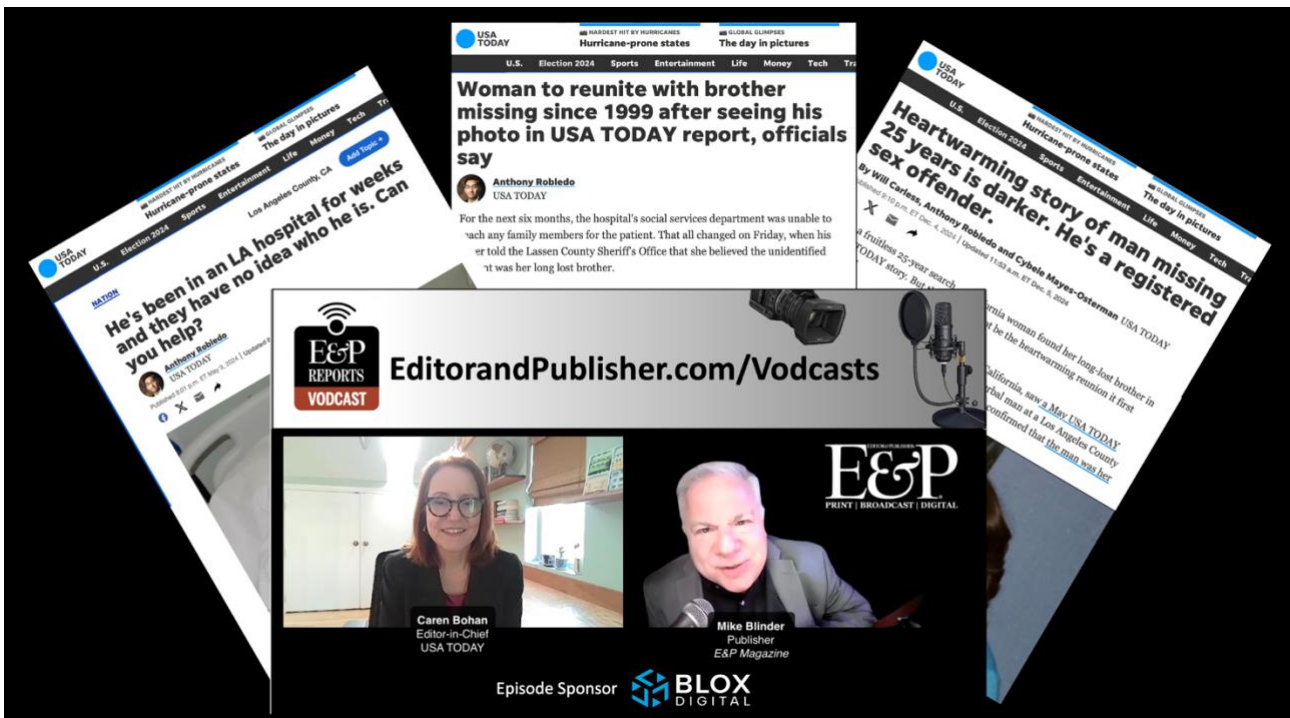


Audio Transcript
Episode 263 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*
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[Public service journalism at Its best: How USA TODAY shined a light on a complex story](#)

By blending investigative rigor with a commitment to public service, [USA TODAY](#) has once again showcased the impact of journalism. Editor-in-Chief Caren Bohan joined *E&P Reports* to discuss a remarkable story that began as a feel-good reunion and evolved into a layered investigation highlighting systemic issues and ethical complexities. Bohan shared insights on how the USA TODAY newsroom navigated the twists and turns of this compelling case while adhering to its mission of accountability journalism



Announcer:

This is E&P Reports, a vodcast from Editor and Publisher Magazine. The authoritative voice of news media since 18/84. Serving newspapers, broadcast, digital, and all forms of news publishing.

Mike Blinder:

We wish you warm greetings from E and P. I'm Mike Blinder, the publisher. Welcome to this episode of E and P Reports. As always, we start off by asking those that are listening to podcast, uh, broadcast of this show to please follow us. Those that choose to watch the video version, please click the subscribe button below.

Mike Blinder:

Either way, you should get an update each and every time we upload a new episode of this weekly vodcast series. Karen Bohan. Hello, and welcome to the program.

Caren Bohan:

Mike, I'm delighted to be here.

