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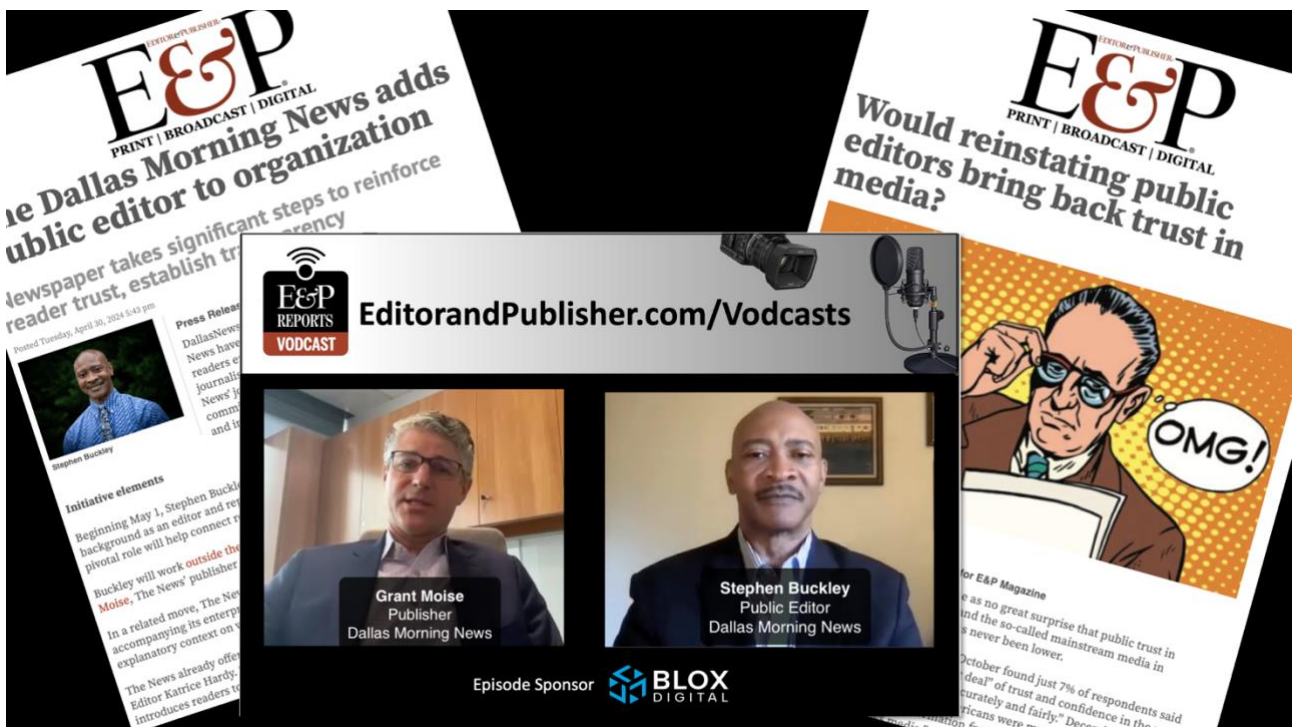
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Audio Transcript

Episode 238 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder

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[Unpacking Dallas Morning News' decision to reinstate a public editor](#)

E&P explores Dallas Morning News Publisher Grant Moise's decision to hire news media veteran Stephen Buckley as their new public editor despite industry trends of cost-cutting that have eliminated that news media position throughout the US.



0:00:03.9 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.

0:00:19.1 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher E&P magazine. As always, if you're listening to us on a podcast platform, we urge you to follow us watching on the E&P YouTube channel. Hit the subscribe button below, smash the bell to the right, you'll get an update each and every time. We upload this weekly vodcast series that is dedicated to the news publishing industry we call E&P Reports. We're taking you now to the Metroplex. Grant, do you still call it the Metroplex? I mean it's... I remember...

0:00:48.5 Grant Moise: Yeah, some call it the Metroplex, some call it North Texas. You know, it's hard to kind of stay up with what our new nomenclature is.

0:00:55.3 MB: All I remember about Dallas is there's too many cars not enough road. That's just every time I go there. Grant Moise, you are not an alien to our audience. Many know who you are. CEO Dallas News Corporation publisher of the Dallas Morning News. I did not know this, Grant, I stalked you. I said, okay, you started as an account executive at KCNC Denver, is that right?

