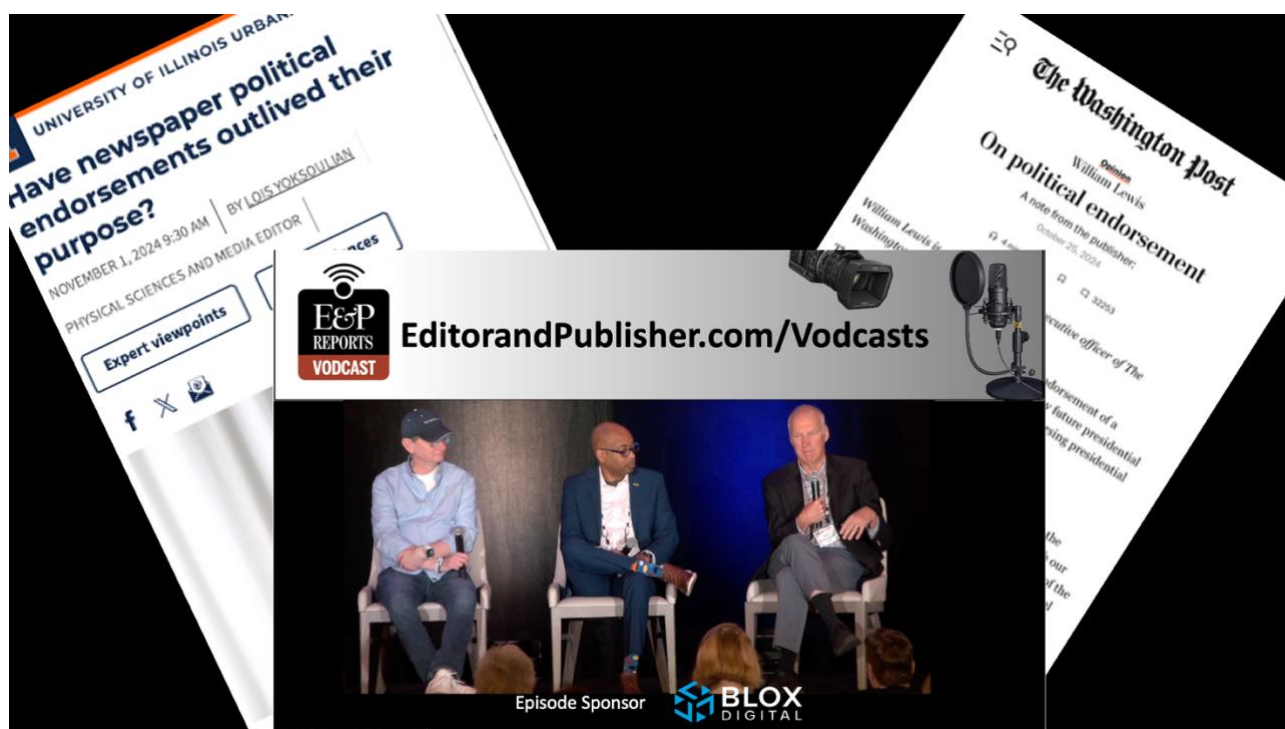


Audio Transcript

Episode 281 of "[E&P Reports](#)" Vodcast Series
with *Mike Blinder*

Publication date: Monday April 28, 2025



[Should opinion journalism evolve or disappear? A live panel from the 2025 Mega-Conference](#)

At a time when trust in journalism continues to erode, the future of opinion content is under intense scrutiny. Should newspapers continue publishing unsigned editorials and political endorsements, or is it time to rethink the role of opinion altogether? That was the focus of a live panel at the 2025 America's Newspapers' Mega-Conference, where hundreds of news executives gathered for this live panel discussion to share strategies, struggles, and shifting audience expectations. What emerged was a candid, sometimes surprising conversation about how opinion journalism must evolve — or risk becoming irrelevant.

Mike Blinder

Today's episode of *E&P Reports* is something special and honestly one of the most vital conversations we've brought you yet. We're taking you inside a live session from America's Newspapers' 2025 News Industry Mega-Conference in Orlando, where I had the honor of moderating a panel that tackled some of the hardest questions facing our industry. Should newspapers continue endorsing political candidates? Should opinion pages evolve or disappear altogether in today's polarized climate? Joining me on the stage were three incredible leaders.

