

E&P

EDITOR & PUBLISHER®

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

Audio Transcript

Episode 224 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder

Publication date: Thursday February 15, 2024



The image shows a promotional banner for a vodcast. At the top left is the 'E&P REPORTS VODCAST' logo. To its right is the URL 'EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts'. On the right side of the banner are images of a camera lens and a professional microphone. Below the banner is a video call interface with three participants. The top left window shows Kristin Roberts, Chief Content Officer at Gannett Media. The top right window shows Mike Blinder, Publisher of E&P Magazine, with the E&P logo and 'NEWSPAPERS | BROADCAST | DIGITAL' text in the background. The bottom center window shows Jason Taylor, Chief Sales Officer at Gannett Media. In the bottom right corner of the video call area, it says 'Episode Sponsor BLOX DIGITAL' with the BLOX logo.

[No more downsizing, as Gannett is hiring locally at all levels](#)

On this episode of “E&P Reports,” we get the inside story on Gannett Media’s major hiring frenzy from their chief content officer, Kristin Roberts, and chief revenue officer, Jason Taylor. We learn about what is being called their “turnaround plan,” which has created hundreds of new local news media industry jobs in dozens of their markets across the U.S. Both Taylor and Roberts directly address the negative reporting that has been pointed at this media empire and how they are both bullish on the company’s plans to continue serving their readers and advertisers.



[music]

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.

0:00:18.9 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we urge you to follow us on our podcast platform. Watching on YouTube, click the bell... No, click the... It's subscribe first, then bell. That's right. Subscribe, smash the bell to the right. You get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly Vodcast series dedicated to the news publishing industry, E&P Reports. I have a friend that I've known for over a decade or maybe even longer. Jason Taylor. Jason, welcome to the program.

0:00:49.4 Jason Taylor: Thank you, Mike. Thanks for having us.

0:00:51.3 MB: Jason, you go way back working for Charles Morris of Morris Multimedia, Honolulu Advertiser, Chattanooga Times, Las Vegas Review-Journal. But today, and currently, you are the Chief Sales officer of Gannett Media. Kristin Roberts, your title is Gannett Media Chief Content Officer. Thomson Reuters was your first gig, National Journal. You spent some time at Politico, but you really had an amazing run at McClatchy, six years in senior content management there before you joined Gannett, correct?

0:01:24.6 Kristin Roberts: That's correct. I'm a news woman, I've been a news woman for 30 years. Came up as a reporter at Reuters, newsroom editor, then raised my hand for senior leadership, and was Chief Content Officer over at McClatchy for quite a while before jumping over here to join the Gannett Media team.

0:01:43.1 MB: Alright, the reason for this interview, and I'm honored to have both of you. We have actually Jason who's in charge of money, and Kristin who's in charge of content. You can't do much better than that for the largest media company in North America. But the reason for this interview is interesting. And I'm gonna set it up this way and guys, I hope you don't mind. But on this very program over the last year, we've had some interesting topics. Of course, we've talked about the USA Today and its growth and its great reporters, and new editors and what have you, but we've also focused on Hutchinson, Kansas, where... Because reportedly downsizing in the market without a local editor, the paper started becoming what was described as a skeleton of itself, because of downsizing. A 16-year-old kid starts up a startup against it.

0:02:28.1 MB: We've had Judi Terzotis from The Advocate on this program who started a digital only, I guess, competitive site in Shreveport, the third largest city in Louisiana. We've had Ballantine of Colorado on this program who went 60 miles South to Farmington, New Mexico, claiming that they were gonna start up a newspaper because of a void due to downsizing, Gannet property, PJ Browning of the Post and Courier, expanding Statewide, obviously including your Greenville property. We even had Mike Read on this program back in June. We were discussing the



Google lawsuit. But he even said that news is expensive, it's hard. And on the other side of the coin, major stories we're breaking here, just recently, The Messenger, \$50 million burned through in eight months because it's hard to do news. It's hard to do journalism and have a sustainable business model.

0:03:24.6 MB: Just interviewed Matt Pearce. You guys may know him 'cause he's president of the Guild of the West, which means of the thousand journalists he represents in the Guild, some of those work at Gannett Properties in the West. How he was massively part of the downsizing at the LA Times. Politico reported over 500 journalists were laid off in January, and I'm gonna steer it up this way, guys. I get an email from the CEO of a major family media company who has Google alerts for Gannett, and this is on January 18th I'm looking at. He said, Mike, WTF exclamation point. And here are the headlines. Jim Fogler, we all know Jim in this industry and president of Florida Press Association is hired by Gannett to run sales in Florida. Then we see Chadi Irani, general manager for Treasure Coast Newspapers. That's a big hire. Shane Morris, General Manager of the Oklahoman. You guys are hiring left and right now. These are what the heck is going on? In other words, with all the stories of downsizing, it looks like Gannett now is going through major hiring of senior management positions across the country. Do I have that right? Let me start with you. Jason, is this what's going on?

