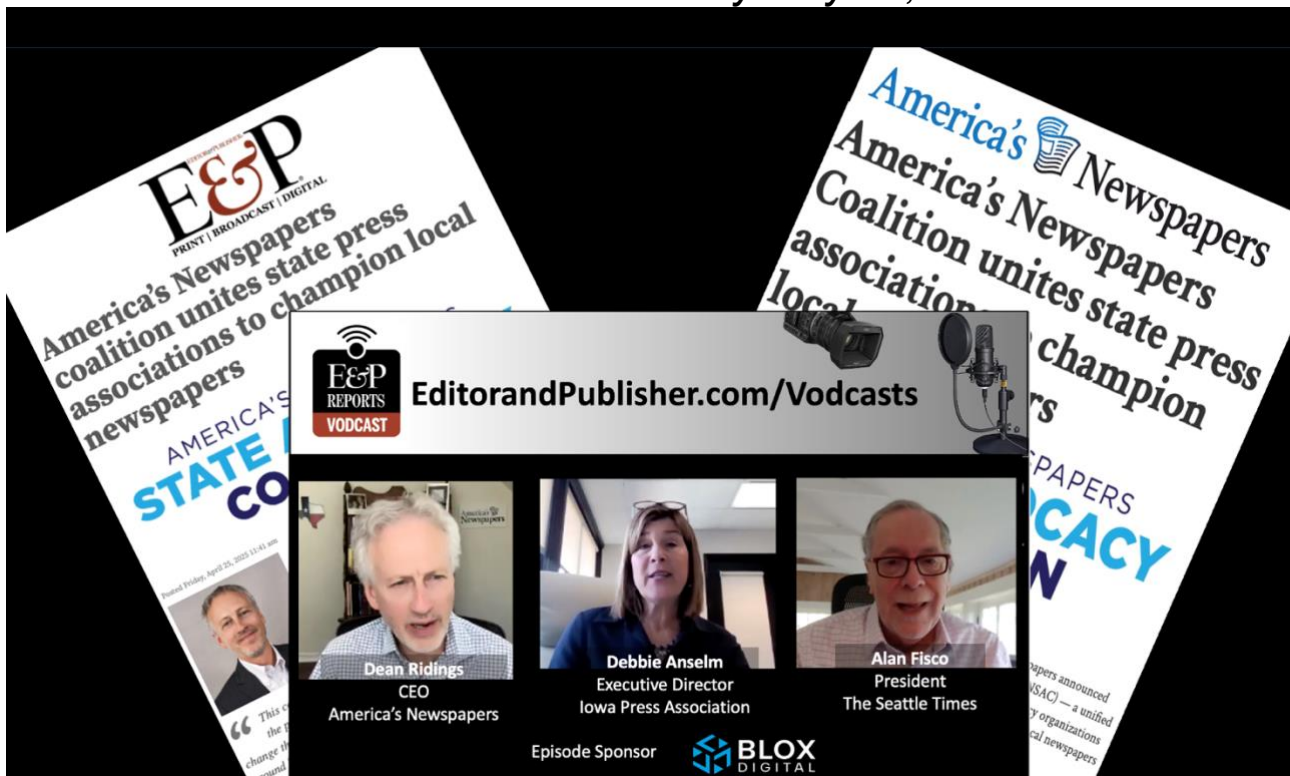


Audio Transcript

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with *Mike Blinder*

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Coalition unites press associations to defend journalism's future

With legislative threats mounting at the state level, America's Newspapers has launched a new coalition to unite press associations and publishers in defense of local journalism. In a recent *E&P Reports* episode, CEO Dean Ridings was joined by Alan Fisco, president of *The Seattle Times* and AN board member, and Debbie Anselm, the new executive director of the Iowa Newspaper Association, to unpack the coalition's goals. Together, they made the case for why statehouse advocacy is longer optional — and how a collective voice can drive meaningful policy change.



Mike Blinder

America's Newspapers has just launched a new state advocacy coalition, promoted as a coordinated effort to unite state press associations and industry leaders across the country in a shared mission. That mission is to champion the interests of local newspapers in statehouses from coast to coast. With local newsrooms facing legislative, financial, and regulatory threats, this coalition aims to amplify a collective voice. Let me say that again — a collective voice.

Its goal is to secure policies that preserve the press's vital role in democracy. And perhaps this is a new solution to a problem some say we have in the industry — too many voices. I don't know. We're going to find out.