David Dunn-Rankin, owner and CEO of D-R Media; Michael McCarter, VP, Group Editor and Opinion Editor for the USA TODAY Network; and, of course, our friend Rob Curley, Editor of *The Spokesman-Review* in Spokane. We weren't alone, though. Over 150 news media executives filled the room, and they didn't just listen — they participated. Throughout this session, we asked five critical poll questions about the future of opinion journalism, endorsements, and reader trust.

You're going to see live results on the screen, some of which even surprised the panelists. In just a moment, after the break, we'll take you right to the stage for this very fast-paced, no-holds-barred conversation. But a quick heads-up: This episode runs a bit longer than usual, but the issues we tackle and the solutions we discuss are too important to edit or rush through. If you care about the credibility, sustainability, and community impact of your newsroom, I promise you — you'll want to stay with us till the very end. So stick around.

After the break, we'll go live to the stage in Orlando.

Announcer

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Mike Blinder

Unsigned editorials — what's an unsigned editorial? Well, in a way, it's when your brand, your paper, your masthead makes an endorsement or puts out a statement on behalf of the brand, not an individual. So the question is: Does your news organization still publish unsigned editorials or political endorsements? And to get our conversation kicked off, I am really honored to have these three gentlemen on the stage. Moreover, there's a method to our madness — who they are.

I'm going to start off with David Dunn-Rankin. David, you're the little guy. Well, you're tall, but you're the little guy. I mean, I've known your career — you've bought and sold, you're a media mogul, you're well respected in the industry, you helped shape this organization. But correct me if I'm wrong, you're running small community newspapers not too far from here in very red, small markets. Am I correct, sir?

David Dunn-Rankin

That's exactly right.

Mike Blinder

And your audience is pretty politically active, am I correct?

David Dunn-Rankin

Politically active on the right-hand side.

Mike Blinder

That's where you are at.

David Dunn-Rankin

Yes.



Mike Blinder

And you have to make tough decisions about editorials, opinions, and what have you.

Now, I want to introduce, if I may, Michael McCarter. We were honored to get Michael. Michael, you're like head of all op-eds for one of the largest media companies in the United States — we're talking Gannett. Am I correct, sir? What is your official title at Gannett?

Michael McCarter

My official title is VP of the Opinion Group for Gannett Standards and Ethics.

Mike Blinder

Oh. Even the local publishers have to come through you or you guide them in each individual market of where we are in op-eds and opinions, correct?

Michael McCarter

We have discussions. They don't have to come through me for what they write. We have market autonomy, but we do have best practices. So they do come and talk to me about best practices.

Mike Blinder

And you obviously have policies that you dictate down to what they should or shouldn't run or not.

Michael McCarter

I don't like the word "dictate," but we do have conversations about what we should and shouldn't do, yes.



Mike Blinder

No one knows Rob Curley, am I right? But we brought up Rob back for a reason. Rob, you're the middle guy — Spokane, mid-sized market. But moreover, you're going to be the first one I ask this question to, because in your past you have run the editorial teams of some award-winning brands all over the United States. You're now in Spokane, and you've shifted over the years. Am I correct? You used to do unsigned editorials. In all your markets, we endorsed a political candidate. We said vote this way, that way. Where are you at today in Spokane?

Rob Curley

We no longer endorse candidates. Look, when I started in this industry, we were still figuring out how the Internet and everything works. Well, now we know how it works, and people know where they're going to get their opinions from. I mean, when Ben Franklin was doing this, he was the only gang in town. Now you can get them wherever you want. So for us, it was, we need to really focus in on the facts, and we're going to tell you what's going on, and you need to be a responsible adult and make your own decisions.

For me, it was some morning you wake up and you go, wow. Our mission statement is literally in our name — newspaper, not opinion paper. And for such a polarized world, the best way for me to make a stand is to tell the truth.

Mike Blinder

All right, so it's just not part of the ecosystem anymore, in your opinion? Those are old-world philosophies from a dark era that we should no longer adhere to?

Rob Curley

We're much more of a mirror of the community. So our letters to the editor are still very, very vibrant. We still have opinion pages, but it's our community's opinions.



Mike Blinder

All right, David, what's your policy? Do you do unsigned editorials in your hyperlocal, small markets? Do you, as the brand — not an individual — as a brand, make an endorsement, make a statement, and try to sway local opinion?

David Dunn-Rankin

Yeah, Mike. I'm a big believer in opinion pages generally. I think opinion pages are like the milk at the grocery store. You're not a grocery store unless you carry milk, right? I mean, you got the whole milk for the Make America Great Again people, you got the 2% for the people in the middle, and you got the stuff that tastes like water for the kind of the leftists. But you got milk for everybody. And you've got to have it.

