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## Audio Transcript

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with Mike Blinder

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### [Detroit PBS CEO Rich Homberg's mission to redefine public media](#)

Detroit Public Television, now rebranded as Detroit PBS, is poised for a transformative journey as it makes a resounding return to the vibrant heart of the city. With a renewed commitment to serving its community with integrity and innovation, the organization, under the leadership of President & CEO Rich Homberg, is embarking on an ambitious mission to redefine public media. In this exclusive interview, Homberg shares insights into the organization's strategic shift towards bolstering local content and fostering collaborative partnerships. As Detroit PBS prepares to unveil its new campus and expand its reach, the stage is set for a new chapter in the city's media landscape, marked by resilience, engagement, and a steadfast dedication to excellence.



[music]

0:00:03.9 Speaker 3: 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.

0:00:20.1 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again. Mike Blinder, publisher, E&P Magazine. As always, we urge those that are listening on a podcast platform to follow us watching on YouTube. Hit the subscribe button below me, smash the bell, or ring the bell to the right. You'll get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series dedicated to the news publishing industry we call E&P Reports. Rich Homberg, I guess, I call you a... Sir, we've never met face-to-face.

0:00:48.7 Rich Homberg: That's so true.

0:00:49.1 MB: But we have chatted so many times. Let me introduce you to the audience. You're one of the movers and shakers in the public media sphere. Maybe you don't agree, but your president and CEO of Detroit Public Television, in my humble opinion, one of the most innovative and forward-thinking broadcast entities beyond public media, the stuff you're doing there is amazing.

0:01:09.4 RH: Oh, thanks.

0:01:10.4 MB: Welcome to the program, sir.

0:01:12.1 RH: Glad to be here. A lot of fun. And thanks for all your coaching as I came out of commercial media, basically on or news radio into public media. And as the world is changing, you need coaches today to say, well, here's where this papers are really thinking. Rich, you've been very helpful there. And we have some friends in common and...

0:01:30.8 MB: You've been coaching me as well. We've... Every now and then, I just... Full disclosure to our audience. I will pick, I will send a quick email to Rich. You got 15 minutes? And he'll squeeze me in between flights all over the country and drives he's doing, just so we can chat about different concepts. And one of the main things I wanna chat with Rich about is, is entrance into public media from the dark side, where I come from, commercial media. But we're gonna unravel all of this and unpack what's happening up to Detroit on the backside of this message.

0:02:00.9 S3: 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 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](http://bloxdigital.com).

0:03:06.0 MB: Okay, Rich. Before we dive into public media in Detroit, let's dive, if you don't mind, sir, into you. You just kind of revealed it. You worked for the real world. I mean, I don't say that despite being a public... [laughter] I mean, you were under pressure. You worked for big network. I mean, give me quick... The elevator...

0:03:24.8 RH: Yeah. It's like real easy. I grew up outside of Philadelphia and went to Temple University. David Borman, by the way, is doing an unbelievable job at Temple. And, Temple was great and Temple was like, kid, if you wanna be in this business, you better get busy. The resumes are this thick on the stack of every day. And, so went to work, did a lot of side hustles in Philly, bunch of internships. And, then my girlfriend went to medical school, and, in Puerto Rico, and a guy walks into... I was working at WCAU in Philadelphia. He says, you wanna move to New York? I'm like, yeah. And so I moved to New York to work for WMCA, which was owned by Strauss Communications. Wonderful people, great experience, still friends with Eric Strauss today, and a great family. And then two years later, got recruited to go to work at 1010 WINS in New York.

0:04:11.8 RH: I love number two to number one, that WINS was sort of, for many years, was number two to WCBS, not when we left. Went to work at WINS with just a great group of people, legendary Scott Herman, number two at CBS Radio. And, just, and folks, we still, there's still a tribe there, the WINS tribe and I loved it. Had a ball went to Pittsburgh to work at KDKA, 'cause in those days, when you worked at Westinghouse, I was in marketing at WINS, and you got to get into sales and then you come back and, I was on the last boat of when they were sending folks from city to city for five year spans in order to build a career. Worked at KDKA in Pittsburgh, spent a year in Phoenix, was over on my honeymoon when I was told I was moving back to New York to be head of sales at WINS.

0:04:57.9 RH: And I was general sales manager at WINS. Took a couple years of running a small market group of stations 'cause I always thought I wanted to do that. Long story. Got crushed, and then ran Shadow Traffic in New York for four years. And, then when Westinghouse bought CBS, Herman called me and said, why don't you come back and go to Pittsburgh? Tracy was born in Pittsburgh. KD is a great station and a legendary station, KDKA. And at the last minute they said, we got a better idea, WWJ in Detroit, legendary number two station to WJR, one of the, just great AM radio battles of all times. But JR was just iconic and I just knew that JP McCarthy had just passed away, the morning host at JR. And I knew, because I knew all news very well.