0:04:44.7 KR: Absolutely but not just senior managers. I wanna say that I think it's key to know. Back in August, we announced roughly 14 general managers across our 14... Mostly our 14 largest markets. Then last month in January, we announced an additional 10, and we have plans to announce even more in the months ahead. But at the same time, we're adding local sellers too. We believe that local driver of innovation, that local decision maker, that local collaborator with partners and content with partners and consumer, it's key to our business. And we can have the best ideas and strategies, but that local leader can guide their peers, work with their peers, and deliver marked results. We're already seeing... Already...

0:05:32.1 MB: Kristin, is this in the newsroom as well? Are you hiring content people locally in markets now?

0:05:37.6 KR: We've been hiring hundreds of people since we launched our turnaround plan on the content team back in June of last year, we've hired 500 people. We've got more than a hundred roles planned for the first half of this year, and that's nationwide. They're reporting roles, they're editing roles, they're visual roles. And it's not just back filling open roles, but it's creating jobs that purposefully bring strength back to local newsrooms, so that they can do the job of strengthening their local communities. Yes, it's real.

[music]

0:06:06.1 MB: All right, so to quote the nameless head of the family media group who put in the subject line, WTF, we're gonna learn more about this on the backside of this message.

0:06:17.6 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 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 Town News now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at bloxdigital.com.

0:07:23.2 MB: Okay, let me start with this rumor that we were chasing about a year and a half, two years ago about Gannett and your future. Jason, I'll start with you because you and I both come from the business side. The rumor that we were chasing was Gannett picked up all the GateHouse properties. The smaller ones weren't really part of the culture. The plan was to stay in the bigger cities, kind of work with the USA Today team, or the network, whatever you wanna call it, and just spin off the small ones. CherryRoad picks up the whole bunch, and there you go. Jason, that's not really Gannett, is it?

0:07:57.1 KR: No, not at all. I think what we're doing now is really doubling down. I say often with our team, we bring the power of one of the nation's largest media companies into downtown Stockton, California, into West Palm Beach. We need to leverage those assets, those case studies of successful advertising campaigns to apply those with a local GM into a local market to get equal results. And it is a challenge. It is expensive, but we're seeing the return already, Mike, I can't emphasize that enough. In the markets where we've embedded a local general manager, and they have collaborated with their peers, we are generating much better results than in markets where we do not have local leadership. So the goal is to continue to expand that process, and to continue to double down. We also say a lot... A cherry tree grows great in Michigan, it doesn't necessarily grow good in Florida. We need to let these local leaders tell us what they need. And we don't need to try to plant the same to get the same harvest everywhere.

0:09:02.4 MB: Kristin, I want to... If I may spend a little time dissecting what the heck you do, 'cause you're Chief Content Officer of an enormous company now. Are you in charge of all content, including USA Today, as well as the national, the regional and all the hyperlocals? I mean what...

0:09:19.1 KR: Yes, all of it. I am responsible to all of our newsrooms and all of our news teams and responsible for all of the content. The journalism, the news, the information across all formats, whether it's our print products that we're investing in, again, our digital formats, our podcasts, our video franchises, all of it, every stitch of it.

0:09:41.1 MB: How siloed are you? When I say that, I mean do you work in terms of verticals when it comes to content? Do you have a chief video officer, a chief lifestyle officer, or are you more about hyperlocal and are you siloed more about communities and markets or a little bit about... Just give me an idea of how you manage all this.

0:10:00.1 KR: We've got a head of local Michael Anastasi, who's a friend of yours who sits there in Tennessee as well. Michael Anastasi is responsible for all of the local properties. And we run that as a regional approach. So we want to make sure, like Jason is doing, that we're pushing as much decision-making to local editors and local leaders on the ground, because they know a lot better than I do sitting in South Florida, what we need in Memphis, for example. What we need in Austin.



So those are full teams, but they get a whole bunch of support from what we call shared teams. So if you think about the audience growth function, or the video production hub, they get support from shared teams. A really good example of this, Mike, is there was a hurricane that affected Florida last summer, not uncommon, but it was the central team, the shared team that is responsible for audience growth that stepped in to spin up the SMS text messaging service, so that our local newsroom could provide regular direct updates to our readers in real time, which really freed up our local readers, our local reporters and local editors to do the job that they couldn't on the ground, which is be out there leveraging their knowledge, leveraging their source network.