You've got to have milk in the paper. You've got to have an opinion page. I went away from unsigned editorials, and instead, I write a column every week with my face on it, my name on it.

Mike Blinder

It's you, not the brand.

David Dunn-Rankin

It says, I'm the owner of this paper that they're reading, and it has my email at the bottom. And at the end of every column I write, I say, "Readers, what do you think? Share your thoughts." And they do.

I went away from the unsigned editorial because I think unsigned editorials create confusion for readers. We say, oh, those are the opinion of the paper. Well, is the carrier involved in this? No. Is the salesman out there? No. Is one of the line reporters involved in it? No. It's actually a committee of five, right? That are the paper, and they're anonymous, and people don't like that.

We make readers put their name on their letter to the editor because we want transparency, but when it comes to editorials that we don't sign, it's not transparent. Therefore, I went to this model that said, "I'm the owner, I'm the person responsible. You don't like what I write? Here's my email. Write me."

So I went to a slightly different model.



Mike Blinder

Michael, what's Gannett's policy on unsigned endorsements? Did Gannett do any presidential endorsements of any way, shape, form, or size in the last election cycle in any markets?

Michael McCarter

We had no endorsements for the presidential race at all.

Mike Blinder

You have local endorsements for races?

Michael McCarter

We do have unsigned — again, it's unsigned, yes. In some markets, it's market autonomy. It's really more of a blend of both of what these gentlemen just said. We do voter guides. We have opinion pieces on what we believe each candidate stands for based on the interviews that we have with them. So we do believe in the importance of helping readers in our local markets understand their local races. But for the presidential race, we do not.

Mike Blinder

I live in Nashville. The Tennessean — I don't remember, did it endorse a political candidate, to your knowledge? Unsigned, saying vote for this guy?

Michael McCarter

I think *The Tennessean* did not. I believe *The Tennessean* had mostly interviews that they shared with the audience.



Mike Blinder

So as we go to our screen now and see how our audience is voting on the question, “Does your news organization still publish unsigned editorials or political endorsements?” we see that the no’s are about half the audience, 52%, and we’ve got 35% saying yes. So mostly no’s in this room. Who did say yes?

Could someone raise their hand, please? Over here? I don’t know who has mics. Shout it out — we’re recording this for my show. Stand up, sir, in the back there and shout out who you are, and I’ll repeat it to the audience, please.

Rehoboth Beach, *Cape Gazette*. Your first name, sir? Craig? Chris?

I’m sorry. Okay, Chris, what is your policy? Who did you endorse? What was the reaction to that?

Audience Participant

Ideas, policies. And if there’s a specific ordinance. We had a county council race that was very contested not that long ago. Instead of backing the candidate, there was a voluntary school assessment that had been contentious, couldn’t pass. We went hard on supporting that as something voters should look at when they’re choosing their candidate, because the existing candidate had clearly gone against it. The incoming candidate, who ended up winning, had stated from the beginning that she was for this VSA.

Mike Blinder

So you did unsigned — it was your editorial board?

Audience Participant

Yes. And when we publish our unsigned editorials, we name our editorial board. It’s five of us.

Mike Blinder

You put the editorial board there?



Audience Participant

This was written in conjunction with these five people, and we name all five people.

Mike Blinder

All right. Who else said yes? Please raise a hand. We'd love your input. Over here, sir — please stand up. Ma'am — oh, is that Judy?

Judi Terzotis

Thank you. Sure. Can you hear me? Great. Hi, everyone. I'm Judi Terzotis. I'm CEO of Georges Media. We own properties in Louisiana — New Orleans, Baton Rouge, Acadiana, Lake Charles, and Shreveport. We have a hybrid model, Mike, where we only endorse in New Orleans, and that comes with the history.

The prior owner, Advance, also endorsed. That's where our owner lives. He grew up reading the endorsements of the *Times-Picayune*. And so we endorse only in that market because of history.

Mike Blinder

It's a history. It's a heritage.

Judi Terzotis

Pardon me?

Mike Blinder

It's expected by your audience.

Judi Terzotis

Yes, it is. It's expected.



Mike Blinder

And you list your editorial board as well?

