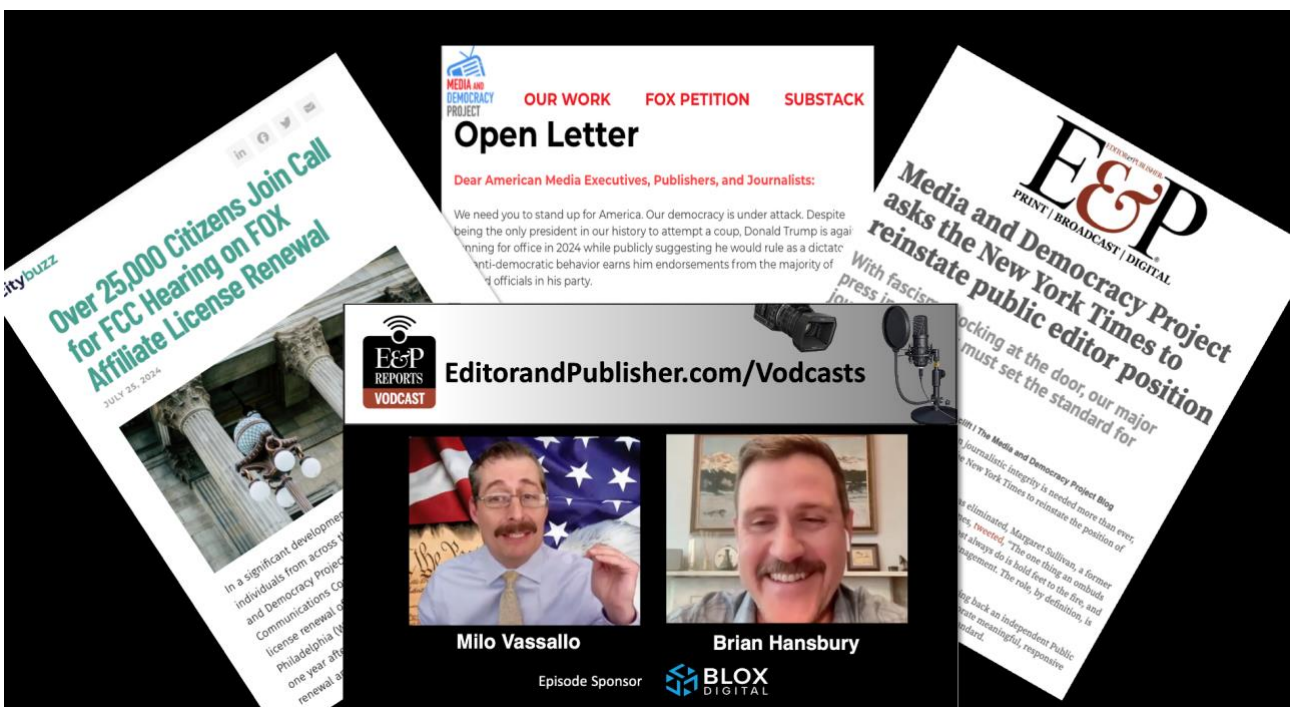


Audio Transcript

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with *Mike Blinder*
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[MAD's fight against Fox: Founders discuss their FCC push and this week's "Open Letter to the Media"](#)

In an era where the lines between truth and disinformation are increasingly blurred, the [Media and Democracy Project \(MAD\)](#) has emerged as a non-partisan, all-volunteer organization that claims to be dedicated to ensuring the integrity of public information. Founded by individuals who believe that a healthy democracy relies on accurate and reliable journalism, MAD is actively working to hold media outlets accountable, combat disinformation, and support local journalism. In this episode we chat with Milo Vassallo, the executive director, and Brian Hansbury, one of the original founders as they share insights into their mission and current initiatives.



0:00:04.5 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.

0:00:20.8 Mike Blinder: And greetings once again, Mike Blinder, publisher of E&P Magazine. As always, we start off boring the audience with housekeeping by urging those that listen on podcast platforms to please, please follow this program, those that choose to watch on our YouTube channel. Hit that subscribe button below, smash the bell, or ring it to the right. You'll get an update each and every time. We upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series we dedicate to news publishing, we call E&P Reports. I have two gentlemen on the program that I'm gonna learn a bit about along with you today. I have Milo Vassallo. Correct, sir? Am I getting the name properly?