0:01:19.8 GM: At Viacom, CBS, you know Denver? Yeah. Yeah.

0:01:25.7 MB: At the same time you were there. Did you know I was Morning man and program director at KEXO Grand Junction?

0:01:31.2 GM: Oh, my gosh, no. Two of us in Colorado trying to get television [0:01:35.4] _____.

0:01:35.5 MB: Yeah. At the same time, a long time ago.

0:01:36.3 GM: That's great.

0:01:37.3 MB: And I started as a DJ and then in my career. Obviously you... Dallas Morning News in 2008. You spent years in the organization, when it was used to be called Belo. What I'd love about your pedigree, sir, is you're like me, you're a nerd, right? The digital side appealed to you in the dark ages of... We were all trying to figure it out. Is that correct?

0:02:00.4 GM: Exactly. Yeah. Absolutely.

0:02:02.7 MB: Yeah. I mean, I was attracted to it, I was carrying around a Toshiba laptop as president of the main broadcasters, closing deals for a radio group, and everybody was going, "What is that thing?" Little floppy drives inside. Oh, we could go on, but let me now, Stephen Buckley, you have a very dull, I'm kidding, background. I mean, amazing, sir, Washington Post, a reporter in '89. Then this is what I find fascinating, Stephen, Africa Bureau Chief, and then Brazil Bureau Chief. Is that correct, sir?



0:02:35.9 Stephen Buckley: That is correct.

0:02:37.5 MB: How many languages do you speak?

0:02:39.9 SB: Well, I speak obviously English pretty well, but, I did have to learn Portuguese. When I moved to Brazil. I've lost it now. I haven't used Portuguese in many, many years.

0:03:00.0 MB: You went to my stomping grounds. I lived in the Tampa Bay area for 25 years. You were at Poynter, what I call during the Howard Finberg years. I don't know if you knew Howard.

0:03:08.6 SB: Oh, of course. Oh, yeah, I knew Howard.

0:03:10.3 MB: I worked with him on many projects back then. I just saw him on an airplane and he's doing great. Then Nairobi, Kenya, you taught at a university there and then three years at Duke, at the Eugene C. Patterson Professor of Practice of Public Policy Studies. Somehow you got discovered by Grant here to become the public editor, the Dallas Morning News. This is interesting. I want to learn, Grant, how you found Stephen, what Stephen's mission will be at the Dallas Morning News and from both of you. Why resurrecting, I guess I can use that term, public editors is important to our industry. But with that being said, I'm going to ask our audience to hang in there, 'cause we'll get to all that on the backside of this message.

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0:04:57.0 MB: Okay, Grant, question number one, why a public editor at Dallas Morning News? I mean, you must be cost-cutting like everybody else, looking at every penny, trying to squeeze every dollar out of the operation. Why bring back a position that most news publishers have eliminated?

0:05:12.2 GM: It's interesting, Mike. You know, a lot of people have said, "Oh, well, we would bring back a public editor if we could afford it." We looked at the data, I mean, 32% of people in Gallup polls trusting the media these days, which means two thirds don't really have no trust. We looked at data points, we looked at our own internal reasons why subscribers were leaving us, and we just decided we couldn't afford not to make a bold move like this. So we said, "Look, some papers are going to say they can't afford it." We said, "We can't afford not to do this."

0:05:52.2 MB: Why, Stephen, I mean, you got amazing background, sir, but not this... Stephen is not local to your market. He was teaching at Duke. Was this a cattle call and Stephen applied" I mean, can I get a history, what, why did you need from Stephen Buckley? Go ahead.

0:06:07.5 GM: Well, so sometimes you also have to say, as we know, this is a people business, relationship business. So I trust my people. Amy Hollyfield, my managing editor had worked with Stephen in Florida. They had a background together. That's what kind of started our conversation together. And then when you spend, I don't know, Stephen in the past seven, eight months talking to each other, getting to know each other, the one thing Mike I knew was if we wanted to make a bold move like this, I had to really know and understand and respect the public editor, who was going to become the public editor. And the point you made about Stephen not being local, I felt that it was far more important for us to have an amazing pedigree of journalism than it was to have knowledge of the local neighborhoods of North Texas. I mean, to me, I just said, if we're going to prioritize what's most important, it was just knowing journalism, arguably better than 95%, 99% of this country. I'd put Stephen in that bucket.

