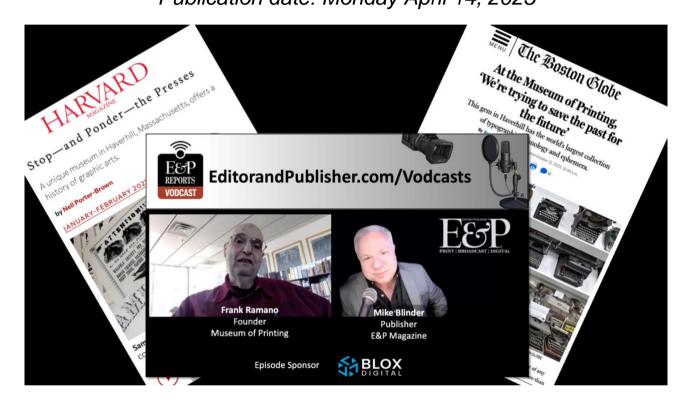**Audio Transcript**
Episode 279 of "E&P Reports" Vodcast Series
with Mike Blinder
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Saving the story of print, one Linotype at a time: Inside the Museum of Printing

If you've ever marveled at a Linotype machine or debated whether Helvetica is overused, you've likely felt Frank Romano's influence—even if you didn't know it. As the founder of the Museum of Printing and author of nearly 80 books, Romano has spent a lifetime preserving the stories, machines, and ideas that shaped the modern media landscape. From brass matrices to PageMaker, he's witnessed every disruptive shift in how we communicate. And through it all, he's championed one unwavering belief: print is immortal.

Mike Blinder:
If you ever set type by hand, stared into the glow of a Linotype machine, or argued over the true birthplace of desktop publishing, then you already owe a debt to my guest in today's program, Frank Romano. Frank, welcome to the show.

Frank Romano:
Thank you very much.

Mike Blinder:
I can't believe this is the first time we've chatted. I studied you before this. I stalked you, sir, and you're like a hero to me. You are considered by many now the quintessential historian of printing. You've lived it, you've shaped it. And in many ways, if I may be so bold, you've saved it. As the founder of the Museum of Printing in Haverhill, Massachusetts—which I'm going to come and visit. Is that where you are right now, sir?

Frank Romano:
That's where I am right now. In our meeting room, at this stage. We have a whole crew of people working. Today, we're getting our Linotype running. We have a Ben Franklin Press. They're coming from a radio station to do an article on this later on. It's going to be a busy day.

Mike Blinder:
More than just finding this facility and making it thrive to keep it like the archive of this incredible art of printing, you're the author—correct me if I'm wrong—of more than 60 books in typography, print history, and publishing. This is your life's work to preserve the story. Am I right, sir?

Frank Romano:
Seventy-nine books.

Mike Blinder:
I had 60! I am so sorry—seventy?

Frank Romano:

Yeah, I'm working on 80 right now. I've written the first book on every new technology that affected newspapers.

Mike Blinder:

All right, so with your permission, sir—we gotta make a buck here—I want my audience to stand by. Because I want to know what it was like to work at Mergenthaler Linotype. Did I say that correct, sir?

Frank Romano:

You certainly did.

Mike Blinder:

And I studied that name—Mergenthaler, Linotype. And why does Frank say desktop publishing nearly killed craftsmanship? I found that quote, sir. Don't answer that yet, because we gotta make a buck and do this commercial first.

Announcer:

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Mike Blinder:

All right, Frank, you started in the industry at Mergenthaler. What was the atmosphere like? When was that? This is the dawn, correct me if I'm wrong, of cold type. And what do you miss most about those days?

Frank Romano:

Actually, I went to work for Mergenthaler in 1959. Graduating high school in Brooklyn, New York, I went to my guidance counselor and said, "I need a job." Well, this company, Mergenthaler, was looking for people. I said, "What do they do?" He said, "Something to do with books." So I went, I got interviewed, and I was hired in the shipping department. Then I advanced to the mail room.

I like to say that when I started there, I delivered the mail to the president. When I left, I wrote his speeches. It was a very paternalistic company. They had a medical plan, a pension plan—because the company made money every day. Those little brass matrices that ran in the Linotype wore out, and we would process a million a day.

We employed 6,000 people in Brooklyn, New York, in these two gigantic buildings.

Mike Blinder:

Six thousand—wow.

Frank Romano:

And by the way, the company was formed because of the newspaper industry. The newspaper syndicate in 1870 banded together to invest in the technology to replace hand typesetting. It took six people to handset one page of a daily newspaper. The Linotype could do it with one person. And so in 1886, Ottmar Mergenthaler introduced the Linotype—it produces a *line* of type.