Mike Blinder:

We are delighted to have you. Karen, um, we have a new tradition. You say you've listened to the show. Uh, I don't know if you know that every other story we seem to report on at E and P has something to do with AI. So we used to, in the dark ages, go to, like, LinkedIn and read your profile, introduce you, or go to your who is page on USA Today.

Mike Blinder:

But I took the liberty of going to ChatGPT and asking it about you. So I'm now gonna read to you what ChatGPT says about you, and you're gonna rate its accuracy. Are you ready?

Caren Bohan:

I'm ready.

Mike Blinder:

Okay. Here we go. Karen Bohan. That's who you are as an American journalist with extensive experience covering Wall Street and Washington. You have served as the Washington editor



of Gannett's USA Today and as a former president of the White House Correspondents Association.

Mike Blinder:

That is nice to know. You were born in Boston. Uh, during graduate school, you, uh, interned with Reuters. And after graduating, you were hired by Reuters. You worked there for a while.

Mike Blinder:

And after more than 2 decades, you became a senior editor at Atlantic Media's National Journal. And then eventually, in October 2024, you were you know, you came over to USA Today. It says, in October 2024, you were appointed editor in chief of USA Today. It also says you're a member of the gridiron club. Did I get that right?

Caren Bohan:

You got it just about everything right.

Mike Blinder:

There you go. Well, I yeah.

Caren Bohan:

Few small nuances, but but that's pretty good.

Mike Blinder:

And the reason you're joining us well, we we should have had you on the program a a while ago just to chat about the great reporting at USA Today. But moreover now, uh, there there was a a there was an a story that was recently released that has had some twists and turns to it. And let's just tease it first, and we'll get into the meat of this and unpack it. But you had an a California woman named Marsala was reunited with her brother Tommy after 25 years, thanks to your reporting, um, because he was a nonverbal patient at LA Hospital. And this is how it all started.

Mike Blinder:

Correct? The story started there. Do I have that right?



Caren Bohan:

Exactly. The story actually started in May when we wrote about the hospital's alert that this man had turned up in the LA hospital was nonverbal. Nobody knew who he was, and they wanted to find a family member. Um, they knew that probably he had family members who were worried about him. And as a result of our reporting in May, Marcela Nasseri happened to see his picture and recognized it as her brother.

Caren Bohan:

The authorities confirmed that it was him and then she put it out a statement on social media, um, saying that she was looking forward to a reunion. Um, she lives in Doyle, California which is part of Lassen County. So the Lassen County sheriff's office put out a press release that got picked up all over the place as far away as the UK. And so it became this big story because it broke just before Thanksgiving.

Mike Blinder:

But but then it took an interesting twist that that the brother's name is Tommy. Further investigation revealed that he's a registered sex offender, and your reporting did more than just reunite this couple. It takes a deep dive into some of the issues in the hospital system, like identifying missing persons, lack of fingerprinting, all this and more. So there's a lot of broader questions as we look at this this story. And what I'd like to do is just put you on hold for a second because I got a number of things I wanna ask you about it.

Mike Blinder:

But we'll we'll we'll say we'll get back to this story on the backside of this message.

Announcer:

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Mike Blinder:

Let's start off with the feel good part of this, if we may. Um, the initial reporting and the public impact. Your investigative work really does show the power of journalism. You brought these two people together simply by amplifying the story. Am I right?

Mike Blinder:

So there is a there there is a it it really does amplify what we do. Don't you agree?

Caren Bohan:

I completely agree. And we often talk at the USA Today Network about our service journalism and the service that we provide to readers. I actually prefer to call it public service journalism. That is giving people the information that they need. And, you know, in a lot of ways, it's giving people the information they need to lead their best lives.

Caren Bohan:

Sometimes that means, you know, sports coverage. Sometimes that means informing them of events in their communities. Sometimes that means informing them about unsolved cases or missing persons cases. I mean, it's a whole gamut of things.

Mike Blinder:

Is the story first broke. It was all about feel good in the reunion. Then it took this darker turn. When you got word of that, what happens? What is the process?

Mike Blinder:

How do you approach handling updates to stories like this and how you move forward? Do you reassign it? You do you take take a different focus? Just give us the backstory of what happens in a newsroom at USA Today.

