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Episode 252 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder

Publication date: Monday September 16, 2024



[Redefining value: Neil Brown breaks down Poynter’s vision for journalism’s future](#)

In a media environment that is often dominated by narratives of decline, layoffs, and shrinking local news outlets, **The Poynter Institute’s** newly released report offers a refreshing perspective. Titled “[OnPoynt — Values Rising: Trends and Traction in Journalism and the News Industry](#),” the study showcases optimism and innovation in journalism despite well-known challenges. In this recent interview, **Neil Brown**, President of Poynter, shared insights on the report and how local journalism is evolving in ways that provide significant value to communities. The conversation highlighted the vitality of smaller, local news startups, alternative forms of content distribution, and the promise of AI.



0:00:03.8 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 Winter, publisher of E&P Magazine. As always, we kick off the program boring the heck out of you with housekeeping. If you're listening on a podcast platform you prefer, love literature, please follow us watching on YouTube. Hit that subscribe button below. Ring the bell to the right. You get an update each and every time we upload this weekly vodcast series we call E&P Reports that's dedicated to news publishing. I have a good friend who I've known for a while, Neil Brown. Neil, welcome to the program.

0:00:49.7 Neil Brown: Mike, good to be here.

0:00:51.8 MB: We have a new tradition on the show since every other story we report on now has to do with AI. So rather than me go through the litany of stuff that we would find on your LinkedIn profile or on the who is what is page on Poynter, we go to ChatGPT for famous folks like you. Ask ChatGPT who you are, then I read it to you and you grade it on a scale of A to F. Are you ready, sir?

0:01:16.4 NB: Yeah, I'm just I'm not sure I'd show up, but sure.

0:01:19.1 MB: Oh, you're there. Here we go. Here's what it/they/him heard whatever said. Neil Brown is president of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, an organization dedicated to journalism, education, ethics and leadership. He has held this position since 2017, bringing with him over two decades of experience in journalism, most notably as the editor and vice president of the Tampa Bay Times. Under his leadership, the Times won multiple Pulitzer Prizes, showcasing his dedication to high quality journalism. You have been a significant advocate for press freedom, journalistic ethics and the use of innovation and technology in the media industry. At Poynter, he focuses on initiatives that help journalists adapt to modern challenges. His leadership at Poynter extends beyond the US, aiming to strengthen democracy and journalism worldwide. And what I love is they added at the end, Neil, because there's a lot of issues now about them scraping our content and we got people for more information about Neil Brown. You can explore at Poynters website. See there, I give you a little that's new. I've never seen that before. So how did it do? Is that you or is that?

0:02:16.8 NB: Yeah, that's the official rundown. No doubt about it. It's, yeah. I mean, as you find when you do this exercise it's sort of strikingly sufficient. Now, by the way, I want to say strikingly sufficient is not the slogan you totally want for your new initiative.

0:02:38.4 MB: Oh yeah. I knew you'd mention it. Surprisingly worked. I mean, we're going to discuss AI, too, because...

0:02:46.2 NB: I didn't mess up too badly. How's that for...

0:02:48.5 MB: Yeah, you got it. The expectation. The bar is pretty low. We're going to discuss AI



because you, first of all, I loved it. You have a new report out called On Poynt. O-N P-O-Y-N-T, notice the play on how Poynter is spelled. Values rising, trends and traction in journalism in the news industry. I like alliteration. It's a great title. But here's what's happening for the it's positive. It's Pollyanna. And I get accused of that all the time, Neil, because I'm always looking at positive stuff and promoting it. Maybe you're like me. I want to ask you a question before we're going to unpack this thing. I believe in our mission, which is to help journalism become sustainable because it has to. In our Madisonian democracy without a free, unfettered press, we lose the democracy. Do you agree?

