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## Audio Transcript

Episode 228 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series  
with Mike Blinder

The banner features the E&P Reports Vodcast logo on the left, which includes a Wi-Fi symbol and the text 'E&P REPORTS VODCAST'. In the center, the URL 'EditorandPublisher.com/Vodcasts' is displayed. On the right, there is an image of a professional microphone and a camera lens. Below the URL, three video thumbnails are shown. The top-left thumbnail shows Dan Kennedy, a man with glasses, with text identifying him as a Professor of Journalism at Northeastern University and co-author of 'What Works in Community News'. The top-right thumbnail shows Mike Blinder, a man in a suit, with text identifying him as the Publisher of E&P Magazine. The bottom-center thumbnail shows Ellen Clegg, a woman with glasses, with text identifying her as Co-chair of Brookline.News and co-author of 'What Works in Community News'. At the bottom of the banner, the text 'Episode Sponsor' is followed by the BLOX DIGITAL logo.

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[Exploring their new book: “What Works in Community News,” from authors Ellen Clegg & Dan Kennedy](#)

In this episode of “E&P Reports” we spend 20-minutes with Ellen Clegg and Dan Kennedy the authors of the new book: “What Works in Community News,” to learn how they selected the featured nine media operations and why they believed these are worth exploring to find models for sustainable local journalism. Clegg a seasoned editor and local news media entrepreneur along with Kennedy a respected professor of Journalism also offer advice gleaned from the book to news publishing executives on how to navigate the challenging and ever-changing local news media ecosystem.



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**0:00:03.9 Speaker 1:** 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.

**0:00:19.2 Mike Blinder:** And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, Publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we urge listeners on various podcast platforms to follow us. Watching on the YouTube channel, hit the subscribe button below, ring the bell to the right, get an update each and every time we upload this weekly vodcast series dedicated to the news publishing industry, E&P Reports. I've got Clegg and Kennedy. I believe Ellen you always lead when you guys get on the stage. It's Ellen Clegg and Dan Kennedy. Dan's never first when you're introduced. Is that correct?

**0:00:49.4 Ellen Clegg:** It's alphabetical.

**0:00:50.3 MB:** There you go. Ellen Clegg is famous in the Boston area for decades of The Globe, and of course you started a digital new start-up in a town, or actually a suburb of Boston called Brookline, where my brother lives right off of Beacon Street. And I understand that's thriving now. It's growing. It's doing well.

**0:01:08.7 EC:** It is. We started last year after the Brookline Tab was shut down and it's non-profit, we've been raising funds, we have hired a founding editor, we are actually hiring a part-time reporter and a full-time chief of staff. We've got 5000 newsletter sign-ups and about 65,000 page views a month.

**0:01:35.8 MB:** Dan, you're the smart one 'cause you're still teaching, right? At Northeastern University. I follow your blog, which is a very, very popular media nation, but you've also got politics in your DNA, right? Guardian GBH news. And you even wrote for The Phoenix in Boston, right?

**0:01:54.4 Dan Kennedy:** Well, that's right. I mean, it's always been media for us, but it's hard to write about media all the time without dragging politics into it as well.

**0:02:03.5 MB:** Well, we're here to talk about your latest and greatest penmanship. I have a physical copy in my hand. We're showing it to our audience. You guys penned a book together, What Works In Community News, Media Startups, News Deserts And The Future Of The Fourth Estate. Yes, Ellen's name is first on the cover. That's norm... And you took a journey to nine separate kind of good news digital stories. How did you pick these nine locations? Were they random, were they suggested to you? And is that a good way to describe how the book kinda reads, Ellen?

**0:02:46.7 EC:** We scoped out the book at Northeastern. I remember going over the project's potential, projects on a white board, and we picked a range of cities, towns, small rural areas, low wealth urban communities, non-profit, for-profit and a news co-op. We wanted a diverse range



across the country.

**0:03:15.0 MB:** Well, we're gonna dissect the book and what you guys uncovered on the back side of this message.

**0:03:19.8 S1:** 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 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 a 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](http://bloxdigital.com).

**0:04:24.0 MB:** Let me kick things off if I may by taking you back a few months when I interviewed what I call Six News Disruptors who have formed their own association, because they all were following similar business models in order to find sustainable journalism. Imtiaz Patel, when he was at the Baltimore Banner was part of this. He's moved on now to Gannett. Shamus Toomey, Block Club Chicago, Larry Ryckman, who I know you guys talk to all the time at the Colorado Sun, Eric Barnes at The Daily Memphian, David Sommers, Long Beach Post, and of course, Ken Doctor's Lookout Local.

**0:04:56.6 MB:** When we were talking about their models, it was all kind of back to basic business skills. That non-profit was almost just a way of cooking the books or changing your... How you're doing your accounting. My favorite quote from the interview was David Sommers in Long Beach, when he said, In our news room, we are always chanting to ourselves, no mission, no margin, no margin, no mission. Is this something that you discovered in your journey to nine different cities?

