

Interview: Jim Brady, Dec. 8, 2012

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Thanks for listening to It's All Journalism. I'm Megan Cloherty joined by Michael O'Connell and our guest producer today, Sean McCalley. And today we have ONA [Online News Association] President Jim Brady with us in the studio. Jim is one of the pioneers of new media. Currently, he's the editor-in-chief of Digital First Media and overseeing the launch of Project Thunderdome in New York. And if you're as curious as we are about the next chapter of journalism, you've heard about Thunderdome and, of course, we'll take more about that. But first, Jim, thanks for joining us.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Sure, thanks for the invite.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

You're back and forth a lot these days.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

New York, D.C., all over the place. Tell us what's going on with Thunderdome and how things are moving forward.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah, the travel's kind of tough because we've got 75 newspapers around the country and you want to show your face as often as you can, especially when you're trying to roll something out like Thunderdome, which is a new concept and not something that's easily explainable via phone or even via PowerPoint presentation. You really need to go, sit and tell people what it is.

The idea of Thunderdome came from our CEO John Payton, when he took over Journal Register Company a couple of years ago. The goal of Thunderdome is to restructure the costs of a traditional newsroom that makes it sustainable going forward. We talk a lot about how all the tools of journalism are improving the actual quality of journalism and opening up all these doors for storytelling that we never had before, but we spend not nearly enough time talking about the financial underpinnings of the business. Cause you can build all the great stuff in the world, but if you can't afford it, you're pretty much dead.

What Thunderdome is trying to do is it's got three core components to it. The first core component, basically, tries to make sure that newsrooms are focused on local. Cause in the end, our local newsrooms are going to live and die based on their ability to cover their communities, not their ability to have foreign and national news in the paper. Readers want to have that information, but do we really have to make that New Haven and in Lorain, Ohio, and in El Paso, or can we produce that content one time in New York and make it available to all our papers and allow them to focus on covering city hall, local high school sports or whatever it is?

And so, right now, if you think about when Paul Ryan was named vice presidential candidate. We had 150 different acts, production acts in our company to put that story up -- 75 in print and 75 on the Web. One person at each of those properties went in and pulled the story off the wire and probably did nothing else to it and just threw it up on the homepage. What if you replaced that with one person who really knew politics, who's layering in related links, links to Ryan's voting record, a photo gallery of his life and putting together a really smart package about Paul Ryan and making it available to all 75 papers? Now they have better content than they had before and they didn't spend any time locally doing that.

Then, you add that up, 10, 15, 20, 50 stories a week, you've freed up maybe a body, maybe two if you're lucky in a bigger newsroom, and our goal is to get them now to say "All right, I've got two extra bodies, go cover something locally now. Get yourselves out of wire editing and get yourselves out of production."

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

As somebody who works on a website, I'm just hearing "clicks" from you. Related links, photo galleries, that would all go into their overall clicks, which would help them financially.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Right. And the story that they would get would be on their site. It's their page views. It looks like it's part of whatever site the readers are on. We're not branding it centrally, we're just producing it centrally. So, the Santa Cruz paper would have a Santa Cruz-branded Paul Ryan package that had all these related links on it, and, obviously, we all know that sideways traffic that comes in our articles right now is really the traffic that you have to take advantage of, because those are generally the people who come from blogs and search and social. And you want to get them to click again, so having stories that have no related links and no where to go from the actual story are kind of a waste. You're missing your opportunity to actually hook a new reader. So, we like to put nice article packages together. So that's part one, which is building out national, international, national business news, national/international sports news in New York and making it available to all the papers.

The second part is, we also have 75 papers with 60 million uniques. If you look at Omniture, comScore is obviously smaller. But everyone knows that Omniture and comScore are not in sync when it comes to numbers. But a lot of unique visitors, but those papers are generally too small to have a travel section, an education section, so we want to start building out parts of our, basically, new verticals that we can roll out across all of these papers and automatically be able to go to advertisers and say, "Hey, we have a health section that reaches 50 million uniques a month. You want to buy?"

And also look for partnerships. We have a partnership already with WebMD and with EverydayHealth in the health space specifically, and we want to do that across the board, maybe 10 or 12 verticals and open up some business opportunities for ourselves. Again, something that our local newsrooms independently will never be able to do, but collectively we can.