0:03:41.1 NB: Well, completely. You know, so here's where we were going with the report. And it goes directly to your question. You'll see in the report, both in the title and throughout the word value, values. And I bring that up because you've used a great global question about the value of journalism and its essential component in our democracy. And what we... We did this report in part because we are acknowledging there's a bit of a challenge and a bump to get over, which is that the language has actually become so lofty and so global and a bit maybe abstract about the value of journalism to democracy, that when I'm out and about and I talk to consumers of news, citizens, local residents, and I say journalism is vital to democracy, they kind of look at me with a blank face. And it makes me think that it's the work itself has gotten a little bit removed from the goal it's achieving. And people don't entirely know the value of journalism anymore. And democracy alone is too abstract. So we want to basically do a report that sort of say, where's the value? Where's it working? And it adds up to that.

0:05:04.2 MB: I have a theory on why that occurred, because I came from other industries, I entered our industry obliquely from radio and TV. And I was a fundraiser for public television when I was a disc jockey, I was like the number one New England fundraiser put me on the shows when Peter, Paul and Mary were on. Because we did a lousy job for over a century of telling people who we were, we were so fat and lazy making so much money, that we never really explained to our audiences our value to the community. We were just a business and they didn't understand. Public television has always done a wonderful job of creating that. You see what I'm saying of what we provide. So it's time, we'll get into it. Tell you what, we're going to take a pause so we can make some money here at E&P. And we're going to unpack on point, this report on the backside of this message.

0:05:50.0 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 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 TownNews, now reimagined to help meet the news publishing challenges of tomorrow and beyond. Learn more at bloxdigital.com.

0:06:56.5 MB: Neil, I love this thing. I mean, I'm all about being positive now. I think rather than just doom and gloom, everything we read, oh, there's news deserts, we're losing newspapers a thousand a day. There are good stories out there. There's not one secret sauce. Everybody, I'm sure

you get asked the same question, what's the one model? It's different things that we're seeing. But let me ask you the first question. Your report suggests a more optimistic view. Can you elaborate on how smaller initiatives, news organizations are succeeding in areas where larger traditional outlets are struggling, like the big dailies and the big brands?

0:07:34.9 NB: Sure. So first, I'm going to roll back a bit where you used the word Pollyanna. I don't think we're being Pollyanna at all. A little counterintuitive? Sure. A little bit more optimistic? Absolutely. And the reason I take on the word Pollyanna is we are acknowledging in this report the challenges and the struggles. But as you said, as a business, as an industry, we have taken for granted that people know why we do what we do and what its value is. And so what we try to say here in a more optimistic way isn't that it's not still tough out there, but that that is an incomplete, inexact story. There are more and more things popping up, cropping up, serving local audiences, then defining the business the same way we've defined it for the last 10 or 15 or 20 years. We've talked about in the local space, there are difficult headwinds. You asked about the challenges to the economic models. We use this phrase difficult headwinds, particularly for metropolitan news organizations, so-called traditional legacy organizations. I don't deny that. The report doesn't deny that. But it does say there's more to the story than that.

0:08:47.2 NB: And frankly, instead of lamenting the headwinds and making a drumbeat of negative coverage that only looks at the troubles, you're not paying attention and seeing there are some new and interesting forms of journalism that are popping up that are finding marketplace value, there I used the word again, value, that people are starting to pay for. And that the story around journalism is more than just the latest round of layoffs or knocks to the old form. I'll add this, Mike, and I'll give you some small examples. I also think that things like audiences don't like facts, audiences don't value local news anymore, audiences are turning out, are indirectly blaming the audience, scolding the audience at times even, when in fact, some of it is our products, our offerings have not adapted or kept up with the promise that they were supposed to offer, which was relevance. So all I'm saying with the report, or Poynter is saying with the report is not to look away at what's challenged, but to say that is an incomplete story, even though it becomes a drumbeat, and I think a tired one.

0:10:04.7 MB: I agree with you. One of our challenges has always been that we tell people the news they need to know in the format we determine, as opposed to acknowledging the desires of our audience and what, I'll use your word, what values they crave, and then swinging around. I had that discussion with Marty Barron on this very program a couple of months ago, about he was in one place where his team at The Post was in a different place, and he discussed why...