0:05:49.8 RH: The opportunity for J was enormous. Called home, told my wife we're moving to New York, she burst into tears, told me that she was moving to Pittsburgh and hung up on me. [laughter] I convinced her to move to Detroit 28 years ago. And I think, I guess I think, Philly's got a certain tone, but Detroit is even a little stronger. I think I'm a Detroiter at heart. My wife says, I'm trying to convince everybody I was born here. I just fell in love with Detroit and got very invested in the town. And I did Leadership Detroit and the Super Bowl Host Committee and this and that. I love this town. And Detroit is a town basically, if you don't understand Detroit, you're going to, if you're gonna live here.

0:06:29.8 MB: Okay so... Your move, but where was the move now? I mean, you are a hustling like



me. My whole background before I got involved in the newspaper industry as a digital sales manager, that propelled me up into, it was all radio sales. That's what I did starting in 1986. I mean, and I present in the main broadcast. I mean, I'm like you, radio sales, grab those crumbs off the table after Yellow Pages grabbed a whole mess of the paper and the network TV, go and get street fighting is what we used to call it.

0:07:06.6 RH: Yeah. Sure.

0:07:07.4 MB: Now you're in public, where was the move between commercial to public?

0:07:12.7 RH: Yeah. So when I was at Westinghouse, Bill Baker was the head of the television station at Westinghouse, and he left to take the job running Channel 13 in New York. Bill Baker was the legendary CEO at WNET in New York. And when he did that, I said, you know what, I think that might be the long play here. I love news and public affairs, I love the this city. And when the opening occurred at Detroit Public Television, I said to my wife, I think I wanna go do this. And she's like, Oh, you such a knucklehead. Go ahead. And...

0:07:44.1 MB: But they even looked at you there because you come from a dark side? You're not an AP style book brainiac trying to win a Pulitzer Prize. You're a street fighting person who understands how to run a broadcast business. How did your resume even get looked at in the public world?

0:08:02.0 RH: Well, limited supply of general managers.

0:08:05.2 MB: Okay.

0:08:06.3 RH: So think about public television, you got to understand your city 'cause you're a non-profit. We're a non-profit.

0:08:13.6 MB: Right.

0:08:14.2 RH: The only public television station in town. So you got to understand your city. You got to understand television. You got to understand public media. And so one of the challenges in this business when, the industry you and I grew up in, and it was the same way in the newspaper business, when you wanted to build a career in commercial media, you go to Lansing, then you go to Columbus, then you come to Detroit. You built market by market. And there was a system for how, whether you were selling commercial radio or you're an anchor on TV, there was a path. You went from small market, medium market, large market, and things like that. Public media, almost everyone we hire at Detroit public television comes in one of two ways.

0:08:56.0 RH: They're either an intern who stays, our head of production operations, our engineer, or there's somebody who comes from another industry. There are, occasionally, you see general managers move from station to station, but most stations are staffed with people. It's their first job in public media.

0:09:15.8 MB: Another question.

0:09:17.7 RH: That's a tough model. And so orienting folks and helping to build a culture. We have a great HR manager. How do you orient people almost? And literally we have this process. I do the last interview for every employee we hire. And I, and it's a pattern. I say, it's really not an interview. I wanna, do you really? And I challenge them. They wanna offer you a job.

0:09:37.3 RH: Do you really, do you understand this business? Do you understand the need? 'Cause almost everybody that comes to work in public media, I mean, and things are changing now, but almost everybody, historically people who come to work in public media, I have a vision for a show I'd like to produce. I have an idea. I think it was a series. Here's what I've always wanted to do. And I literally tell staffers, you'll probably get to do that at some point, but we have real job descriptions and we have a real system here. And I want you to understand the system. So the final interview I do with every employee, I say, we're going to bet, let's say 5% of our business on you. You're gonna bet 100% of your career on us. Are you, and literally if you talk to our employees, anybody that we've hired full time in the past 15 years has heard this. We have real job, real job descriptions, we have a plan, we have a model.

0:10:26.0 RH: Can you buy into that? Because a lot of times in public media, one of the challenges is the firmness of job descriptions, the clarity around what the expectation is, 'cause there's a little bit of, I've always wanted to do this and that's great. And you'll get to do that at some point, right? But how do you build a culture?

