

E&P

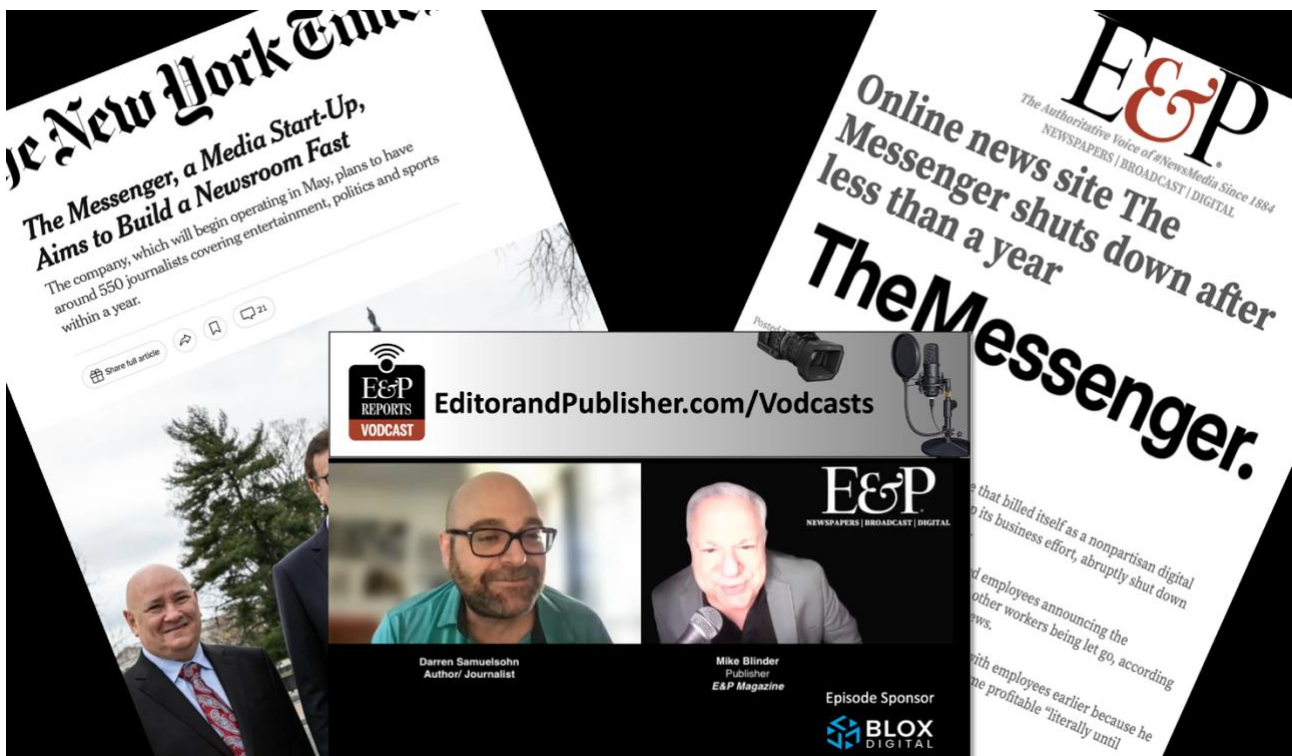
EDITOR & PUBLISHER®

The Authoritative Voice of #NewsMedia Since 1884
NEWSPAPERS | BROADCAST | DIGITAL

Audio Transcript

Episode 223 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder

Publication date: Friday 8, 2024



[An inside look at The Messenger — from startup to shut down — 10 months and 50 million dollars later](#)

In this episode of “E&P Reports,” we go inside the newsroom of the now-defunct digital news startup, The Messenger, by going one-on-one with their former senior editor, Darren Samuelson. We learn first-hand about The Messenger's initial 50 million dollar mission to become the unbiased, new national news source and how the hundreds of journalists reacted to their recent firings just 10 months after startup.



0:00:00.0 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.