0:10:34.2 NB: Well, I think that the difference, that gap Marty made is really important. We have determined what they need without really having enough connection to them for them to allow us some feedback on what they actually need, and how they need it, when they need it, what form they need it. It's sort of, we still have taken something of an eat-your-peas approach. It's good, we care, and that doesn't, sort of, doesn't fly as consistently anymore. So, what you see is, listen, there's still some, there's plenty of tremendous work done by big and medium-sized organizations, particularly on a project level, but on a day-to-day level, some of the new digital startups in urban areas, in public media you mentioned, they are providing more services, more service-oriented work, more relevance. We did a roundtable on this very report with Mitra Kalita, who runs URL Media, and she

started a newsletter called The Epicenter in New York City, in part because she was an executive with CNN at the time, loves news, head of digital for CNN, and she could not find out information about vaccines in her New York community.

0:11:45.9 NB: She wound up starting a newsletter that provided all of that sort of information. I'm not saying everybody has to provide everything to everybody, but I am saying that there are opportunities, and it is happening, where much more local, much more, sort of, relevant informational approaches are starting to take root, and so the news ecosystem is much richer than the one we write about.

0:12:11.1 MB: You also mentioned Ken Doctor's operation, Lookout Local. We've had Ken on the program five times. He gets a special jacket, but one of the things I remember, he announced the whole project on this very program. He gave us that, and I yelled at him. I said, why are you doing this outside? Why aren't you just inserting this inside of a legacy property to improve it, to shift it, to modify it? And he did this on his own, and now he's got that Pulitzer, right? You're on the board, I mean, I don't know if he's...

0:12:43.3 NB: I was co-chair of the board last year, and we were really honored to give Lookout Santa Cruz that award, very well deserved, and so, and I've talked to Ken about this, and his team, so what did they do? They stepped in and filled a need, right? The need was people needed real-time information. Maybe there was a day TV would have given it. Maybe the larger news or legacy organization there would have done it, whether it's the cutbacks, things like that. I'm not here to look back. I'm here to look forward. All I know is with a staff of about a handful working 24/7 and reaching out to audience members, including via text messages as well as regular reports, their ally during that mudslide crisis was Lookout Santa Cruz. That is journalism, and that needs to be part of the conversation as well. And I don't know what his answer to you was, but I think why have to implant it in an existing infrastructure of a legacy organization? Audiences, you said at the top of your broadcast, Mike, audiences can get information in several different ways. We don't have to decide it's only one lane and one approach.

0:13:56.5 MB: When we put out our newsletter this morning, one of our exclusive stories we released to the industry today is about a site called Documented in New York City, which targets the immigrant community, but here's the headline we chose, which goes into my next question about getting away from this website format. You talk about that in the report. Here's what you said, using WhatsApp, WeChat, and Nextdoor, how Documented reaches the immigrant community. Is this something that we've got to wake up to that may be just the idea of a webpage? Remember the day we called them portals? Remember that?

0:14:32.0 NB: And the front porch. Don't forget the front porch. There were front porch too, don't you remember?

0:14:38.8 MB: Everybody's going to come to our website first. They're going to start their day there.

0:14:42.8 Announcer: Exactly. I think that's a super example. And I think those three forms of reader connection, audience connection, I'll even say, that Documented is showing that you're

highlighting is a perfect example. By the way, it doesn't mean you can't still do the website. These are false and phony choices, but I think the industry still tries to ram it through an old format. Outlier Media, which is out of Detroit, that is regular journalistic reports, and everybody gets them via text. As we know around the globe and even here, WhatsApp is a means of getting information. We own and run PolitiFact. We're now doing PolitiFact in Spanish as well. Well, our Spanish audience wants our PolitiFact fact checks on WhatsApp. They don't want to go to PolitiFact.com, and that's fine. The idea here is that every organization growing out of relevance and audience, should begin to expand to new and different forms. And collectively, that news ecosystem suddenly doesn't look so terrible if people are getting more information. And we need to tell that story, Mike.