0:10:46.0 MB: You and I are so similar 'cause we both come from Philly and we're both street fighters. I can just tell in your delivery. But when I first got ahold of E&P, which was four and a half years ago, and this is the official publication of Pulitzer Prize winners for the last over 140 years, a lot of people said it's gonna fail. How dare this aggressive sales person who has no empathy for the news side. And I have news in my blood because are you like me? Do you, I mean, there was a time, there was a study done like 20 years ago where they actually, with newspapers, remember when they used to sell them out of boxes and the top half above the fold was the most important part. There was a city that actually let the sales manager run that for like in certain boxes for like six months. And those papers got picked up more than the others. [laughter]

0:11:38.0 MB: Is there, is it okay for someone from the business side? And then this is a setup question, 'cause I hope you're going to answer it the way I want. What's in that world now? Because that world is not used to like you, correct me if I'm wrong but.

0:11:53.5 RH: Yeah, no, I, again, I have many successful colleagues, and stations succeeded in their own ways, but to me, don't confuse speed and don't confuse ambition and drive with values. We are, our values to post on the wall. We like DETIF Diversity, Engagement, Trust, Innovation. It's just that we have a mindset inside our building that we install on a regular basis. And, I think there's some great stations out there that have really stepped up. But the days of being bespoke and special, there's a phrase that just drives me crazy. And I've said this in meetings and I've said it pretty regularly. A lot of times in public media, they'll say the phrase is, if you've seen one public television station, you've seen one public television. And what that, that's French for you would never understand our town. And we operate in a certain way because we, well, last time I checked, we're trying to get mammals to look at a screen, identify themselves as viewers, and we're looking





to activate those folks. So one, I need you to get to, I need to pull you in and, but if you...

0:13:11.6 MB: There's my, there's my pull quote right there. The three points. Get a mammal to engage in the screen and motivate or change or influence.

0:13:18.9 RH: Get a mammal, get a mammal in front of a screen, get him engaged one-to-one, how do I identify you? How do I pull you in? And then how do I activate you in your community? So imagine...

0:13:29.3 MB: Beautiful. That's it.

0:13:30.9 RH: You've got a topic. That's what it...

0:13:32.6 MB: That's what we do. Let me get...

0:13:34.0 RH: And so I think, let's be careful not to differentiate on the wrong things. So go ahead.

0:13:37.8 MB: I'm so sorry for being interruptive, but I've got, we're short time and I have so many questions to ask you. So let's move into Detroit now. And I'm assuming you agree with me that you can no longer rely totally on network programming to be a PBS affiliate. You need now to have strong local content of some way, shape, form, or size. And the only reason I'm setting you up for that is I've already explored your content, which is amazing. You've just hired in January, one of the top editorial people from this sector, right? You brought on a, I forgot her name. I think I have a note on it.

0:14:10.1 RH: It's... Yep. Yep.

0:14:10.5 MB: I interviewed her once. Alicia Anderson, she's now your new managing editor.

0:14:14.4 RH: Yep.

0:14:14.9 MB: Oh, I love the title, Journalist. Yeah. You can't even say, editorial. So, go ahead.

0:14:21.8 RH: So let, but let me be, I, yes. We are producing more content than we've ever produced in our history. Absolutely. However, simultaneously, we in use, engage, and pivot off of national content as much as any station in the system. And I'd be glad to share our model. We have a very specific model around this. But the truth is, today you have to be as local as possible, but you also have to be as relevant as possible. And you have to understand, we as an organization, we literally say all of that. We are, the days of general audience. That idea of we have generalized, you're a viewer. We grew up in a system where it was viewers and members and general audience and members, right? We need to see every single citizen in Detroit as a subscriber based on their interests.

0:15:16.3 RH: And so tell me five questions and I'll make you cry. Where do you live? What do you do for a living? Did your father have an accent? What are your passions and what are your challenges? If you have a kid on the spectrum, if you love sailboats, and if your and your family's



from the Ukraine, I've got content for you that'll make you cry. It's so good. How? But the mindset around seeing folks in, they talk about tribes. DEI is a really important aspect of what we do, but it's also one of the most important ways to approach anyone. Tell me about you and your family. I've got an incredible show for you. And so we pivot. We have a great relationship with Ken Burns. We have a great relationship with Henry Louis Gates. We just did two projects with Nova. We're working, we're really excited about a documentary coming out from the American experience. We, in the end, national content localized, like there's a really important program tonight on Detroit Public Television or Detroit PBS, I'm getting used to the new brand.

0:16:18.0 MB: Yeah, the new brand, we're gonna be talking about that.