Welcome to *E&P Reports*. I'm Mike Blinder, publisher of *Editor & Publisher* magazine.

With me today are two old friends and a new one. I don't know — Dean Ridings, are you old, or just an old friend?

Dean Ridings

Let's just say old friend.

Mike Blinder

Dean is CEO of America's Newspapers. You're spearheading this national push. Alan Fisco — Alan, you've been on the program before. You're president of *The Seattle Times* and a member of the America's Newspapers board of directors, championing this effort.

And, Alan, you're not unknown for your work in helping champion industry initiatives and keeping us alive and well — hopefully, or at least on the right path.

Debbie Anselm, first of all, congratulations. You are the new executive director of the Iowa Newspaper Association. Congratulations.

Debbie Anselm

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.



Mike Blinder

Welcome to a wonderful group — newspaper association managers. It's one of my favorite organizations. I actually spoke at their conference last year.

What's your background? I've got to ask — do you have ink in your veins? Do you come from the industry?

Debbie Anselm

I sure do. I've had decades in the industry. Most recently, I was a publisher for Lee Enterprises, overseeing seven mastheads in Iowa. I was actually president of the Iowa Newspaper Association board before becoming the executive director. So it's fun to be on this side of the business.

Mike Blinder

We'll dive into what prompted this coalition, what challenges it's tackling, and, maybe most importantly, what we can do as a local publishing community to support it.

Everybody stand by — we'll get to all that right after this.

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Mike Blinder

Alright, Dean. Let's start with you. What was behind this? What is the catalyst for launching this new coalition on state advocacy?

Dean Ridings

Yeah, Mike, there were a couple things that happened. In our board meetings over the last couple of years, there was a consistent theme from many of our directors — and that was how important their state press associations are. The role they play is vital. Nothing else can meet the goals of those organizations the way they do.



America's Newspapers has its place, but we can't fill the role at the state level. The board kept asking, "What can we do to help the state press associations? What can we do to make sure they're able to protect their members and continue to have strength and resources going forward?"

Some of them are facing financial challenges. So the board asked, "How do we help?" That was the first impetus — to create a coalition that could bring these groups together, provide more resources, and help us work together more closely on advocacy issues.

NAM — Newspaper Association Managers — is a great organization, but it doesn't advocate. So I felt there was a need for that too.

The second reason — if you look across the country, the majority of journalists work for for-profit newspapers. I'm not embarrassed to say I love working for for-profit newspapers. The owners care about their communities and want to produce great local journalism. That's so important.

But I've heard many of our members publicly criticized — and I felt like we need another voice to stand up for the newspapers across the country that are doing most of the reporting. This coalition gives us that voice — so we can collectively stand up and remind people of the vital role we play in local journalism.

Mike Blinder

Debbie, I'm showing the audience the inaugural 14 state associations that are on board — and you're one of them. Why is this important to you?

Debbie Anselm

I think it's not just a really important initiative — the timing is also critical.

When I first reached out to Dean, I was looking for opportunities to learn from and collaborate with people who are really making an impact in our industry.

Last year, I participated in the legislative fly-in with America's Newspapers and the News/Media Alliance. What I heard wasn't just one message — it was a unified message. A unified message about where we stand on issues like big tech, the Journalism Preservation Act, and others.

What I learned from that experience — and brought back to our state to share with members, legislators, potential funders, and the broader community — was incredibly impactful.



There's so much noise around our industry. We haven't done the best job telling our story. But there are lots of successful models out there. This coalition lets us hear directly from those doing great work — learn from their successes, share messages that are resonating. The messages themselves aren't necessarily new, but how we're telling them, and how they're landing — that's what's new. And it's important right now.

Mike Blinder

What are you facing locally that a united voice like this could help with?

Debbie Anselm

Public notice — always. Every state faces this. Protecting public notices in newspapers and keeping them off government websites.

I've reached out to coalition members for guidance, and we were able to come back with a bill that not only kept public notices in newspapers but also placed them on a statewide site our association manages.

Another big one: anti-SLAPP legislation. Thirty-four states have it — Iowa didn't. We just got that bill passed, which is a big deal.

We're also dealing with a lawsuit filed by our governor against one of our member newspapers, tied to open records and government transparency. These issues affect all of us.

This coalition gives us access to feedback, support, research — everything we need to keep fighting the good fight in our states and markets.

Mike Blinder

Alright, Mr. Fisco, let's bring you in. You're representing the publishers in this episode. What do you say to your fellow publishers about why we're doing this — and why it's important to the publishing community?