**0:05:26.2 DK:** That's right. Absolutely. Now, I would say that the revenue mix for a non-profit tends to be a little bit different from what you find with the for-profit. For one thing, very few non-profits have a paywall. It's considered part of their public mission to make themselves free to the public, although they certainly do ask for membership contributions. Non-profits are also free to solicit large gifts from foundations and high net worth individuals, which I've learned is non-profits speak for rich people. And so that gives them a different kind of mix.

**0:06:08.3 DK:** If you were a for-profit, you're kind of stuck with a paywall, which is working very well at a few of the national and large regional papers, but really hasn't caught on at the hyperlocal level at all, and advertising, and we know what's happened at advertising. It's maintained some of its value in print, it has almost no value in the digital space, and it's just become a really, really difficult way to make a living. So as a result, I think that although Ellen and I would love to see a robust for-profit space among local news organizations, the fact is, most of the ones with much in the way of any reporting capacity these days are taking that non-profit road.

**0:07:00.4 MB:** Ellen, talk to me about your favorite deployment or favorite... What was your most interesting journey into these nine? Which one of them was the one you'd love to feature the most

as a great, unbelievable sustainable news operation or at least on a path to get there?

**0:07:21.3 DK:** But they were all our favorites.

**0:07:22.6 EC:** They're all... It's hard to pick. I'm from Minneapolis, so The Star Tribune, Main Post, Sahar Journal certainly resonated with me. I was in Minneapolis a couple of times, staying with my brother, stranded by a blizzard at one point. And Sahar Journal is just a remarkable story started by a Somali American journalist who was at Minnesota Public Radio, The Star Tribune, and it was a labor of love. He stood up a website, it was just him. He ran a lot of opinion. Minneapolis, perhaps surprisingly, has one of the largest Somali populations in the United States. Mukhtar Ibrahim, then got some seed capital and an office space from Minnesota Public Radio, he started reporting, he raised funds. He now is running, I think he's got a newsroom of about a dozen people and a budget of over a million dollars a year. He did critical reporting, Sahar Journal, the whole staff did critical reporting after the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. And so they've expanded beyond just reporting on immigration, to looking at racial equity, education, all sorts of issues in the Twin Cities.

**0:09:01.2 MB:** Which... The Twin Cities is not exactly on its way to be a news desert. What is your position on that? I mean, do you believe that there are pockets of populations within large cities that are being underserved, thus there has to be more Sahar Journals that have to start up in order to serve these communities?

**0:09:21.8 EC:** That's a great question. Yes, I believe that. I mean, this legacy paper, The Star Tribune, went through hard times and it was acquired by McClatchy to kinda lot of debt, went through bankruptcy, but has rebounded under local ownership and is one of the most admired regional papers in the country, yet in the Twin Cities, there are underserved populations. Certainly the African diaspora, the large immigrant population. There's a large Native American population in the Twin Cities and in the state that could use more coverage.

**0:10:05.5 MB:** My favorite part of the book was The Storm Lake Times Pilot. Who's the one that wrote that one up?

**0:10:12.6 EC:** I did. I have a Midwestern beat.

**0:10:18.2 MB:** So lets talk about your Midwestern, I love walleye life. Storm Lake Times Pilot is one of the few legacy titles that you guys explored, correct? And it's kind of going through with a modification as a hybrid?

**0:10:37.5 EC:** Yes, it's... Well, Stewart, when I was editorial page editor of The Boston Globe, I routinely read Art Cullen's editorials. He won the Pulitzer Prize, as you know, for editorial writing. So I really wanted to go to Iowa, talk to him, see what was going on. They are a hybrid operation for-profit. Art and his brother and wife, I think do not take salaries. It's a real family operation, and during the pandemic, advertising shut down, they went through some tough times, but they've pulled out and they're getting grant money from the Western Iowa Journalism Foundation, which is a non-profit, and the WIJF raises money, you get a tax deduction, obviously for writing a check to it, and then they disperse grants to the Storm Lake Times Pilot and other small rural papers in

Western Iowa.

**0:11:52.5 MB:** Dan, I have a little resentment. I mean, I love you guys dearly and you've been on the show, it's been a year since you've been on the show, you've had me on your show. But I resented that there wasn't enough exploration, 'cause basically what this book is... Correct me if I'm wrong. This book basically says, Okay, we've all seen the Abernathy report. We all know that there's news deserts and ghost papers, but there are good models we should be looking at that help keep this necessary part of our Madisonian republic alive. That's what this book was. Why didn't you look at some of the legacy led stories that are doing well, like The Advocate down in good old Louisiana or PJ Browning's operation in South Carolina, The Shaw family in Chicago, or even you could look at Word In Black, which all are based on legacy black publications. Was it you didn't want to explore those or they're just in your opinion, that wasn't part of this mission when you took on this book, Dan?