0:07:17.3 MB: Stephen, I read Margaret Sullivan's book last year. I don't know if you're familiar with it, where she discusses...

0:07:23.5 SB: Newsroom Confidential.

0:07:24.9 MB: Yeah. And she just... She tells a wonderful story about her journey as a public editor and more importantly, maybe I'm paraphrasing this wrong, how much she was hated. Stephen, not... Remember, you're... Correct me if I'm wrong, let me get this straight. You report directly to Grant, right? That's how a true public editor should be on the hierarchy. Am I correct, Stephen? You're not reporting to the editor in chief? You report to the publisher.

0:07:49.2 SB: That's correct. That's that is correct, yes.

0:07:52.5 MB: So you are like the watchdog... An internal... You're like that. Whenever I watch a show about police forces, there's always that internal investigator everybody hates. I mean, is that how you got up... Sorry if I'm painting a weird picture here, but is that how are you being received? Are you hated or will you be hated? Or how do... This is a new role for you? Let me...

0:08:11.4 SB: It is, it is a new role for me, Mike. And I would say, let me use two metaphors. One is that really I'm a bridge between our audience and the newsroom. And so as I get feedback from readers about our work, I will be passing that on and investigating, inquiring, with the newsroom. I'll be asking questions about their coverage of stories and issues. And then I'll report back to the public. Sometimes I'm going to go back to the public and I'm going to say, "Dear public, your concerns are warranted and we need to do better". Sometimes I'm going to go back to the public and say, "You know what? I've looked into this. I've read the stories. I've talked to the editors and the reporters and others in the newsroom. And, dear public, I don't think your concerns are warranted this time, but we'll keep our eye on this issue." So independence is a really important part of this job and almost by definition, that means that it's going to be lonely sometimes, and that's okay.

0:09:23.8 MB: Are you putting together a list of your brethren public editors? I mean, it's so hard to find them now. I think of Kelly McBride at NPR. I mean, are you starting to put together kind of a group where you can share and consult each other and chat. So you have some kind of, I don't know, a spiritual group to turn to every now and then?



0:09:46.3 SB: Well, I'm days into this new role, so I haven't started doing that. And Kelly is the only other person I know of who's a public editor. I actually don't know of any other newspaper public editors.

0:10:00.2 MB: I don't know either.

0:10:02.9 SB: Now actually there is an International Ombudsman group. I'm not sure if that's what they still call themselves, but apparently that group is actually quite robust. So at some point, perhaps I'll become a part of that group.

0:10:17.4 MB: Grant, one of the challenges we report on here at E&P a lot is our industry's lack of being able to define itself well over the centuries to its audience. We were, so... I'm, again, this is one man's opinion, but it's my show and I can do whatever the hell I want. I always describe this industry as one that got fat and lazy and did not do a good job defining its role in each individual community. Because we were making so much money and the money was kinda over the trends, and especially demand-driven income on classified and stuff. Now it's essential for us to educate our audiences on who we are and what we do within each individual community we serve. Now you've got to define to your audience what a public editor is, 'cause it hasn't existed in so long. Is that a mission? You've got PR people working on this? Are you having meetings now? So Dallas Morning News can tell your audience whys and hows and why this is important to them.

0:11:14.2 GM: It's funny you say that, Mike, 'cause as soon as we launched last week, we really launched internally with Stephen here with the newsroom, and I put out my column last week. We said, "Oh, wait, now we're in teaching mode. This is marketing mode of..." But to your point, your first point, Mike, is media literacy, journalism, understanding what journalism is and what it is not in a day and age of social media, is very different. And so what we're really talking about quite a bit internally is, "How do we market this to our digital audience, versus how do we market it to our print audience?" Because the print audience gets it, they get it, they're ready to jump on board with it. Stephen and I were just talking yesterday, the first column in print garnered a few dozen questions, whereas the digital column that I published, I think we saw less than a handful. So we're going to have a lot more teaching to do on the digital side than we are on the print side, but that's okay. I think it reinforces that we're doing the right thing, because as we know, that print reader will move on. And the digital reader will be here for as long as the rest of my career, I know. So I don't know, it's really an interesting challenge.

0:12:38.5 SB: Sure.