0:00:58.9 Milo Vassallo: Very close. I prefer Milo. It works for me, though. Thank you.

0:01:01.9 MB: Milo Vassallo, you are, your official title for being on the program is Executive Director and co-founder of the Media and Democracy Project. And it's an honor to have you on the show. Your background is interesting, sir, because we always check out who we're bringing on, either on LinkedIn or god forbid, ChatGPT, but all I've learned about you so far is you're an allergist immunologist, you practice in Brooklyn. You can correct me in a second. You're a baseball lover and you're now dedicated to helping the news media industry kind of watchdog itself. Do I have that correct, sir?

0:01:42.5 MV: The foundational facts are definitely correct. Thank you for that intro. So, yes, I am a citizen. I have a daytime job. I am also very interested in how my patients, our communities, and our society is informed. Where do people learn about what vaccines do? What happens when there's a pandemic? All of that is brought to Americans consciousness and understanding by media. And we've been very interested in the role that media plays in democracy. And that's where I'm pouring some of my passions now.

0:02:16.6 MB: There you go, Brian Hansbury. Brian, the only thing I've learned about you, and you're gonna have to fill in some gaps is 'cause I actually listened to a podcast you were on recently. You're an actor. That's your day job, sir. Do I have that correct?

0:02:31.2 Brian Hansbury: Yes.

0:02:31.4 MB: But you're also an advocate. You work hand in hand with Milo. Both of you are co-founders of MAD, which stands for Media and Democracy Project.

0:02:39.7 BH: What I like to say about, Media and Democracy and where it all started is, watching news media, make these false equivalencies between, I grew up in the Tri-state area. Everyone I know knew that, Donald Trump was, not on the level, a conman in 2016. And to watch, how media, continued to normalize, disqualifying behavior all the way through till today. We all met in the democracy protection space, ahead of 2020. There were groups who were concerned about Donald Trump not respecting the results of the election and announcing that, and even more concerned that it didn't seem to be that big of a deal to our news media. And we got together and started having informal meetings and then eventually, formed this thing called Media and Democracy Project.



0:03:40.2 MB: But together, you two guys now are getting a lot of traction. We at E&P picked up a story you did when you asked the New York Times to reinstate a community editor, correct? I mean, a citizen editor. There's different names for it, for someone who's watching out for their content. We posted that on the show. And since then, we've now discovered you even more because, not only are we now tracking that you guys are working and I guess doing very well in Washington DC lobbying the FCC to take away a license for a Fox affiliate in Philadelphia. If I could circle back to Milo, is that correct? You're actually, you've got some really strong people with you. And this is still ongoing. Am I correct? This has not been settled.

0:04:32.7 MV: Absolutely. If I could answer that question specifically, that's our project specifically at the FCC, where we've asked the FCC to hold a hearing, whether Fox News and the Murdochs, based on election lies that were spread through the American electorate, as was revealed in the Dominion lawsuit, should disqualify the Murdochs and Fox from getting a re-licensure of a local TV station affiliate. That effort's been joined by a bipartisan coalition, a former Republican FCC Chairman, another FCC Commissioner, three former Fox executives, and Bill Crystal as well, who we all know. So that group has actually come out and supported the FCC holding a hearing to realizing that specifically it has never been before. You may know more than, you've probably familiar that a publisher knowingly broadcast lies. The Dominion Discovery is central to that case, and that's what's going on in our FCC case.

0:05:34.7 MB: We're gonna unpack that. We're gonna talk about your pro-democracy election coverage guidelines that you released this week. We're gonna do that in just a few moments. Let's stick around.

0:05:44.6 Announcer: 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.

0:06:50.8 MB: Okay, so let's stay with the Fox FCC issue, gentlemen. This is interesting. When confronted with the lawsuit, Fox News, which is not broadcast across the spectrum, that's leased by the FCC, Fox News, a cable, whatever you wanna call it. Now, streaming channel claimed it wasn't news, it was simply entertainment. [laughter] That's how they tried to get around the defamation suit. Finally, they settled for close to a trillion dollars. Am I right, sir?