Mike Blinder:

If I may interject—and this is boring maybe to you—but I went to high school in suburban Philadelphia in the '60s, junior high I should say. We had a print shop, and I actually operated a Linotype to make my first little business card. We learned back in the day—I did. I actually remember the smell and the boiling and how it all dropped down. And you have one that actually works there at the museum, correct?

Frank Romano:

We have one of the few working Linotypes in the United States.

Mike Blinder:
I don't want to go to the museum just yet. I want to stay with you about the history. So, you have actually been part of this transformation—as I have. I mean, I was more on the ad side of going from the traditional legacy print project into digital. But over the last six decades, in your humble opinion, sir, what was the most disruptive shift that you saw? And which one was overrated? I mean, does that make sense? When people were looking at X, should they have been looking at Y? Because you are an expert in this history—what do you think the most disruptive thing was? And what was the least disruptive, if I may ask you?

Frank Romano:
The one that we call desktop publishing.

Mike Blinder:
Yes, sir.

Frank Romano:
Let me just go over the evolution for a second. You had handset type. That's replaced by the Linotype, and for 80 years, the Linotype is the dominant machine for setting type. Then we see photo typesetting come in, and for 40 years, there were 40 companies fighting for that marketplace.

But then, when Steve Jobs introduced the Macintosh, a program called PageMaker from another company, PostScript for outputting fonts, and the ability to output to a high-resolution laser imaging device—it changed the world.

Now, the problem is, it happened very slowly. So everyone thought that desktop publishing was just for cheap and dirty stuff. And suddenly it starts to affect newspapers. I mean, there's not a newspaper today where the reporters aren't typing on terminals. And in many cases, that information is going right to typesetting. It bypasses all the processes that used to be part of the mainstream of a newspaper.

And so, desktop publishing put the control back in the reporter's hands and the editor's hands—and it just changed the world. Before that, the union controlled everything because they controlled the machine.

Mike Blinder:
Right. Amazing. Okay, so now here you are in Haverhill, and you founded this Museum of Printing. Was there a particular moment in your life where you realized this history needed to be preserved? That it should not be lost to the dust of the future?

Frank Romano:
Actually, the museum started in 1978.

Mike Blinder:
Really?

Frank Romano:
At that time, I had been publishing a magazine called *TypeWorld*, which I started from scratch and built up to 82,000 circulation. And because I had extra money, I bought *New England Printer and Publisher* magazine.

So I got to know the publisher of *The Boston Globe*, Mr. Taylor, of course. They were getting out of hot metal in '78 and letterpress printing. So I went to him and said, "Can we save some of this?" There were 14 of us—publishers, printers, and others in the industry.

Not only did he say yes, he found us free warehouse space to store everything in, because we had no money, no place to put anything. And so for 10 years we were in warehouses. Then we wound up in a building in North Andover, Mass., which was the old textile museum building. So we started to build the Museum of Printing at that point in time. Then we outgrew that building and moved to this one here in Haverhill.

And now we're outgrowing this one. We have the largest collection of the equipment, the technology, and the printed material. The back issues of all the magazines, samples of type—we have the entire Linotype library, all the drawings for every Linotype typeface. Helvetica, Times, Roman—they're all here. They went to the Smithsonian. The Smithsonian didn't want them. The Smithsonian closed down their printing exhibition.

So we are now the oldest and largest museum dedicated to the printed word.

Mike Blinder:
If we may, let's together announce this. We're going to put it out in an official press release, but let's let the audience know that we have agreed at *E&P* to donate our actual print issues—back to 1900—and send them up so they'll still have a home for many, many, hopefully decades or centuries to come. Thank you so much.

Frank Romano:
I'm hoping that—by the way, again, we have the complete bound issues of many of the magazines in the printing industry.

Mike Blinder:
Amazing.

Frank Romano:
Like *The Inland Printer*, which started in 1881. That was the first magazine for printing in America. Not only do we have it—it's also been scanned. Which, by the way, we're going to do with most of our publications. And thank God you did it with *E&P*.

Mike Blinder:
Thank you. All right, I want to give you a little bit—

I started as a disc jockey. That's how I got into media. I was a pre-med at GW, and I always wanted to be a DJ. I worked myself into a radio—an AM radio station—just doing anything, washing floors. And that's how I got into media. My blood is radio. That's how I eventually found my way into the newspaper industry, obliquely. But I was a morning DJ on AM, with records, you know—back in the '70s.

Now, I live in Nashville—and I'm setting you up to get your thoughts on this. I moved here to be closer to our daughter. They call this building in downtown Nashville the Batman building—it's the AT&T building because of the towers. No, those are radio towers. Nashville's history is the old Grand Ole Opry—WSM's tower in Brentwood—that's iconic. And when I was at the Country Music Hall of Fame Museum, I watched a woman tell all these kids, looking into some kind of a display called a radio, "People used to sit around this and listen."