0:00:19.2 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine, if you're listening to this program on a podcast platform of preference. Boy, I said that without screwing that up, didn't I? Please follow us watching on YouTube subscribe button below, bell to the right. Get an update if you hit those two things in that order. Get an update each and every time we upload this weekly vodcast series, we dedicate to the news publishing industry E&P reports. Darren Samuelsohn, welcome to the program.

0:00:51.3 Darren Samuelsohn: It is so nice to be here.

0:00:52.5 Announcer: It's an honor, sir. I love what you put up about yourself in, on LinkedIn. You love, journalism, but you don't love, journalism as much as that's the title of your podcast series, correct? And your blog, do I have that right? Your Substack newsletter?

0:01:07.8 DS: That's correct. Yeah. Love, journalism. I do love, journalism. I've loved journalism my whole life. But this is more of sort of a letter from journalism to journalists saying, "Hey, we love you, but there's some hard times that go along with that relationship." So it's a little bit about the love-hate relationship with journalists and journalism.

0:01:25.6 MB: Based on your background, you should have been in this program before, my apologies, but there's so many people we could interview. But man, 10 years of POLITICO. And you're talking about after it started, right? While this brand was building. So there must be an entire interview we could just discuss, 'cause all the people from that POLITICO era, look where they are today. I mean, that was almost like the building block for some of the top people in the industry today, wouldn't you say?

0:01:47.9 DS: I'm honored to have worked there for that decade. I was there from 2010 until 2020. So about two years after they launched, three years after they launched, they pulled me in, in sort of that very first wave of specialty policy experts that were coming in, in the 2010 period. I had been an energy and environment reporter for 10 years before that, working at E&E News, which is a paywall publication that is a high-end profile... High-end specialty trade publication. I had cut my teeth covering climate change and energy policy. And that's what POLITICO recruited me for.

0:02:24.1 MB: Speaking of which it was because of those POLITICO years, man, I'm just assuming, that you had an eight-month stint at what we're gonna spend some time chatting about, because a lot of the people, not a lot, but your boss that hired you at the Messenger came through POLITICO, correct?

0:02:40.3 DS: That's right.



0:02:40.4 MB: And that's how you got on board at the Messenger. And we wanna discuss that first, 'cause it's big news right now. So hang on. We're gonna get to that on the backside of this.

0:02:48.6 Announcer: This episode of E&P Reports is exclusively sponsored by BLOX Digital, formerly Town News. 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 Town News, now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at bloxdigital.com.

0:03:53.0 MB: Okay. So here you are, and a phone rings, an email comes in, a text comes in and someone says, "We got 50 million bucks. Come join us at the Messenger." Tell us the story, Darren.

0:04:06.3 DS: Sure. Well, for me, I had been unemployed for about four or five months when I got that phone call. I had been after POLITICO, so I was at POLITICO from 2010 to 2020, and I left POLITICO right at the end of the Trump impeachment, the first impeachment. And I was poached to go lead, the Washington DC Bureau at Insider, which is now known as Business Insider. And I built a new team from scratch there from 2020, basically, through the pandemic. And two and a half years there, I was leading my own team. It was my first time going from reporter to editor and manager where I had the chance to lead a team coach, just come put the whole coverage package together day in and day out. And that came to a screeching halt for me at the end of October of 2022, where I got caught... Tossed overboard as part of a larger, I think overhaul that ultimately you would see Insider really shed their entire politics team.

0:05:02.5 DS: And I spent about four or five months kind of figuring out what did I want to do when I grew up. No, no, no. I launched that Substack. I loved journalism during that period 'cause I was interviewing for jobs and I was getting a lot of people asking me, "Do you want to be a reporter? Do you want to be an editor?" And honestly, I could give really good answers for both. I love being a reporter. I love being an editor. I was definitely looking at both opportunities. I had a lot of really interesting prospects. It was also during another bad time to be trying to get a job in the journalism industry. I mean, 2023, the early part of last year was brutal. I mean, it's the same as now. There had just been a whole bunch of CNN layoffs.