0:07:19.8 MV: A billion dollars.

0:07:21.8 BH: Three quarters.

0:07:22.1 MB: Three quarters of a billion. And I have to ask a question. Do you have proof that the



local broadcast affiliate retransmitted those lies? 'Cause they were lies. I mean, it turns out, Dominion, that's already been settled.

0:07:38.3 MV: The main substance at this point of the effort is that there are character qualifications to be granted a license, the FCC character qualification. So it's not only the issue of content being broadcast, but the larger question of does the Fox News Corporation and the Murdoch representatives, have they violated the FCC's own character qualification law rules?

0:08:15.4 BH: And I will chime in...

0:08:16.9 MB: So essentially is, does Rupert Murdoch deserve spectrum? 'Cause this is an O&O affiliate, correct? It's owned by Fox, owned and operated by the network. So that is your case. Because he broadcast lies across this cable channel. The local affiliate's license should be taken away. Do I have that right?

0:08:34.0 MV: That there should be a hearing. That's the first step. There needs to be an adjudicated with evidence presented of this issue of character qualification. And that's what everyone has lined up for.

0:08:49.1 MB: Interesting.

0:08:49.5 BH: And just to further clarify, Mike. So the FCC has these rules in place and they've applied them before and they refer to non-broadcast misconduct. And so, I think because it was something that was delivered over a television to people, it can be a little confusing, but non-broadcast misconduct has been applied by the FCC in the past, whether it's a company fudging the numbers or lying to the FCC, the FCC has taken away broadcast licenses for that. They took away broadcast licenses from RKO, the storied historical broadcaster because of some misconduct that they did, outside of the broadcast realm, in the 1980s. So what we're asking the FCC specifically to do is apply the rules about non-broadcast misconduct, in this case, lying to the American public about elections, which we think is completely reprehensible, and applying those same standards to Fox and the Murdochs, and not allowing them to renew their license.

0:09:58.2 MB: So you're a complete independent organization, how do you get funded? Are you getting donations from private donors? What is the funding of MAD?

0:10:10.0 MV: This is a very small, but effective organization. It's actually all small donors. We have no oligarchs funding us. We have incorporated as a 501 [c] [4], we've crowd-funded our funds and but we're always looking for donations. For those who are interested, they can go to our website, [0:10:31.0] ____.

0:10:33.0 MB: Alright, so now you issued an open letter to media, and that's why I have you on the program today. And the open letter is called the Pro-Democracy 2024 Election Coverage Guidelines. You as an independent organization is sending a letter to us saying you've got to keep your eye on... I know I'm paraphrasing. I'm gonna open the... Give you guys a chance to state... You're telling us to keep our eye on the ball when it comes to election coverage in this very critical 89 days left, or 88 or 87. Do I have that right? And what is this letter all about? Either gentlemen,

go ahead, sir.

0:11:12.2 BH: Sure. I'm happy to take this one. What this letter is all about is, Americans being informed as they head to the voting booth. And what we've seen for years now is a failure to, with the appropriate prominence and frequency address something unprecedented in American history, which is just the abject lying about elections, about their outcomes, and refusal to accept those results. And the news industry, maybe some of your listeners are, often want to say that, they have covered that enough. But we and seemingly, thousands upon thousands of Americans, do not believe that that's the case. So we are asking the news industry to not turn this, it's not a blind eye. They do do coverage about these things, but when election lies have been normalized to the point where Donald Trump is seen and often portrayed by news organizations as the viable candidate after he is lied for years about elections and attempted a coup, we just think that there is a dire need for a newsroom reset in these last three or four months before this election, so that people understand the threats to democracy that they face, the millions of Americans will be harmed and rights will be taken away by Project 2025.

0:12:56.3 BH: We're awash in disinformation and, often that disinformation is conveyed via more mainstream outlets. And we're also tired and so are so many Americans of this treating elections as if they're not as important as they are, as if they do not have maximum impact on people's lives, even life and death in many cases, as we're seeing, especially with the issue of bodily autonomy. So we are, yes, addressing the news industry, you guys, and asking for better. Asking them to uplift and defend democracy.