0:11:14.7 KR: So I wouldn't call us siloed in that way. We have set up a situation where we have content creating teams, and then a bunch of shared teams that support them.

0:11:24.1 MB: Jason, you said a cotton-picking mouthful before, I wanted to go to Kristin first. Now, I'm gonna go back to you. You said something that I believe in more than anything, and you know I go way back, but I wrote a book in 2008, when I had my best year generating revenue for the newspaper industry back in that depression. And it's about sales, and I said, it's a numbers game. If you have feet on the street, you're gonna make more money if you don't. Jim Brown was on this program just about a few weeks ago, dissecting the latest Burrell research and radio came up, number one, and I really pegged him on that. I said, why are more local advertisers buying radio? And he simply said, 'cause there's more feet on the street. Jason, are you a believer that it's just back to basics, the old, you know more feet, more door-knocking and you're gonna get more money?

0:12:14.1 JT: I really am. If you look at where our success is coming from right now, it's getting back to the basics. It's getting back to call volume, it's getting back to sales pressure. It's flexing our muscle again, as I alluded to earlier. It's really giving some swagger back to our sellers, like getting them excited. I'm in a fortunate situation that I've been to the majority of our markets, Mike. I've ridden alongside many, many reps and I've watched the process and learned and listened to the clients. And at the end of the day, whether it's on a phone, whether it's on a Zoom call or whether it's face-to-face, it is a volume game. We have incredible assets that we sell. We just have to get back in front of people and flex our muscle again.

0:13:00.7 MB: I believe, and this is one man's opinion, that we made a big mistake back in 2008, 2010, when everything was about digital services. And you might remember, I launched Propel for GateHouse. I was in just about every market when I was doing my revenue generation, and workshops. I was everywhere helping launch digital services. Nowhere in those conversations was any of that, had anything to do with our core competency of renting eyeballs, generating our own content, and then... Even the directory product back then was Local.com. It wasn't even a bolt one if you remember. How do you feel about that today? I know you've got tons of digital services in your toolbox. I know you're selling everything that an advertiser needs, OTT right on down to a banner ad on a website. But Jason Taylor, Sales Pro winner of all the big awards, do you believe in your heart of hearts that if we stay in our core competencies and really focus on monetizing the content Kristin generates, there's a better future for us?

0:14:02.3 JT: We believe strongly, and I believe strongly in a full funnel approach, that DMS business is where our clients want us to be in so many ways. But we have to look at the entire funnel. We have to look at the adjacencies next to the content that Kristin and her team are creating.



We have to look at the unique sports partnerships we have, like the one we've just announced with The Big Ten last week. All of these things combined take a client through a full funnel journey with a customer, and that's where we really see the results, and that's where our clients see the results. That's where they see the lead gen, that's where they see the retention. And in turn, we see our retention as well. So it's really a combination, Mike, of both. It's that entire full funnel solution that we offer, and really selling that way, selling all across that funnel.

0:14:48.3 MB: One more question to you, Jason. Most research never changes. It's been this way for 10 years, but it's always like, the big news is. Most of our opportunity, according to Mather or Burrell tends to be that it's small business. If we're waiting for those big inserts to come back, the big agency deals to come back, all the demand driven business that made us, in one man's opinion, fat and lazy for decades, we gotta go out and mix it up. That's hard business to service. That's hard business to get your reps to deal with, 'cause there's tons of rejection and new advertise... Not new, but the ones we have to go after now are harder to get into, and I was selling in the '80s. I could knock on doors in Maine Street. Now you get in front of home improvement, you've gotta get in front of legal, you gotta get in front of all the healthcare silos. What say you about that, and again, that model, especially when there's all this national stuff going on. Is it still back to what we call basic street fighting, and getting out there and meeting these small businesses?

0:15:52.6 JT: I think it really is, but it's not just the small business. We're fortunate in Gannett to also have one of the most powerful storied brands in the country with USA Today. So even we're seeing a reactivation of national accounts. We have accounts that we have been on their do not advertise list for five plus years who are returning back to us because we have new innovative things that we're offering. In the local market, it is a sales pressure game. Again, whether they're dialing in, Zoom calling or knocking doors, it sales pressure. It sales pressure. It's getting out there... It's expensive to get out there and knock the streets, knock the doors, but it is so imperative to the success of our business long term and finding that balance between the two. We're fortunate right now, we're year over year positive in both local advertising and national advertising. And I think that's because we've increased our sales pressure. We've increased our swagger, getting back out there, telling our story. Even things like the Taylor Swift reporter from Kristin's team, the Beyonce reporter, all of that changes our story. It's a muscle flex. It's something that just adds some interest back into our company. We cannot do what we've always done, and expect anything less than what we've always had. Now we had...