Alan Fisco

I think this is exactly what we need right now.

The focus has really shifted from federal legislation to state legislation over the past year or so. For me, it came into sharp focus in Washington State. We had a bill — similar to the federal tax credit bill — that came very close to passing. Unfortunately, it died at the last minute. We're still hoping for a special session to give us another shot at it.

But what it showed me is that even within one state, like Washington, the infrastructure is thin. Our state association is essentially one person wearing multiple hats. There's no centralized voice. Many newspapers no longer have local publishers — they're based in other states.

It was disorganized. And I mean no disrespect to Roland Thompson — he's our hero, working hard every day — but there was a lack of support and structure. That's what we hope this initiative will fix: giving state associations the guidance and roadmaps they need to actually pass legislation.

Mike Blinder

Let's take that one step further. You've got the mic — what do you say to other publishers who are actively involved in their local states? Should they be supporting this effort and getting involved?

Alan Fisco

Absolutely. Yes, join the coalition. But more importantly — build relationships with your local legislators, both state and federal.

They need to know who you are. When you go in with an ask, it's so much easier if they already know you. You don't want to be introducing yourself for the first time *and* asking for something. That never works well.

And here's the thing — your state legislators today are your federal legislators tomorrow. If you build that relationship now, you'll be ahead of the game later.

Mike Blinder

Dean, I see that you're hiring. You're looking for someone to help champion this initiative, right?



Dean Ridings

Yes. Now that we've got our initial group of associations on board, we want to hire a State Policy Director.

Going back to the purpose of this effort: we've seen a lot more legislative activity on the state level. One of the requests from our board was for America's Newspapers to provide more communication about what's happening in each state — so publishers can stay informed, replicate effective legislation, and learn from each other.

That's a big part of the coalition's mission — sharing information. But we need someone to help us do that.

We have a small team. We're looking to hire someone to monitor advocacy activity across all states. We already have a strong lobbying platform — for example, if a new bill is filed in Georgia that could affect newspapers, I get a notification. The tools are in place — now we need the person to manage them.

Alan Fisco

If I can jump in — one thing I'm excited about with this coalition is the level of visibility it could bring.

In Washington, 432 bills were passed in just 105 days. It was like D.C. on steroids — and we had no real way to track what might impact us. We didn't even know some of the bills existed until it was too late.

This coalition can help shine a light on those bills early, so we're not caught off guard by legislation that ends up harming us.

Mike Blinder

Let me swing back to Iowa for a moment. Debbie, we all know that many news organizations have downsized and eliminated publisher roles. Sometimes, there's no local "face" advocating in the community when a call to action goes out.

How are things in Iowa right now?



Debbie Anselm

We're actually pretty fortunate. In Iowa, we still have a newspaper in every one of our 99 counties. That's not typical anymore — but it's a point of pride here.

We also have solid representation in each of those counties. That's something we've always done well, and I credit my predecessors for maintaining that.

But we don't take it for granted. We're constantly working to bring in new editors and general managers. As our papers change structure and traditional publishers go away, we ask: Who's next? Who will be that community-facing advocate?

We're also focused on outreach to J-schools and universities. We're worried about the pipeline — and the future of the industry. These messages and efforts matter not just for legislators, but for students too. They're deciding right now whether journalism has a future — and we need to show them it does.

Mike Blinder

Dean, we've got to wrap things up. But let me ask you: whip out that crystal ball and tell me where you hope this initiative will be one year from today.

Dean Ridings

Well, I hope we've added more resources.

It's a bold move to say we're going to monitor 50 state legislatures with just a couple of people. But it's more than we had before. I hope we'll continue working closely with the News/Media Alliance and the National Newspaper Association — both do great work. We each have our areas of expertise.

But this coalition is a way to give us another voice — one that can go into a state when needed and give legislators real perspective on why their local newspapers matter.

If we have a good year, I hope there are new bills passed that support newspapers, bring us more resources, and help us do our jobs better — all because of the coalition's work. That's the goal.



Mike Blinder

Dean Ridings, CEO of America's Newspapers — thank you.

Alan Fisco, president of *The Seattle Times*, and a man wearing many hats to support the industry — thank you.

And Debbie Anselm, new but experienced Executive Director of the Iowa Newspaper Association — thank you as well.

Let's revisit this a year from now and update the audience on how it's going.

Thanks for your valuable time, everyone.