad metaphor here... But to right the ship?

0:16:24.1 AB: Yeah.

0:16:24.7 MB: So everybody feels comfortable. What are your plans?

0:16:26.3 AB: So I can firmly and unequivocally say that I will not be the last president of SPJ.

0:16:34.9 MB: There you go.

0:16:35.0 AB: All of our journalism organizations across this country are facing some challenging financial situations. We have the benefit though, of having a foundation that was created to be in support of the society. That foundation has \$12 million in the bank. So I have been working very closely with the president of our SPJ Foundation, and that board, for them to create a reinvestment plan for SPJ. And so we were able to negotiate a really amazing plan that is going to infuse a significant amount of money into the society over the next four years. And so I am proud to say that we're going to be able to pass a surplus budget in 2024. And I have a huge feeling that we are right along our way to be able to righting the ship. And I can say that firmly that that will happen before the end of my term.

0:17:33.2 AB: And so, while, yes, were we looking at some troubling financial numbers at the... Towards the end of this year? Absolutely. But I think the founders and the boards in the past who had the wherewithal to create the foundation, and with a very significant donor that set us on a path to be really solvent when it comes to our finances. We are in a much better situation than most. And I'm proud to say that both of our boards, our SPJ Foundation Board and our SPJ Society Board, have worked so incredibly hard over the last couple of months to make sure that we are able to put a plan in place that ensures that SPJ will be around for the next 10, 20, 50, another 115 years.

0:18:23.0 AB: And that's the goal. And I think for me, that has been my number one priority, is getting a budget together that makes sense, that puts us on a path to be able to be sustainable for many, many years to come. And I think we are well on our way to do that.

0:18:40.1 MB: Ashanti Blaize-Hopkins, we at E&P want you to keep in touch with us. We thank you for your valuable time, and more so, keep up the good fight. We're behind you a 100% here. Let's work together to keep journalism standards where they should be in this ever-changing news media ecosystem. Thank you for your valuable time.