When people come to your museum—kids especially—do you get goosebumps?

Frank Romano:

By the way, I personally handle 32 school groups a year—homeschool, grade school, high school, college. I'm getting a lot of senior citizens as well. But I love the young kids, especially the very young ones. They're really excited by all of this. I give them a little presentation about typography because I say the one thing we all have in common is—we all use type. At one time, that wasn't the case. You had typewriters, and then you had printers who did type. But the common person never did that.

And now, everyone is using Times Roman. Everyone is using Helvetica. It's a very common practice.

So, the young kids are really interested in…

You know what they're really interested in? The typewriters.

Mike Blinder:

Seriously, I was going to ask. So is there one piece, when you're walking through the halls, that you just still stop and pause at? I mean, is there one iconic historical piece in the museum that sticks out to you?

Frank Romano:

Yes. As you come in the front door, in a glass case, is the world's first typewriter—the Sholes Glidden, 1873.

Mike Blinder:

Oh my. We're definitely going to be putting a picture of that up on the video version of this podcast.

Frank Romano:

I'll send you a copy of it.

Mike Blinder:

I don't know if you have to—because when I went to Google, people are posting tons of photos from your museum online. Families tour it—you're getting pretty damn popular, sir. I want you to know that.

Frank Romano:

I wanted that typewriter for years. And they're very rare—you can't find them. And then one day, an elderly gentleman comes in. Turns out he had one. That's where the QWERTY keyboard came from—Q, W, E, R, T, Y, U, I, O, P.

And you know that all the letters for the word *typewriter* are in that line?

Mike Blinder:

I had no idea. No—I'm learning from this one. I think you just gave us our pull quote, sir.

Frank Romano:

And when Sholes was inventing the typewriter, he needed someone to test it. So he sent it to a guy in Washington, D.C., who was a court reporter. He tested it but was intrigued with it and wanted to find a way to make it set type.

So he went to an inventor. He went to a machine shop in Washington, D.C., and by accident, he meets a man named Ottmar Mergenthaler, a German immigrant who then starts inventing a machine.

And their first investor is Stilson Hutchins—Stilson Hutchins was the founder of *The Washington Post*.

And so he puts together a syndicate of newspapers, and they invest. Mergenthaler goes through three prototypes—we have the second one here. And then finally, in 1886, the Linotype machine is invented.

So the typewriter and the Linotype are related.

Mike Blinder:

Frank, I could talk to you for hours. But you know, I'm going to let you in on a little secret. You may already know this—but attention spans in today's multimedia world are pretty challenged. So we try to hold this show to about 20 minutes an episode. But this should be three hours.

So, I'm now going to let you put on your prognosticator—or your historical expert—hat. You have a quote that's out there that I found when I Googled you: "Print is immortal."

What do you mean by that—*print is immortal*?

Frank Romano:

Well, you can't change it. See, the nice thing is, when you look at a newspaper from the 1700s, no one is going to modify it.

If you remember the book *1984*, it opens with Winston Smith, the protagonist, changing history. And today, because everything we're doing is in electronic form, I wonder—100 years from now— if it will still be in the same form. Or if somebody will have modified it, to change its meaning to something in the past.

Whereas print cannot be changed. And that's the great thing about print—it is the best way to record history.

Mike Blinder:

What advice do you give to news publishers today who are torn about their relevance—I'm going to use that term—to the communities they serve?

How should they, in your humble opinion, sir, honor their own legacy?

Frank Romano:

Well, like Ben Bradlee said: get the facts.

By the way, I worked with Ben Bradlee when I helped consult on automating the newsroom at *The Washington Post*. He was a very dynamic editor. Again, I've consulted for many of the big newspapers in America, and I have to tell you—the editors in those days were the greatest people on Earth.

They had an adherence to facts, documentation, getting it right, and putting it down in cohesive form.

I don't see that today. I see long articles that go on forever—imbued with opinion rather than facts.

Mike Blinder:
That, sir, is coming from a gentleman who was mostly on the operations side—giving, I would say, the best advice ever.

People ask me all over now, "Frank, what's the secret sauce? What makes what works?"

And I always say: just do good storytelling. Every time we see a winning operation, they're doing the facts.

Frank Romano—possibly the most prolific historian of printing and the founder of the Museum of Printing in Haverhill, Mass., and more importantly, the author now of almost 80 books.

Do I have that right, sir?

Frank Romano:
You got that right.

Mike Blinder:
On typography, print history, and publishing.

Frank, you keep up the work—and more importantly, just… keep, keep, keep going. Stay in this industry.

We need you, so we can feel anchored. Thanks so much for your time, Frank.

Frank Romano:
And thank you very much for doing what you're doing.

And, by the way—bringing back radio.