0:05:39.3 DS: There had just been a whole bunch of other layoffs across the industry at the early part of '23. So it wasn't exactly an easy time to get a job. And that's when Marty called and said, "Hey, we're building this thing from scratch. What do you think about coming on board?" I thought about it. There were a couple of people who were already on, who were signed on, who I talked to on the phone, who convinced me, yeah, this is worth a shot. You are gonna be on the ground floor of something new. So if it takes off and is successful as the bosses were claiming at the time, you're gonna be at the beginning of a CNN or an NBC or whatever, that they were talking about at the time.

0:06:14.5 DS: And no, don't get me wrong, we were all skeptical that this was gonna work. And in

the opening days, we were looking around at each other like, "Is this for real?" But it was a job and it was a paying job, and it was an opportunity to do journalism at a moment when like, clearly there was going to be a lot of news in 2023. This is the spring of '23. And Marty, Katy, invited me to come on board. I had originally said yes to being the enterprise and special projects editor which was right into my talent wheelhouse. I was gonna help out on Congress and the White House and just sort of help the team overall. But within about a week, Marty looked to me and said, "We don't really have a legal editor." And that's what I had covered at POLITICO most recently through the Mueller investigation and, and the Trump impeachment. And so I said, "Sure, what the heck? I'll build us a legal team." And this is about a month before...

0:07:04.9 MB: You had a budget to build a legal team, right?

0:07:06.9 DS: A small budget.

0:07:08.5 MB: A small budget.

0:07:08.6 DS: A very small budget. [chuckle] Yeah.

0:07:09.7 MB: Out of the 50 million, you got a chunk of that to build the two.

0:07:14.3 DS: Oh. I would say the smaller, beyond small chunk of that. [chuckle] Like two people.

0:07:20.3 MB: Yeah. I know you're... You didn't have a full-time gig and they offer you a job, but did you ask appropriate, I'm not being judgy, but did you ask questions like, "Well, what's the business model here? Am I gonna have a job forever? How are we gonna fund ourselves?" Did you wonder when they... Did you know that they projected a hundred million dollar revenue for 2024, which was only a year later, and no one's ever done a hundred million instantly out of the box. Did that occur to you or anything? Or not? Was it just, "Let me put my head down and do my job?" What was going on?

0:07:49.5 DS: I think it was more of the latter. I mean, I'm a journalist and I know I understand the business world, but... And I'd seen the New York Times story. I'd seen, I think there was an Axios piece or three, I kicked the tires, but really when I kicked the tires, what I was more kicking the tires for was about Jimmy Finkelstein's background and history at The Hill and the John Solomon debacle, that led to the first Trump impeachment. There was a whole sort of history at The Hill Magazine with the publishing of some pretty controversial stuff. That that was my biggest concern, to tell you the truth, was trying to figure out whether this was going to be an honest, with integrity journalism outfit, and we would be able to publish the stories that we were gonna find.

0:08:27.4 MB: But for those who don't know Jimmy Finkelstein, why don't you just give us like the quick elevator pitch on why that was controversial?

0:08:33.6 DS: Gosh, I mean, it was basically an op-ed piece. I mean, it was an op-ed series about Burisma and Joe Biden and the... It was basically the four stage of the laptop controversy that would blow up two, three years later on Hunter Biden.

0:08:49.1 MB: Exactly.

0:08:49.2 DS: This was the early days when... I mean, this was... Again, this is kind of what helped lead to the first Trump impeachment with the perfect phone call into Zelensky. But Jimmy Finkelstein ran The Hill before he sold. He would go on to sell The Hill, but he owned The Hill back during that period and published a controversial series of articles that the Newsroom itself was not aware of and fought back on. And ultimately there was a lot of internal discord there. This is all in a previous publication. Jimmy Finkelstein, obviously, has a long history of working in the worlds of publications and in legal trade publications going all the way back to, I believe the '80s and '90s. So been around the publishing business a very long time. His father, I believe, started The Hill.