0:16:20.3 RH: Detroit PBS. Yeah. There's a really important program tonight on Detroit PBS, I think it would be particularly important to you. How do I, how do we, that mindset to me, what we talk about is how do you drive the conversation? What are the important conversations around kids in education, arts and culture, leadership and public affairs, energy, environment, and health?

0:16:40.9 MB: All right.

0:16:41.3 RH: Five pillars.

0:16:43.0 MB: Okay. So now my wife is the editor in chief here. We're business partners in this operation. I run mostly the business side, but I pushed and pushed to launch a new vertical, dedicated to public media because I believe public media is growing into that local journalism world more and more. And my brand's important to anyone who crafts local journalism. We know that, we discussed it. You were one of my mentors when I wanted to launch this thing. I chatted with you six months, eight months ago. My wife was mad because the stories I started posting were so negative. She kept saying, all you're posting is people laying off, laying off, laying off, downsizing. You gave me this positive story, like in the first week.

0:17:20.5 RH: Well, but think about something, think about the math here. There's literally, there's one and only one public television station serving virtually every city in the country.

0:17:34.3 MB: Right.

0:17:35.9 RH: They're never sold, they never go out of business, they're all nonprofits. We live in a town. There are no other locally owned television stations in Detroit. There are virtually no locally owned stations across our state. There's one public and the platform is very similar. We're in a city that splits NPR between the Wayne State Station and the Michigan Station. There are a variety of versions of NPR across cities, basically very similar. Virtually every PBS station is very similar. We are very sustainable. We have huge archives. We have huge audiences. We also...

0:18:14.8 MB: But you're not downsizing. You're, you put out, you bought land. You are reinvesting in the city. You're about to build this gorgeous new campus. Why would you put in that money away in a CD and saving it for the next downside?

0:18:33.3 RH: 'Cause, because the opportunities to service there. But also know that the new



building, we're building a, we have 105 employees right now. We had 80 when I got here. We made big cuts to 65. We've grown back to over 100, 40% of our employees have joined us since 2019. But let's say we have 100 employees. We're building a building that has capacity for 147 as of yesterday, with an eye towards bringing partners into the building. We're building a building in the center of Detroit in one of the most accessible piece of land, piece of land in our city. It'll have 120 parking spots, and it will be an engagement center. It'll be a place to come to. That's not aspirational. It's what we do. We're very well known as a station that gets in front of people and gets people together. Think about the opportunity to turn to emerging journalism organizations and say, I've got some space for you if we can make that work together.

0:19:29.2 MB: Exactly.

0:19:30.8 RH: So the opportunity's there. And, but keep in mind, again, there's one and only one thing. I wanted to be real clear about it. We also own buildings. We got finance departments. We do business with foundations, with corporate, with major, and we have a membership system. The point is the infrastructure of a public television station, we're seeing a similar things. Look at Grand Rapids. Watch, Grand Rapids. WGVU is exploding out there because the leader at the Jim Rademaker is doing the same thing. Look at Denver. Look at Colorado and what Amanda Mountain has done, enormous. Obviously, KQED forever. You want a great example of a university licensee that has just done amazing work? Look at KPBS in San Diego. There are some amazing things. What's going on in Dallas is a very exciting, how Lisa Shumate has reinvented Houston, stunning. The work that was done in Georgia by Teya Ryan, it's there, and we, but what we need to do is really embrace the opportunity. We need to get it right at every level.

0:20:29.4 RH: But part of it starts with understanding your town and how you serve your town. And yes, that's journalism of the capital of J, but it's not clumsy journalism. It's understanding the issues. It is driving the daily conversation. It is partnering with folks. I wish I could do this all alone. Tragically, today, you have to partner with folks. You have to partner with organizations of all sizes and shapes. And there's always a little hesitancy with that. Partnerships aren't easy. I, you know, my idea of splitting revenue is gonna be different than yours. My idea of what perfect content alignment is, is different than yours. How do we come together in this? We don't have an option, we have to work together with others. But the potential of public television stations hold in every city in the country, to me, is absolutely enormous. And we just need to embrace it. That's the fun part.

0:21:22.8 MB: And it's all back to, I mean, all I gotta say, that sounds like the best blocking and tackling, not just for public television journalism, for any local news entity to follow. The energy out of Rich Homberg is almost, it's definitely hopefully something that we're all going to start to absorb. But it's a great story, and I know you'll keep this up to date during the growth and expansion. Rich Homberg, president and CEO of Detroit, PBS. Correct?

0:21:48.3 RH: There you go. Yes, sir. Thank you, Mike. Great to talk to you.

0:21:49.6 MB: There you go. Thanks for your radical time.

[music]