0:12:38.8 MB: Stephen, as you learn more and more about the Dallas Metroplex or whatever the heck they're calling the ecosystem there, and their goals and their needs, as you're also educating youth at the university and working towards their brand and building it. Where's your head at with local media today? I mean, you're teaching it. You've lived it, you've worked internationally. When you're educating a student on the local media ecosystem, what is it lacking in your opinion? You're going to have this power now to be able to shape one of the most important local news publishing brands in the United States for the next generation. Where's your head at already? Or do you have any predisposed ideas on where we should be heading and where we're lacking and how we're covering our communities?

0:13:30.9 SB: Well, I think, first of all, there are a couple of challenges. One is, a business challenge, and I'm not going to speak to that, that's Grant's bailiwick. But I actually think that local news has some tremendous opportunities. Audiences are so distrustful of the national media that that leaves an opening for us in the local sphere. And so we can be the folks who report news with the most authority, the most fairness, the most intimacy, for lack of a better word, and all of that's about trust. People, based on the emails that we've received in these first couple of days, people really want to trust the Dallas Morning News, and they are close readers. They care deeply and they care deeply about the Dallas Morning News, because they care deeply about their communities. And so that, that's the opportunity for us. The opportunity for us is to say, "Hey, we are an honest broker in this community. When we write something, when we report something, you can believe that we have done it thoroughly, fairly, and authoritatively." That's a great opportunity and my role hopefully will help us take advantage of that.

0:15:02.4 MB: Grant, are you sharing research with Stephen? I mean, I'm sure you do lots of audience studies and you... Focus group and all the things you need to know to make sure you're in the right place. Is that something that Stephen will have access to?

0:15:14.4 GM: Stephen will have access to whatever he wants. I mean, I think that's what's kind of fun about this is we're just getting launched, so obviously we're getting our protocols down and things of that manner. But look, Stephen, as he's kind of... He and I have discussed from the beginning, his job is to go report, investigate, use whatever term you want, what the public is curious to know. And so to your question, Mike, if there's data of reader research and things like that, that could be helpful for him to understand why we're making the decisions we are, then we need to make that available to him, so that he can contextualize and understand why we're making the decisions. And as he said before, he's going to agree with us at times. He's going to disagree with us at times. But you know what's fine with me about that is the public agrees with us at times and they disagree. And I think the fact that we're able to show a little humility here in a day and age where not a lot of media companies are showing humility, that's really at the heart of our motives here. And, I just think if the data can help him understand decisions, we're happy to provide it.

0:16:23.1 MB: Good for you. I mean, again, as the publisher of E&P Magazine, good for you guys. 'Cause I remember a mentor of mine, when I took my first management position in the '80s, said first rate people hire first rate people, second rate people hire third rate people. What he was trying to say is, "You want to have people around you that push you, change you and not be scared. You don't want to live in an ecosystem of 'yes men'." And you're doing that in your environment. And Grant, you have no idea where this is going to take you. And it sounds like you're just going to enjoy the journey. Am I right?

0:16:58.7 GM: Like I said, I think, we'll blaze the new trail. We'll enjoy it. We'll learn from it. And, as I told Stephen, I said, "Look, we'll take our bumps, we'll take our bruises, we'll have support at times, but as long as we can be a better journalism organization at the end of it, then look... Then count me in." I'm looking forward to it. It'll be great.

0:17:22.5 MB: In a way, I've almost... I wanted to get this interview in quick, because it's such breaking news, but I also think we're going to have to revisit gentlemen, if that's okay, maybe a few



months in and then start looking at Stephen's work. So with your permission, can we make this an ongoing journey together?

0:17:39.2 SB: We'd love to.

0:17:40.1 GM: Of course.

0:17:41.5 MB: Okay. This is going to be great. Grant Moise, congratulations on groundbreaking moves that no one's doing right now for a myriad, mostly I would say maybe I don't want to paint with a broad brush, financial reasons. When you're looking to cut some corners, you need public editor. I don't know if we can afford that. You're making the move. Congratulations. Stephen, welcome to the fray. This is going to be fun to see...

0:18:06.8 SB: Thank you.

0:18:07.2 MB: What you do and what you see and how you start writing the new playbook. Between both of you, I think there's more news to come. And thank you both for your valuable time.

0:18:15.9 GM: Thank you, Mike.

0:18:17.8 SB: Thanks.