0:09:32.1 DS: So he's the one putting the money in with investors. We knew who the board was, 'cause you could Google around and see who the board was. And I remember at that period, one of the names was the now owner of the Washington Commanders football team, was one of the early investors of The Messenger. So I saw the details on the finances, but again, you're a journalist, you're coming in and you want a job. You're thinking about, "Yeah, will this job exist in a year or two?" But again, I'm surveying the landscape of jobs out there in early '23, and there just wasn't a lot out there. So you take what's offered to you. And again, I knew Marty, that also I think played a big role for me as well. I trusted Marty.

0:10:11.6 MB: Okay, so you're there for eight months, during the time you got your head down, you're doing your job. When did it become clear to you that this may not be my future, that this may be a ship with a few holes in it or something, or we're not seeing the money coming in to justify the expenses going out the door.

0:10:32.6 DS: Again, it's hard 'cause you don't get to see the balance sheet as a reporter or a journalist or an editor. But, I mean, the feelings were probably immediately, April, May, June.

0:10:40.9 MB: Oh.

0:10:41.0 DS: As soon as we got there. I mean, you'd go walk out for lunch with your colleagues and you're looking at each other and you're trying to size each other up. And you're definitely all wondering, "God, I hope we're here in a year." So yeah, I remember having those conversations with fellow journalists right away. And that's before we even launched. We had some stumbles right outta the gate, if you'll remember. We lost two editors, geez, on the first day of publication, [chuckle] who were two good colleagues. One was a former political colleague of mine. And that was a disagreement early, early on as... Basically, we were trying to put together sort of a two-fold... Two-headed monster in terms of journalism.

0:11:19.4 DS: We were trying to do breaking news and playing a pure traffic play. So that's throwing as much at the wall as you can. And then there's the original journalism, which is what I was hired for and what I said yes, to come on board to do, as I said, to be an enterprise, long-form, original, an enterprise editor working on big projects. And we would try to do both right from the get go. And I think that was ultimately what led to the two folks who left right away, was we were trying to do both. A lot of people came in expecting that they were gonna be on the enterprise original reporting side. But then there was this mandate right away, go, go, go. Let's get as many

stories up on the most popular topics that people are clicking on, on the internet, which is a play for clicks, which is leading to revenue in advertising and, I mean, from...

0:12:06.4 MB: Well, in my opinion, that was the flaw because you're... I mean, I can understand the philosophy. We're all talking as an industry before you started, and this is just one man's opinion, but it's been backed up by other opinion pieces. We're all looking at the... What the echo chambers of Fox and MSNBC and CNN, no one's just running down the middle, no one's just taking over that space and making people comfortable with journalism again. So we're gonna be the big dog quickly that slips in there to do breaking news of all shapes and sizes, right, and still have enterprise journalism going on as well. And that will monetize itself quickly. Do I have that right? That pretty much was the mission, right? To fill, become, and you guys held to the center, correct me if I'm wrong, a lot of your stories, if you ran them through any, whatever those AI programs to see if they were bias one way or the other, your stories were pretty much in the middle to... Am I right? That was the philosophy.

0:13:05.2 DS: That was the philosophy. And I think we were really proud of that work and being down the middle. And it meant pulling back on some of the bombast and the rhetoric and some of the bloody headlines that I really learned at POLITICO. I mean, POLITICO is all about just sort of that drama intention. Punching whomever's in power is the POLITICO model. And here, we were going for a scale down version of that, but it's down the middle, hitting both sides, hitting the left and the right when we needed to. And, yeah, I mean, it's playing... It's a combination. You're trying to put... One of the other things we were getting hit on early, early on was, "Oh, I can't find The Messenger. The Messenger was a name that didn't... You couldn't find it on search.

0:13:44.9 DS: You were getting the search, excuse me, the chat function for Facebook, you're getting that newspaper in somewhere in the Midwest. I mean, it was really hard. And so there was a chicken in the egg concept here where we had to put a lot of stories on the board in order for the algorithms to start to see that we were there. And we got made fun of forever for how many stories we published in the opening days of our publication. But look, we're trying to be seen on Google so that people can find us so that the revenue can come through advertising through other means. So it's, again, I hear you on the flawed model because... But that's the play that the bosses were going for. And that was the play that we were... As journalists, that's what we were... That was our mandate while we're in the silo then.