Judi Terzotis

Yes, we do. That's not just for endorsements — for editorials too. We run editorials in our southern markets: New Orleans, Baton Rouge, and Acadiana. Again, it's all local. We don't weigh in on anything nationally unless it has a profound impact on us. Then we will talk about what that legislation might mean to our readers.

Mike Blinder

Does your inbox explode with hate mail when you do this?

Judi Terzotis

Well, we've reshaped our editorial pages. Twice a week, we have what we call the "Town Square," where it's an issue and it's both sides. Then, on Saturdays, we take two full pages and it's nothing but letters to the editor. Finally, on Sunday, our editorial editor writes a column and summarizes the themes of all the letters that she's received. That has kind of tamped down the negativity because we can point to, "Hey, we're trying to make this your voice, not our voice."

Mike Blinder

I'm going to flip the letter now. Greg, can we go to question two? Do you regularly publish opinion submissions from readers, community leaders, and local officials? Do you give them a voice — signed, but not from you? From a local leader, a local official. Please vote. Gannett, where are you at on this one?



Michael McCarter

We absolutely do. Again, markets are different. Our audiences are different. I would hate to sit up here and say that all of our audiences are the same. But letters to the editor are one of the most powerful things that we can publish in our local newspapers. We've just introduced a product called *Forum USA Today* for more of a national look. So we pose a question each week on some hot topic, whether it's tariffs or immigration, and we get voices of people from around the country. We publish those every Monday.

We also have a podcast off of that, where we have people in their own voice saying how they feel on those topics.

Mike Blinder

But God forbid you do things based on metrics. I'm saying that sarcastically. How popular are these pages? How important is it to your mission to build audience? What kind of traffic are you getting?

Michael McCarter

The traffic is good because we're giving the audience what they're asking for. The audience has said they would like to have more of their voice represented, and we're doing that.

Mike Blinder

David, hum to yourself because you're coming up next. Rob, I believe you do this in Spokane, correct? Do you allow community leaders regularly? Is it a special feature? How popular is it? What's your policy?

Rob Curley

Yeah, we do it a lot. And we also have something called a "super letter," where if a reader writes a really thoughtful, long letter, it can go over the 250-word limit, but you can only have, I think, four of those a year. Some people would like four a week. Those are very popular. What's interesting is when you run a pro-con — you know, both sides of an issue — and someone will say you didn't do a great job on the other side. And I'm like, that's not on me. You sent the wrong person to write your case. So that's always interesting when somebody says, "Well, that wasn't a very strong opinion." I'm like, well, you gotta try harder.



Mike Blinder

What kind of traffic are you getting? Is this a popular part of your site?

Rob Curley

If it's a hot-button issue, it can be our most-read story.

Mike Blinder

Really?

Rob Curley

Yeah.

Mike Blinder

David, your policy — do you let the mayor, local officials, do you amplify their opinions? Do you have pages for that?

David Dunn-Rankin

Yeah, Mike. I'll mention two things. I'll take a real paper — our paper in Winter Haven in Polk County. I write a column every week, which I've said is focused on issues, and I get a lot of feedback from readers. Quite often, readers write me something like, "Dunn-Rankin, you're a moron." And then what I usually do is tell the editor to run that letter to the editor in really big font and have the headline be "Dunn-Rankin is a moron," and run that letter so people understand that we can dish it out and we can take it.

In that paper, I write every week. Our publisher writes a column every week. She grew up in that community, and she talks about what it was like growing up there — sometimes about being a gay woman growing up there. Then the local sheriff, Grady Judd, writes for us. The most dangerous



place in Polk County is between Grady Judd and a microphone because he'll run you over — we love our sheriff. He writes every week.

The chairman of the County Board of Commissioners writes a column for us every week about local issues they're wrestling with. The school superintendent writes for us every month. Both congressmen write for us on a monthly basis. We also have other civic leaders who write for us regularly. That's an example of one paper — big commitment.

Mike Blinder

Let's put the board in front of our audience here in Orlando, where the response to the question, "Do you regularly publish opinion submissions from readers, community leaders, or local officials?" is resounding. Surprisingly, 89% of our audience says yes. Only 11% say no.

With that being said, gentlemen, we're going to move on to our next topic. Is that okay with you? Topic number three. This is near and dear to you, Michael, I think, because this is part of your bailiwick: Does your paper run national syndicated opinion columnists or political cartoons? Do you invest energy, time, space, and pages to run national syndicated columns or editorial cartoons?