**0:13:00.1 DK:** Well, we did have a bias towards startups and we had a bias toward digital. That said, we did look at a few legacy news operations, including The Storm Lake Times pilot and The Minneapolis Star Tribune. I should also note that one of the great legacy success stories in the country is right in our backyard, The Boston Globe, which is growing and profitable under the ownership of John and Linda Henry. We weren't going to do them again because they were a major focus of my last book, The Return Of The Moguls. Honestly, when we were deciding on what kinds of projects we wanted to write about, there were literally 100s we could have chosen. And if we had wanted to, we easily could have taken a look at independent legacy news operations that are succeeding because they don't have the burden of corporate chain ownership or hedge fund ownership. And that would have made a very good book as well, but we made our choices, and as I said, we did have a bias toward startups and we had a bias toward digital. Not a 100%, but largely that.

**0:14:21.7 MB:** Dan, you teach kids, right? I mean youth. I was at a recent conference once, where they brought in the students from the local J school. They sat on the stage, none of them could name a local TV station from the town they grew up in news operation. Some could name the heritage legacy newspaper, but none, when I stood up and asked the question, would any of you be wanting to work in some hyperlocal cities, to work in... They all had aspirations of different operations, PR. Are you seeing the students, at least that you teach at Northeastern, wanting be that Lou Grant journalist that's just exposing corruption in their cities and fighting in order to be that final check on power? Is there some fire in their belly?

**0:15:15.2 DK:** Oh, absolutely. Absolutely. And one thing that I try to tell my students is that, they're worried about the job market, of course, and what I tell them is it hasn't gone from wonderful to terrible. It's gone from hard to harder. I mean, Ellen and I are getting up there, and it was not an easy job market, when we graduated from college and started looking for that first news job. It's harder now, there's no question about it. But we find that our students who are really determined to work in news, find ways to do it. Some of our fairly recent graduates are at large news organizations, like the New York Times, the Washington Post, NBC News, but a number of them are going out into these smaller projects and really making a difference. And at the same time, many of our students have always gone into public relations and journalism adjacent type jobs. That was as true in the 1970s as it is today, and there's nothing wrong with that.



**0:16:25.8 DK:** We think that the skills that they get by getting a journalism degree will serve them in good stead really, no matter what they do.

**0:16:34.2 MB:** Final question. We'll start with Ellen, then we'll give Dan time to prep for it. I wanna do an Axios ending to this interview. Ellen, give me the bullets from your latest journeys into all these various markets and operations. Give me the five takeaways you would give right now that entrepreneurial, I wanna make my newsroom click whether I'm profit, non-profit, what have you. What are five takeaways you would offer right now to that energy needing, I've gotta survive publisher of local journalism?

**0:17:13.5 DK:** My goodness. Five takeaways. That's like a novel for Axios.

**0:17:20.1 MB:** I know. Ellen, can you give me at least three of the five?

**0:17:21.8 EC:** Well, what's the buzz word? Let's get smarter. Connect with your audience. I mean Brookline.News, we have hosted house parties, we've been on Zooms, we've done tabling at street fairs, so find out what your community misses about the legacy newspaper. What kind of coverage they want to see? Number two, it's hard. Expect it to be hard. Fundraising for a non-profit is a mission. It's a marathon, not a sprint. And number three, it's fun. It's a mission. Journalism is a calling. Storytelling is as old as the Bronze age or older. It's necessary for democracy.

**0:18:13.8 MB:** Dan, three to five.

**0:18:15.1 DK:** Okay. Let's see if I can come up with three. First of all, anything can work, anything can fail. When people ask what is the best model for doing local news, the answer is there isn't one. We have digital startups, we have radio stations, tiny radio stations, we have a TV station, we have legacy news papers. So anything can work, anything can fail. Number two, there is no substitute for entrepreneurial visionary leadership at the local level. And if I got to come up with a number three, I think I would say when you are doing community journalism, no matter what you may move on to, if you choose to move on, you will find that your days as a community journalist were some of the most rewarding of your career. Getting to know people and institutions at the local level, there's really just no substitute for that, and you can go on to bigger and supposedly better things, but it's very difficult to have that same kind of connection.

**0:19:34.9 MB:** The book is called What Works In Community News. It's recent. It's powerful. It's a journey to spot like nine separate stories of our innovation and perseverance and all different ways that we can have a sustainable news model. The authors are Clegg and Kennedy. Ellen Clegg, famous for three decades at The Boston Globe, helping to edit and find Pulitzer Prize winning content. Also the founder of Brookline.News. I urge everyone to go to that site, it really is amazing. Dan Kennedy, who teaches at Northeastern University as a journalism professor and writes a very, very good blog, one that's followed by many media nation. Thanks both of you for your time, we really appreciate your work and we'll stay in touch.

**0:20:24.5 DK:** Thank you so much, Mike. We really appreciate the chance to talk with you and your listeners today.



**0:20:31.6 EC:** Always great, Mike.