0:14:28.8 MB: And we're talking wide open, right? Did you have any... I mean, this was all about clicks. This was all about monetizing eyeballs, not about getting reader revenue, right? There was never any discussion of that.

0:14:41.9 DS: I mean, It was definitely trying to get clicks and, yeah, and however you can do it. And again, there are ways with great journalism to get clicks too.

0:14:50.0 MB: Of course.

0:14:53.1 DS: And that was my team's mission leading the legal team, and that was our politics team's mission, day in and day out, was to put the best story up that we could, competing with the others, competing with our former colleagues, competing across the board. So we're aiming for the

best stories we can. And that's all you can think about in the daily grind of the news flow and everything that's coming at us.

0:15:13.3 MB: Wait, while you're feeling this pressure in the Newsroom, and you're... Some of you are saying, "Wait a second, we're not building that... We're not building that revenue." Did any of you go up and say, "Let's silo this mor. Let's focus just on the legal. Let's just focus on this and be a down in the middle mission." Or did that not cycle up to the top in any way, to your knowledge?

0:15:34.9 DS: Not to my knowledge. I mean, I'm working in a silo, right, under Marty and I'm working through Marty. So Marty's the guy to ask the questions about how much of our ideas go up to the top in terms of what they decide to do. I mean, we went really broad. Don't forget, this is a 300 person news organization covering not just politics, but covering entertainment, sports, Business...

0:15:54.1 MB: Everything.

0:15:56.2 DS: Yeah. And that scaled up over time. Politics was among the first to launch. So we were the first out the door, and obviously we're trying hardcore to hit Congress, the White House, the Trump legal stuff, which is blowing up very quickly at that period of time.

0:16:09.4 MB: You took on USA Today and CNN right out of the box, but going down the legal. I mean, all of the resources that they have built over decades and decades, you guys tried to do it right out of the box, everything for everybody, and that was a challenge, correct? How many stories did you have to generate in a week, sometimes? You must have been writing in the middle of the night. Am I making that up or what?

0:16:31.5 DS: No, I wasn't writing into the middle of the night. I've been doing this so long and I had a good team under me on legal. I mean, we were going from 8:30 in the morning until 5:36, 6:37 at night, watching the court dockets and hitting the court dockets. We made a decision, like we're not gonna hit everything, but we certainly, on the legal stuff. I mean, again, this is 2 1/2, three-person team, so kind of keep in mind like how much work my little team did. I'm so proud of these guys.

0:17:04.0 MB: Compared to the others. Yeah.

0:17:05.5 DS: I mean, geez, the CNN's are like full squads that they're sending in the courthouse, 20, 25 reporters. They got college students running in and out of the courtroom with stuff. So we were doing things in a way that we had the breaking news team that was really good. And they were working probably from, what, 6:00 in the morning until 7:00 PM, 8:00 PM at night. And then we had a night editor. So we were not going into the night, overnight, into the next morning the way that Insider does or some of the other publications that are around the world. To your question of how many stories were we publishing? I mean, I was probably publishing five to seven legal stories a day. It really depended on how much it was happening. So 50, 60 stories over the week.

0:17:46.8 MB: Can you confirm that a class-action lawsuit has been filed against the messenger's owner for wrongful termination? Are you part of that suit? May I ask?

0:17:55.5 DS: I can confirm there is a lawsuit. I have not signed it. It's only been a couple of days. I mean, there's been a number of articles about it. I think it's in Federal Court and State Court. And, yeah, I mean, it's out there. I have questions about it. I mean, it's been only, what, four or five days since we shut down. And so there's been a lot...

0:18:14.4 MB: Of course. I was just curious, and I know it's been reported a number of ways. That's why I asked. January was a bad month for layoffs. You and I both know it. I mean, welcome to the club and you have my deepest sympathy. How are you feeling about the job market today? What are you doing? What do you... How do you feel about your prospects? You are definitely a celebrated, well-known, extremely competent journalist. How do you feel about finding a gig?