I'm going to start with Gannett because I've had Rex Huppke on my show, and he is a very polarizing columnist — very far left. We have an archive — I've had 280 episodes of my podcast over the years — and his is still the highest trafficked. When I look back, it's still getting downloads. My YouTube page has tons of people hating him and screaming that this man is a left-wing idiot and all that. And you proudly put him in local papers and promote him. What is your rationale behind this? How many columnists are under your purview, and why is Gannett doing this?

Michael McCarter

That was a lot in that question. Thank you. So, first of all, Rex is a wonderful columnist. Yes, he is very opinionated, but he is liked — and even the people who hate him love to hate him, and they continue to read him.

Mike Blinder

I agree.



Michael McCarter

We don't — I never tell a local paper — you say you live in Nashville. I would never say *The Tennessean* has to run Rex's column. They have the option to run it. We don't run national columnists anymore in all of our publications because we're hyperlocal focused.

Mike Blinder

So this is a digital audience for Rex across the network?

Michael McCarter

Yes. Across the network, our USA Today opinion columnists can be picked up by our local sites if they choose to. But again, they need to know their audience, and when they do, they know whether a left-leaning columnist will work well in their audience or not. We have three left-leaning columnists at *USA Today*. We have three right-leaning columnists at *USA Today*.

Mike Blinder

I was about to ask, what is the ratio? How far right is your farthest right columnist?

Michael McCarter

See, now I'm having to make an opinion here. I would say that probably Nicole Russell is the farthest right.

Mike Blinder

The traffic is good on all these? Are these audience builders for the network?



Michael McCarter

It's about providing different audiences an insight into what they're interested in. We try to make sure that we publish in a way that people can see different sides. If you're a Rex lover, you're going to gravitate toward Rex, and we want to provide that for you. If you're an Ingrid lover, you'll gravitate toward her work. We try to make sure it's available for all of our audiences.

Mike Blinder

David, I love when I asked you to be on the panel, I investigated your newspapers. I went online and looked, and you have political cartoons. I called you and said, wait a second — on Tuesday or one week, you ran a left cartoon, and then the next week you ran a right cartoon. What is your policy? Why are you doing both sides?

David Dunn-Rankin

Thanks, Mike. We don't run any national opinion stuff in our weeklies. I already talked about what we're doing in Winter Haven with our small daily that's in Citrus and Kettle counties — Trump country. We try to run about 50% right and about 50% left, both in the opinion columns and in the editorial cartoons.

Sometimes, because my email is in my column every week, I get love letters telling me I'm a leftist commie, and they complain about the opinion page. I say, "Do me a favor. For the next month, count. Count the opinions. Tell me how many are left, how many are right, and how many editorial cartoons are left and right." Because we try to count and end up around 50-50. Quite often, they do count, and they're like, "Oh yeah, well, you're about 54% liberal." I'm like, well, okay.

We also might get columns from our brother and sister papers in Florida, where they have really superior writers who cover important issues. We try to keep it about 50% left and right.

Mike Blinder

So you're in the middle. You're splitting it even in these red districts. Rob, correct me if I'm wrong — you don't do those, do you?



Rob Curley

We don't do it like we used to, but we still run national columns. We get emails from our readers saying that we have to quit running the liberal ones.

Mike Blinder

All right, how about cartoons? Are you running any at all?

Rob Curley

Yeah, but our plan is we have an E-edition every afternoon — an afternoon paper that's just the E-edition. The plan is to move our opinions there. We initially were going to do that last year, but we decided to wait until we got through the presidential cycle, and then we'll move straight to just all-local in the print edition, with national content in the E-edition.

Mike Blinder

All right, let's look at the screen now and see what the survey shows for this question: Does your paper run national syndicated opinion columnists or editorial cartoons? We see the audience heavily in favor of yes — 69% — with no running at about 25%. All right, this isn't hyperlocal now. This is national. These are bringing in cartoons and syndicated columns. Some people said no.

Can I try this again? Who has decided not to run national content? Can you share with the audience why you don't? Anyone, please? Come on. There must be someone. Yes, sir, please stand up and share. Who are you, and what are you doing when it comes to national columns, cartoons, and what have you?

Todd Benoit

My name is Todd Benoit, and I'm at the *Bangor Daily News*.



Mike Blinder

Oh, Todd in Bangor! I see you.

Todd Benoit

We recently reduced the number of days that we're running opinion because no one was reading it.

Mike Blinder

Really?