0:13:36.9 MB: For our listeners, and I'm, again, I'm just gonna do the bullets that I pulled out of your letter that was just released, Prioritize substantive coverage of the issues that matter to voters' lives, make headlines accurate and informative, click bait. That's a big de... [laughter] You listen to some of our shows on this, it's massive. Stop making predictions and pushing polls at the expense of coverage. Again, a big issue, media creates polls. So we have stories to report on. You see, I hear you, I hear your frustration, celebrate and uplift election workers, voters in the election process. Very important. I can't debate that. Don't set aside moral judgment when covering obvious lies and bigotry. That's your challenge. What is truth? What is journalism? And this unfettered press that we have hold politicians to account for their position statements and behavior. Basically what you're saying to me, and this is just one man's opinion, we all gotta go back and watch Newsroom from Aaron Sorkin again. You're telling us all to go back to the days when news was less focused on just making money and more focused on truth and journalism. Do I have that right?

0:14:52.4 BH: Sure, absolutely. And news has always been making money and that's always been a part of it. Absolutely. But I think it's an appeal to morality. It's an appeal to recognizing that sometimes it's more important to put the public before profit. You said the lies and bigotry one. We also have a guideline that talks about avoiding using euphemism. Americans, especially American voters, deserve plain speaking. And when there are obvious racist remarks, racist behavior done by a candidate for president, it doesn't serve anybody to use euphemisms like racially tinge or frames that put the onus on the person who has been, smeared, to defend themselves or to somehow correct the problem of that person's racism.

0:15:51.2 BH: Really there is room for morality in journalism. And when you're talking about the

existence of candidates in elections up and down the ballot in states all across the country who don't respect democracy, something that I think we all agree is important, vital, and is the bedrock of our nation. We have to appeal to morality. We have to expect that instead of just maintaining access, allowing lies to slip through for those reasons of access, that instead we call these things out, we describe for Americans and contextualize when false things are being said, and we make it important and we value truth and we value democracy in our country. And so I think it's important in this industry that people start to take a step back and realize that maybe they're caught up in the business of it all and not really focusing on the dire situation that we're in.

0:17:05.2 MB: If this program airs, I'm gonna get a lot of heat. You know that because some will say you're nothing more than pissed off people that don't like what you're hearing from the right. I'm just putting that out there. And there is just as many pissed off people watching Morning Joe that get angry, that throw stuff at their TV saying, They're not telling the whole story. Who are you? I'm gonna give you your final chance to be this legitimate voice. But in a way, when I hear Brian, I feel like we are mainstream media and our readership is forming a union.

[laughter]

0:17:41.3 MB: And again, that's all me, not you, but Milo, who the hell are you and why should we give you this voice? Or why is that voice existing? Go ahead, sir.

0:17:50.9 MV: Great, thank you. So I think it's clear that we all share the same goal. We are not considering this an adversarial process. We're reflecting and mirroring as consumers, but also fellow citizens that we think editors and publishers have a duty to emphasize democracy at a time when democracy itself is literally at stake. We outline with our guidelines 18 specific measures that we did not come from spontaneously on a zoom. We find inspiration in Jay Rosen, Dan Frumkin, Margaret Sullivan, Nicole Hannah Jones, and of course Eric Boer. Those philosophies of that journalism can do better is something that we share with thousands of our members. And we engage people in ways they can advocate for improvement. I would emphasize that we're very interested in mobilizing solutions to support the interstate. There need to be legislative solutions. I'd love to come back and if there's an opportunity to talk about what your thoughts are, the local Journalism Sustainability Act, the JCPA, Bob Chesney's local journalism initiative, moonshot which is unfettered federal dollars in every zip code, so or congressional district. So we consider ourselves being able to mobilize people to help solve the journalism crisis and in support of it.

0:19:17.5 MB: They're called the Media and Democracy Project, and they're definitely getting a lot of air and a lot of attention right now. And two of their founders have joined us this morning. Milo Vassallo, I got Milo, correct? Correct, sir.

0:19:31.2 MV: Perfect.

0:19:33.2 MB: And Brian Hansbury, gentlemen, thank you for your valuable time. And yes, you'll be back on the program, I assure you.