Caren Bohan:

So when we and others got wind of the fact that this man had been identified, it was through a

press release from the sheriff's office in Lassen County, and it was it was very self congratulatory. It talked about the great work of these detectives that led to a family reunion, and this was a couple of days before Thanksgiving. So, you know, it it seemed like a heartwarming family reunion story around the holidays. It turned out that there were more layers to this story. So, you know, we we had our initial story that reported on, you know, his his identity being determined, um, and what his sister had said about how she was looking forward to a reunion.

Caren Bohan:

But, you know, as the days ticked by, um, after Thanksgiving and the reunion didn't take place, we had these nagging questions out there, such as if they're both in California, now granted she was 600 miles away, she had started a GoFundMe account for the reunion, why hadn't this reunion taken place yet? And we knew that we owed it to our readers to find out the answers to these questions. And so that's when we started digging. And the more we started digging, the more there were questions that arose, and we learned that there was actually she had talked in her GoFundMe post about wanting to bring him back to Lassen County, needed the money for a medical transfer. And we discovered that there was outrage in the community because he had a criminal record.

Caren Bohan:

So we we set out to find out what that criminal record exactly was.

Mike Blinder:

Story highlights gaps in you you you so you said there's so many layers to this. It's amazing. And I as I read them, I was going, wow. This thing just keeps changing. You're highlighting gaps now in a system used to identify missing persons, like the absence of fingerprinting.

Mike Blinder:

Um, how it would how can journalism spotlight these these issues and advocate for change? I know it's part of our job, but how how important was that facet as you started digging into the story?

Caren Bohan:

Well, our job is accountability journalism, and our journalism in this case, and and in some other investigative stories that we've done recently have highlighted gaps in the criminal justice system. You know, the fact that it took months to identify this man and that that it it wouldn't have happened if not for our story

Mike Blinder:

Right.

Caren Bohan:

Tells you something, you know, in an era of DNA testing and things like that. And then, by the way, you know, the fact that it wasn't originally reported that he was a sex offender was as a result of the fact that authorities in Lassen County didn't coordinate with LA about the fingerprints, and so they didn't find out until days later.

Mike Blinder:

Just so it seemed it seems logical that if you have a nonverbal patient, you would use every means to wanna identify the patient. Fingerprints, facial recognition, you would think that would be part of the system in at a hospital, but it's not. Right?

Caren Bohan:

Exactly. And there are all these advanced tools. There's AI. There's there's all these tools at everyone's disposal, and it's very revelatory when you see inside of that system and realize that, you know, there's just so many gaps.

Mike Blinder:

Uh, well, obviously, this story, you know, is going to hopefully, you know, point some fingers that direction as you called accountability journalism and make some changes. But let's talk about, uh, ethical consequences. Um, there there's a there's a public's right to know, but there's also sensitivity to the players in the story. That's kinda tricky, isn't it? And when you're working with the with the reporters on this.

Caren Bohan:

Exactly. And, you know, so I went into our morning meeting Monday with with kind of what I call my spidey sense. Like, there was something that wasn't adding up about this story. Right.

And it it it bugged me that I couldn't really understand why this reunion hadn't taken place.

Caren Bohan:

And so what we talked about in our brainstorming meeting was, you know, my spidey sense is pretty good, but it could be wrong. And this is a sensitive story. And while we have to ask questions, we always have to do it in a sensitive way. This is this is a story about people at the end of the day. And, you know, whatever questions we have, we owe it to our readers to get those answers, but we also owe it to the people that we're interacting with to be sensitive to their concerns and and and try to find out without, you know, sort of invading people's privacy.

Mike Blinder:

This story definitely, uh, churn some public reaction. Um, I I wanna ask there's there's there's a couple parts to this question. Um, what is your policy on that at USA Today, um, when it comes to reader response? Secondly, how driven this is a this is a I asked Marty Marty, uh, Barron this question. Um, how driven are you by the engagement numbers when you're looking at a stripe?

Mike Blinder:

Because there's always that the issue where you've got people, I'm sure, pulling at you saying, we need more clicks. We need more page views. We need more engagement. When you see a story like this, how how how does your brain work with that in your policies at USA Today?

Caren Bohan:

So the way my brain works in terms of metrics, I'm kind of a metrics geek. Like, I'm I'm constantly looking at what's resonating with our readers. And I'm not doing it in this way, like, let's chase the clickbait. It it's actually the opposite of that. I'm interested in what the reader behavior is that's illuminated by these metrics.