Todd Benoit

Yeah, really. It was not popular. So when we did that, we eliminated the national stuff and focused on getting more provocative local content. And I think that's working. Our opinion page team now spends more time developing sources within Maine to come up with more interesting commentary than what we had before. So it's more active and less passive.

Mike Blinder

Can you give me an example of something hyperlocal that's really polarizing?

Todd Benoit

Well, the big thing right now is what our governor, Janet Mills, is doing versus Donald Trump. For example, what does expert opinion say about her legal grounds to do that? So we want someone from Maine School of Law to write a piece that says, "Here's what our statute says in Maine, here's what Donald Trump is citing, and how does that work?" And in that case, the commentator might take a side.



Mike Blinder

And you're okay when the inbox explodes? This is good. The opposite of love is not hate — it's indifference.

Todd Benoit

I'll tell you one other thing. We endorsed Kamala Harris and expected our inboxes to explode — and there was nothing. Dead air.

Mike Blinder

Nothing?

Todd Benoit

Nothing. And that told me no one cared about our opinions anymore. So that gave us further impetus to reduce the number of days we run opinion.

Mike Blinder

In Bangor, you endorsed Kamala Harris?

Todd Benoit

Yes, and our district went for Donald Trump.

Mike Blinder

Of course.



Todd Benoit

Our editorial board went for Kamala Harris. And nobody cared.

Mike Blinder

Nobody?

Todd Benoit

Relatively nobody cared. We always get responses — as these gentlemen have pointed out, often from the same people.

Mike Blinder

Oh yeah, so do I.

Todd Benoit

But generally, it was nothing. And that just told us everything we needed to know.

Mike Blinder

That's really telling, isn't it?

Todd Benoit

It is. The numbers say it too. You can track opinion pages over the years. Someone up here mentioned it — you can get your opinion elsewhere now. That's what we're finding. People are going elsewhere for their opinion.



Mike Blinder

It's a different world, isn't it? In the old days, the paper was everybody's — here's a section for grandpa, here's the comics for the kids, here's home and garden. Now people get their verticals elsewhere.

Correct me if I'm wrong, but our bailiwick is hyperlocal reporting, correct? That's what we should be doing.

Todd Benoit

We used to have dress patterns and movie reviews. No point either anymore.

Mike Blinder

It's a different world now. So we evolve and change.

Anybody else want to participate in this? Yes or no? Please. Come on, shake off last night's partying! Give me a hand, anyone? All right, we'll move on to the next question. We've got two more left — hang in there, about 15 minutes to go.=

Have you ever pulled an editorial or opinion piece due to legal or political concerns? Have you ever just gotten antsy, thought about running it, and decided, nah, I ain't gonna run this thing? Please vote now and let us know what you're thinking.

Looks like we're getting more no's, and a few not sures. Michael?

Michael McCarter

Can you repeat the question?

Mike Blinder

Yes, sir. Have you ever gotten a submission — an editorial — and decided not to run it, not because it was poor journalism or the writer was an idiot, but because you just didn't want to get into the fray?

Michael McCarter

No, we don't back down. If it is relevant, if it is written well, and if it is factually correct, we would not back away from it.

Mike Blinder

All right. David, have you ever pulled a piece? Have you ever decided, I'm not running this?

]

David Dunn-Rankin

I have sent things back — and there's a couple I wish I had sent back. I'll give you a quick story.

My favorite mayor in Punta Gorda called me on my cell phone and just started ripping me a new one. I had to hold the phone out here. After about two minutes, I had to break in because he was on a rant. I said, "Well, Mr. Mayor, you sound mad." And he said to me — true story — "David, I am so mad, I want you to take your damn paper and stick it where the sun don't shine."

I was like, oh. He said, "Yeah, but not the Sunday paper. I'm not that mad." True story.

So I said, "Come on in, Mr. Mayor. Tell us what we screwed up." We got the committee of five who wrote the editorial. And this was an editorial I should have sent back — I knew better. He told us all the things we had gotten wrong in the editorial, and he was mostly right. They argued with him, blah blah blah.

I said, "Mr. Mayor, I totally see your point. We're going to write an editorial in about two days that says, 'Mayor says Sun has it all wrong,' and we're going to outline all your arguments, and we will not try to rebut those arguments. I think that's fair for us to do."

He said, "No, David. If you write another damn editorial about this, people are going to go, wait, what's going on? They wrote about it twice. They've already forgotten what you wrote about. I just came here to tell you you were wrong and you didn't do your homework."