0:18:36.7 DS: I'm feeling good, personally, about finding a gig and having gone through unemployment a year ago for five, six months. It's kind of, I mean, I'm in an okay spot where I like, I've done this, I've been here before and got a lot of prospects and I'm really excited about the possibility, going forward. I'm really concerned about my colleagues who are out of work and people with less resources, less networks than me. I mean, I'm working part-time right now to try and get my former legal reporters, which it kind of hurts me because I built this really cool team and I wanna work with them through the Trump trials and through everything of 2024. So I'm really sad to see them go. I'm gonna be recording a podcast with them here pretty soon, just to kind of say goodbye and have a final sort of beat meeting with them.

0:19:19.2 DS: But, I mean, some of the best legal reporters out there, Adam Klasfeld, Ben Feuerherd. Please hire them. They are some of the best legal reporters out there. But the same goes for all of our politics reporters, our Capitol Hill reporters, our White House reporters, our politics reporters. I mean, they're all so good. And unfortunately, they're all now in a job market like myself that is full of really talented journalists from the Wall Street Journal to the Washington Post to CNN, you name it, who have lost their gigs over the last two, three, four years who are looking, so. Yeah, the...

0:19:47.1 MB: Recently, the National Press Club hosted a taco dinner for the DC-based journalists. And you're doing some kind of a planning with that. You got roll at the press club and helping them out, am I right?

0:20:00.2 DS: Yeah, that's right. So I'm the incoming, chair leader of the professional development team at the National Press Club.

0:20:09.7 MB: Good for you.

0:20:10.5 DS: The inauguration for our new president is this coming Friday, which is very exciting. So I'm part of that, I guess new administration you could call it, coming in. And, yeah, there was a taco night on Friday. I was bonked and I couldn't make it on Friday night. I just didn't have the...

0:20:25.4 MB: But there's a GoFundMe campaign, right, to help some of these journalists as well.

0:20:29.4 DS: There are. There's GoFundMe campaigns for the journalists who just lost their job at



the Messenger. There's also just, I think, through the press club as well. But yeah, really excited about the Press Club and, and again, like this will be for the membership of the Press Club, but also, through the National Press Club's Journalism Institute, which is their 501 [c] [3] nonprofit. There will be some public facing career development stuff that we'll be working on, apart from everything that they're already doing. And that's one of the volunteer things I'm gonna be doing, while I look for work here, is just seeing how I can scale up other journalists behind me. And also, I'm sure there's a lot of folks who are still trying to stay in this business at every stage of their career. So we're looking forward to putting the curriculum together for that.

0:21:07.1 MB: Well, you mentioned your podcast. I want everyone to be able to listen to, we'll offer a link to it on the landing page, but why don't you tell anyone and everyone how they can find your substack work and your podcast, which you're back doing now, because you had to take a hiatus when you were working for the Messenger. How do we find you or what did we search for?

0:21:26.1 DS: Pretty simple: Love, journalism.

0:21:28.3 MB: With a comma, right, love, journalism.

0:21:31.8 DS: You don't need the comma to find me on Google. So just Google love, journalism. You'll find it, it should be right at the very top, the name of the substack; love, Journalism. But if you google love, journalism, you'll find it, darrensamuelsohn.com will also get you there. But yeah, and, again, it's gonna be a whole series of messengers, trials and tribulations here to start. And I'm sure I got some writing to do with respect to all of the experiences that I just went through. And then, man, I had a whole bunch of other ideas that I put on the shelf there when I took this job at The Messenger. So we'll see how long I'm on the job market for and how much time I've got before I go work for a new outlet that we'll see who, whether or not I keep it going or not. But I do say... I will say this is a long-term game for me with with love, journalism. It'll be with me, I think, through the rest of my career. So it'll be my landing page in my home for my work, from going all the way back till I'm done, which I hope is a long, long time for me.

0:22:30.1 MB: Darren Samuelsohn recent, very recent senior editor at The Messenger, now still doing his Substack work and his vodcast. We appreciate your valuable time. Thanks for being on the program.

0:22:44.0 DS: Thanks so much for having me.

[music]