0:15:55.0 MB: I want to get into AI for a second, Neil. You talk about AI as promising in this report, correct? That it has to be embraced. Can you give me a little bit more meat on that bone, sir?

0:16:05.7 NB: Yeah, absolutely. Listen, everybody's talking about it. That's a good thing. Our eyes are wide open. That's a good thing. Again, oversimplification is one of our soft underbellies in our business. And so the reality is it's either good or bad. Job eliminating, the end of the world. News organizations can look back and say that a reticence to embrace technology definitely set back the industry and put us at a little bit of a gap between us and our audiences. I believe in precision. Each example matters. I think there's lots of examples where it does not mean a reduction in the labor force, or it means higher pay because we've moved the labor force to doing work that's more valuable than what it was. Obviously, every newsroom should have an ethics playbook around AIs. This is about your communication with your audience and your honesty with your audience.

0:17:07.0 MB: So here we go. Final question. We have a lot of different shapes, styles, and flavors of publishers now listening to this program. You've got the big guys running multiple markets, but you've got a lot of small market weeklies that are still providing that chicken supper, local happenings, high school sports, and keeping an eye on the school board and the city council. You just cranked out an amazing report, Neil. What overall advice? Give me the Axios bulleted advice. Would you give any publisher right now saying, I'm just having so much trouble keeping the lights on, that this report provides them?

0:17:53.2 NB: All right. A couple of key things. Embrace the value you're offering and recognize it's not just one thing. You mentioned those things like in the community weeklies, the chicken dinner news, the coverage at a micro level. There's also still lots of local advertising in there, and that is of extreme value. Value, again. Embrace new story forms as a way to reach audiences and start to see yourself and your organizations in the aggregate of how you're serving folks, not just the singular lane that you have been serving folks in so many ways. Whether it's get involved with vertical video like Instagram and TikTok and get some younger people who can tell stories in two and three minutes, that counts as your audience. Don't only guide yourselves based on still what may be the spinal cord of your operation and your enterprise, and you should be very proud of it, but go ahead and market all the ways that you are relevant to people in their lives rather than build around only one. Multiple audiences, multiple products, lots of energy. You bring energy to your communities and you should talk and walk that way.

0:19:07.2 MB: Here's my final takeaway that I got. It reminded me of the best advice I ever got, Neil, tell me if I'm off base, but I started as a disc jockey in this industry and eventually became a

radio station manager. I was sent to my first conference, 1986 Loews Anatole Hotel, never saw a glass elevator in my life. And I met my hero, Mike Joseph, who's long since passed, who created a format everybody said was crazy called Top 40. No one's going to listen to the same records over and over, but he had the unmitigated goal to research audiences and find out that, yeah, I could build a format where you play the top records and I will build a huge audience. Became a multimillionaire. I got him in an elevator. I remember it like yesterday. And I said, Mr. Joseph, sir, this was after he had done a speech and it was in the evening. And I said, give me one piece of advice to this young pup that's finally in radio station management, leaned into me, gin-soaked breath.

0:19:58.1 MB: This is true story, Neil. And he said, kid, find out what they want and give it to them. And he left the elevator. You kind of feel, that's, we're back to one-on-one here.

0:20:10.4 NB: Well, a little bit. You know what I would say that he would expand the eyes. The most important word in that was they. Don't think it's just singular anymore. Find out what they want, what they wants and give them a few different products. Give them a few choices and don't think that it's sort of one-size-fits-all. You can serve them in so many different ways. So serve them in so many different ways.

0:20:35.9 MB: Neil Brown, president of the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, good friend, good supporter of E&P, great organization. We know how busy you are and we want to thank you for your valuable time.

0:20:44.8 NB: I really enjoyed the conversation. As always, Mike, this is just fun to talk about. Let's go provide value.