And this is the part where I should have pulled it. So he left, and I said to the committee of five, “Hey, I have a rule — the Savage Rule — that we do not write about a person unless we talk to them first. Isn’t that my rule?” They said, yes, that’s your rule.

I said, “And we clearly didn’t talk to the city manager or the mayor before we wrote this?”

They said, “Well, it was 4:30, and we sent him an email and he didn’t respond by press time.”

I said, “Oh, is that David’s rule? You can write about somebody as long as you send an email at 4:30 right before press time and they don’t respond? That’s not my rule. You guys know that’s not my rule.”

“In fact, because you don’t understand that that’s my rule, the next person who does that, I am going to fire — and then I’m going to fire you, the executive editor, at the same time. Because you don’t get it.”

“Our job is not to be fair — fair is an opinion. Our job is to be accurate. And that editorial was not accurate because we didn’t do our daggum homework. When I read it, I was like, I don’t feel right about this. I don’t know what it is — but I should have pulled it.”

“So I actually think requiring people to do more homework is better. Because — and I’ll get into trouble here — I often read national publications like *The Wall Street Journal* and *The New York Times*. And when their committee of five writes about something that I know a lot about, I often go, these people didn’t do any homework. They could have done 30 seconds of homework and found out they were factually wrong.”

“And we should consider pulling more things and making sure that we’re accurate. Because accuracy builds trust. Fairness is an opinion.”

Mike Blinder

Hear, hear. That’s quite a story, David. Let’s go to the screen and see what the audience here is polling on this question.=

Have you ever pulled or edited an opinion piece due to legal or political concerns? The no’s have it — at least half. Half the audience here in Orlando says no. We’ve got yeses at 28%.

Has anyone in this room gotten a national syndicated column that you usually run, or a political cartoon you usually run, and said, “No, this is too polarizing, this is not relevant to my audience, I’m pulling it”? Raise hands, anyone? Has anyone made that decision? Over here?



Audience Participant 2

I think we don't run as many of the national columnists as we used to. And some of them that we do — I kind of approve them — but our copy desk looks at them and they run stuff by me. If it's just going to be, you know, someone going on a tear against Trump, I'm not going to run it.

We try to stay more toward the middle.

Mike Blinder

Trying to pull your quote from the Broadway show... it wasn't worth it.

Audience Participant 2

Yeah, it's just not worth it.

Mike Blinder

You've got enough to do. You have to work on your journalism. You have to tell your stories. Why are we even bothering with this in today's world?

Audience Participant 2

Right. And the cartoons — I find it really hard to find decent cartoons on the right side. I'm paying extra just to get some that are conservative and not terrible.

Mike Blinder

You've got a head nod here. So there's tons of left, but not enough right?

Audience Participant 2

Yeah.

Mike Blinder

Where are you from again?

Audience Participant 2

Dubuque, Iowa.

Mike Blinder

Oh, okay, so we're talking red now.

Audience Participant 2

We are. Dubuque is always — it's a blue-collar, union town. Used to be a very blue town. We recently elected our first Republican in county government. I mean, since I've been at the paper. But before that, it had been 55 years since there was a Republican in the courthouse. Now that's changed.

Mike Blinder

Okay, well, thank you for participating.

All right, we're going to do the last question, which we set up hopefully through this entire dialogue. This is important:

Do you think we should increase our op-eds, our opinion pieces? Should we do more, stay the same, or is it time to scale back? Should we recognize the new world — if people want far-left and far-right, they can go somewhere else. If people want to know who to vote for, they can watch the evening talk shows. I'm going to do local journalism. That's my job. I'm done with centuries of op-eds.



Dean, are you in the audience? Mr. Dean Ridings, are you here? Do you have a mic? Dean, how do you feel about this?

And by the way, can we have a round of applause for America's Newspapers, Dean Ridings, and this amazing show?

What do you think, Dean? You actually put out a little bit of an op-ed on this, did you not?

Dean Ridings

First of all, I think our members are right.

Mike Blinder

What?

Dean Ridings

I think our members are correct. Whatever they're doing right, I love our members.

Now, I think we live in polarizing times. From a business perspective, audience is critical. We don't have a future without audience. These more polarizing columnists and opinion pieces — we're losing audience. We live in incredibly polarizing times. People are here, they're there, and you lose half your audience when you go down either direction. And I don't think we can afford to lose audience. I'm not saying be cowardly, but we need to ask: is this what we should be doing?