Caren Bohan:

And I'll give you an example that has nothing to do with this story about the missing man. Sure. The Mike Tyson, Jake Paul fight. We were all over that story. The minute it was announced that it might take place last winter, we were all over that story.

Caren Bohan:

It crushed everything else in metrics for, you know, days on end. I mean, we were we were I wouldn't say astonished by the response because we know our audience well enough to know that something like this is likely to connect with them. But what those metrics told us is people want more and more and more. And, you know, we look at those metrics and we say, if people are are fascinated by a story and they can't get enough of it, whether it's the Jake Paul, Mike Tysons fight, whether it's the Olympics, whether it's a missing person's case, then, you know, that's when we flood the zone. We pull out all the stops to get the information that people want and to inform them.

Mike Blinder:

Alright. There's there's this balance between, uh, human empathy and journalistic rigor. At least we report, you know, we we've done some we look at study. When you do human stories like this, uh, despite the complexities, um, how do you handle that empathy versus journalism, uh, when you the final reporting is going through the editing process? How do you coach the team in that kind of writing?

Mike Blinder:

What is what is the if I may use this over worst term, what is the ethos of a USA Today when it comes to that?

Caren Bohan:

So I feel very lucky to be editor in chief of USA Today for many reasons. And one of the reasons is that we have, as you know, 200 plus papers around the country that are focused on serving their local communities. And a lot of the journalists at USA Today actually come from those papers. So they bring an ethos with them that is very much like I actually, most of the time, don't have to teach them anything about that. I'll give you an example of that.

Caren Bohan:

Um, the Apalachee High School shooting in Georgia earlier this year, terrible, terrible tragedy. And we sent reporters down there not because, you know, that was a story that anyone wanted to ever have to cover. It's it's the story that you never wanna have to cover. But we know that a community is grieving. And we know that in an instance like this, they especially

need answers.

Caren Bohan:

Like, you know, how did how did this killer fall through the cracks, the youngest mass shooter ever? You know, what happened? What went wrong? How can we keep our communities safe? So we knew we had to report it, but we also knew that the sensitivity part of this was crucial that, you know, the last thing that you wanna do is go into a community where people are grieving and worsen that grief and make them feel that you're you're kind of gawking at them.

Caren Bohan:

I mean, that's horrible. You never want that to happen. Of course. And the team of reporters that we sent down there, they they were just amazing. They they knew, you know, several of them had reported on tragedies and crises before, and they just knew how to approach people.

Caren Bohan:

And I'll tell you, Mike, like, one of the things that was so heartwarming to me, we covered we covered every vigil in the aftermath. We were the only news organization that covered every vigil. And some of the people in the community were hugging our journalists saying thank you for being here. Thank you for the sensitivity with which you've handled this story.

Mike Blinder:

You've got hundreds and hundreds of news execs right now listening to this program. What lessons have you learned from this particular story that you can, uh, share with the industry?

Caren Bohan:

So what I think people can learn from this story in this business is that you've gotta let your service to the readers guide you. And, you know, if a story raises more questions than it answers for you then you know it is going to do that for our readers and readers needed to know that there was more to this case. There was anger in the community and people wanted that information out there. You know, whatever happens as a result of that information is, you know, a case of let the chips fall where they may. But we've got to stay with a story like this.

Caren Bohan:



And it's important, um, also, the other thing that I think our reporting on this illuminated within our newsroom is the value of no surprises journalism. Um, there were a lot of tough questions eventually that we had to ask the sheriff's office in Lassen County, you know, why did you put out this this laudatory statement and why didn't you know more about who this man was and and that he was a convicted sex offender? And for the sister who is raising money for a reunion on GoFundMe, you know, are you planning to take the GoFundMe plea down? Are you, you know, how do you feel about about the fact that your brother was convicted of this crime? Does that does that make you feel differently about a reunion?

Caren Bohan:

That's a a tough question to ask anybody, but it needs to be asked.

Mike Blinder:

Well, Karen Bohan, the, um, the editor in chief of USA Today, we will definitely have you back on the show. Moreover, those that are listening on a podcast platform, we're gonna offer links to all the stories, uh, as the and we'll continue to update the page as well as more reporting comes out of the USA Today newsroom. Thank you so much, Karen, for your time. We really appreciate it. We hope you have a very happy holiday season.

Caren Bohan:

Happy holidays, Mike, and thanks for having me on the show.

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