0:17:08.4 KR: Mike, when you think about. Jason, tell him about Blueprint, tell him about the investment that we're making.

0:17:13.1 JT: Great example. So Kristin's team project Blueprint, they're going in and they're actually investing in our Sunday packages, our weekend packages, innovating design, content plays, and mind-boggling. We're selling 26 and 52 week print contracts we've not sold in a long time, Mike. And they're selling out immediately, these premium spaces. And clients, I've had numerous conversations with clients. I can think of furniture stores, auto dealers. They're like, we're just so glad to see you all invest in these products. It felt like you were in retreat, but now you're investing and you're excited and we're seeing the results there too. So that's what gets me fired up. There are so many segments of our business where we're seeing growth that I know that it's possible. And I think so much of that, so much of it is proving to our own team that we could grow again. And now

watching what happens from here.

0:18:09.1 MB: It's funny, I just finished speaking at Minnesota Press Association. I did this speech, what's old is new again, and I was screaming to audiences, Jason, go back to ToMA 52 week campaigns. Build that top of mind awareness again. Man, I feel like it's... Great minds whatever. Kristin, two things I wanna talk to you about. Number one, how do you... I had Martin Barron on this program. We had some discussion about old new, the debate of the news you need to know versus the news you want to know. Kristin, how nerdy are you? How much do you look at the clicks and engagement numbers in order to move the content in a direction, or how much do you not, and where are you at on investing in enterprise journalism, which may take two months, three months in order for the story to even break?

0:19:00.0 KR: There's a lot in that question. I would call...

0:19:00.3 MB: I know.

0:19:03.7 JT: I'm maximally nerdy. Our organization is driven by data. We know what is working and it's not just clicks. It is level of engagement around a story. Does this story drive you to experience something else? Does it lead you to click and listen to the audio that led to the reporting that led to this longer story? We look at the data multiple times every day. We have data analytics experts embedded within our news teams that are helping our editors make strategic decisions every day about how to approach a story, how to swarm a story. That does not mean that we're not also investing in things that take a lot longer to produce. We still hold a high value for investigative journalism for deeply reported voices and opinion journalism. We have to have both, because we recognize that we are trying to serve more and more readers. And what it means to be essential to all of those people is different.

0:20:06.0 MB: All right. My wife is our editor-in-chief and she is entrusted with keeping our 143-year-old brand credible. I am Jason, I am the sales guy, and I really grew our revenue here, Kristin, at E&P on sponsored content, branded content, native. It's got a million different names to it. I remember the good old days of advertorial. Where's your head on that? And then I'm gonna swing the question to Jason. Are you okay when you, I call it co-mingle, an advertiser's content with the hardworking journalistic content that you generate in your local newsrooms?

0:20:47.4 KR: There are lots of kinds of content. The most important thing to me is that we are not tricking our readers.

0:20:54.5 MB: Tricking.

0:20:55.4 KR: We're not tricking our readers. If we are giving them content that was sponsored by an advertiser or written by an advertiser, it needs to say that. So long as we are transparent about what we're doing, telling people right up front, then of course, lots of different kinds of content are relevant to our readers. It's not just the journalism. There are ways for you to think about, in a much more tailored and dynamic and responsive environment, that other kinds of content from other sources are also relevant. So for me, it's all about transparency and honesty with the reader.



0:21:30.1 MB: Jason, question to you, where are you at on the sponsored content, branded content game right now? How important is that revenue to you right now?

0:21:39.2 JT: I think it's very important and to Kristin's point, it's all over the place in what our customers need. Many of them don't have a way to generate content. So they need us, whether it's video, whether it's the written word, they need us to help support that. Again, Kristin and I are aligned on making sure that's transparent, making sure that we're very visibly... That we have visible indicators of what we're doing. But so many of our clients need us, want us there, and it's valuable information for our readers so many times and even lists, and again, to my earlier point, video, there's so much out there that... That evergreen video even is so important to some people. When you're in that moment in time looking to figure out how to take that and put up a Christmas tree or do something, that's valuable content that our clients really find value in being adjacent to if they're selling Christmas decor.

0:22:33.7 MB: Jason Taylor, Gannett Media Chief Sales Officer, Kristin Roberts, Gannett Media Chief Content Officer, we know how busy you are. We know how dedicated you both are to this industry with your years of service. And more importantly, we thank you for your valuable time.

[music]