I think we have to reevaluate what we're doing.

Mike Blinder

But remember the power we used to have — back in the old days.



Dean Ridings

Oh, we loved that power.

Mike Blinder

When I was first out there teaching people what the internet was, the presses were still in the building. The publisher had the big office with the receptionist. This was my job. This was my town. But we're in a different mode now.

Dean Ridings

Trust is eroding. We did research last year that indicates that trust in local newspapers is declining. We used to hold ourselves up as much better than the national media. That difference is eroding. And I think we need to be careful. Again, I'm speaking from a pragmatic business perspective.

Mike Blinder

We're a billboard in a basement, right?

We're not... I mean, what's the use? We need that audience to be relevant.

Rob Curley, more, less, or stay the same?

Rob Curley

We could run pro-con every day. I would — but we can't find that many people who want to conjugate verbs publicly.

Mike Blinder

Every time I'm asked — and Robin and I get this question no matter where we go — someone calls me and says, "Mike, what is the secret sauce?" I mean, everybody talks about sustainability. They say, "You do all this reporting, you're out there at conferences. What's the number one business model thing I should be doing to survive?"

And Robin will agree with me — and I think you've heard it already here: just tell good stories. Local journalism. Every success I've seen — from Hearst Connecticut tripling their digital subscription base to the Baltimore Banner, which is now on fire — it all starts with journalism. If the journalism is there first, everything else just comes behind it, right, Rob?

Rob Curley

Absolutely. Eight years ago, we switched our front page to 100% local, and it made all the difference.

Mike Blinder

Yeah. When I look at the business of *E&P*, as long as the stories are there and the audience is reacting, I can fix everything else. But if I lose that, I'm in trouble.

Michael, you were nodding your head when I talked about storytelling, local journalism. Do you agree?

Michael McCarter

I agree with my panelists. I also agree with the statements that were just made. There is something to be said about storytelling. I truly believe we have to lean into the moment that we're in — just saying it a different way. We all have to be essential to the markets that we serve.

If we're seen as essential, we'll be in a much better position. But we have to do that in a fearless manner. I don't like the idea of retreat. I consider retreat as defeat.

I think we have to lean into what we're doing, and we have to do it better and smarter. We have to listen to our audience. Metrics are no more than what is moving off the shelves of the store. If you're not selling it and people don't want to buy it, then you're not selling the right product.



We have to keep experimenting and trying new things. That's exactly what we're doing at Gannett. I have the wonderful job of experimenting in different ways to reach new audiences where they consume the news.=

Earlier this week, I was at the University of Arizona. I took a red-eye — so honestly, my days are blurring. I spoke at the Cronkite School. And when I talk to students, it's disheartening because they still consume news — they just don't always know *who* they're consuming it from. You have to reach them where they are.

Mike Blinder

But isn't this the age-old question? When I was a young pup in the '80s, I went to my first NAB conference — I was in radio then. Fred Friendly was still alive, and he was on the stage. Edward R. Murrow's legacy was everywhere.

And he said the debate then was: do we tell them the news they want, or the news they need? That was the dialogue back then.

Michael McCarter

That was part of the problem too — back in the old days, big offices, big rooms, big egos. Part of the problem with opinion from yesteryear was telling people what we wanted to tell them, instead of what they wanted to know.

Mike Blinder

But if it wasn't for Edward R. Murrow, would McCarthyism have continued? There's so many sides to this argument, or this conundrum. David?

David Dunn-Rankin

I've got a little different take, Mike. I think we're not biased and opinionated enough in our news. I got into this business to influence — to make my communities a better place.

I tell our writers: you need to be more biased, more opinionated — because we're here to make our communities better. It's okay to root for the high school football team. It's okay to root for your city. We're supposed to find the heroes and lift them up. And if there are villains, we should write about them too.



Yes, we're biased — because we decide what we write about. That's a bias. We decide how big the article is — that's a bias. We decide the headline — that's a bias. Let's not pretend news isn't biased. Let's wear it proudly and say, "This is who we are. We have our community's back."

I wish our folks would do less reporting and more storytelling. In every good story, there's a hero and a villain. And we need more of that — fighting for our communities.

Mike Blinder

Well, with that being said, let's go to the big screen with our final question and see how our audience here in Orlando responded:

Do you think opinion content should increase, stay the same, or scale back at your organization?

32% said increase, 42% stay the same, and 23% said scale back.

I'm out of time. How did we do?