And the third piece is the piece that's really exciting to a lot of us as well, is to create sort of a shared-services desk for the entire company. We have a lot of newsrooms, again, not that big, who can't afford to have database journalists, who can't afford to have development resources, can't afford to have curation, can't afford to have video.

And so, we're building teams in New York that can basically dive in and help any of the local newsrooms when they need help on something. So, if in the midst of an investigative series the El Paso Times gets their hands on a great dataset that they can't produce locally because they don't have the skill set, they call New York and say "Hey, I've got some data that I think could really be useful for the story I'm doing, can you guys produce it?" And we will.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

The resource center?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah, it's a resource center. Most of the newsrooms don't have those now. The big ones do, but the small ones just kind of, whenever they get their hands on something, it's just like "Well, this would be great, I guess we'll type it into Excel and we're going to do something low-tech with it." Which is better than nothing, but we can do a lot better than that.

On top of that, we're creating a smaller reporting team that basically will allow us at any moment to expand the local newsroom size if there's a huge story locally. We had this a while ago at a school shooting not too far outside of Cleveland. We have a paper there that's not small, but it's not huge either. We might've been able to send in two reporters and put them under the power of the local editor and say, "What do you need these people to do? Do you need them to do any reporting on the big story? Do you need them to report on some things so you can free up your local people to do the big story?"

Or do you want them to run a social media feed? Do you want them to do just some basic blocking and tackling?"

But we'll be able to, as Hal Raines used to say, "flood the zone." Pick a spot, flood it for a couple of days and pull them back and put them somewhere else. We're experimenting with the idea of really smart, putting really good resources and using them in a smart way.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

What do you think most newspapers or most outlets that you're talking to are responding to? Because that's a multiple-pronged approach here.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

And all of them sound great. But what is the big sell usually?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

I think they're responding most to the last. I mean, that this shared services sort of model.

We already had this within the election. St. Paul Pioneer Press wanted to have live election results that night and didn't have the bandwidth to do it. And so, they worked with us. We pulled together a really nice set of data from them and they got six-figure page views on something that they'd never be able to have before. So, that's the kind of thing that gets a lightbulb to go on. When someone sees that and says, "I get what Thunderdome is, or I get it can help me." Our goal is you've got to get 10 of those to blink on every day. Even if that's the case, it'll take a year for everybody to really get it, because we have 2,100 journalists in the company. That's the goal. Don't try to win everybody over on day one.

It's a foreign concept. The centralization of the non-local, I think that sounds good to a lot of newsrooms, but right now, we're kind of doing it, kludging it together cause the technology is not where it needs to be. To do what we're talking about doing, about producing the story one time, we've got to be in a common design, we have to be in a common CMS [content management system]. We don't have to be, but it's a heck of a lot easier when you're on a common system. And we're slowly getting there. We're rolling out, current redesigns, we've already rolled out two and we're going to have 30 or 40 rolled out by the middle of this year. The Web redesign will be largely done in 2013 and the CMS rollout will probably take till the middle of 2014. We have ways to deal with not having those common systems, but every time we get another system installed that's part of our common, we'll be in much better shape.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

That's the whole appeal, right?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

That it's easy for them. They don't have to redo it in their CMS or whatever it is. OK, I missed the memo. Why is it called Thunderdome?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

There's a lot of dispute about that. I'm going to call my CEO out on this one, because he always claims he doesn't know either. But I've heard this story from multiple people, that he named it after, this is a story, by putting on here I'll find out whether it's true or not at some point.

But, my old employer, The Washington Post, built a really slick part of their new newsroom that was really for the Web staff and the homepage staff with a lot of monitors and it was very glitzy. If you've been in The Washington Post newsroom, it's not glitzy. It's got an amazing amount of history and amazing things have been done in there, but no one would call it glitzy. And this very modern thing in the middle of this older newsroom and I think John asked Katharine Weymouth, who's the publisher, what that was and she explained it and said, "We just call it Thunderdome." That story I've heard from multiple people. Whatever.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Where the action's at.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

I didn't name it. I had nothing to do with it and I still haven't gone back to watch the movie yet, which I feel like I probably should at this point.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

When you have your anniversary you can bring in Mel Gibson.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Yeah, maybe some WWE fighters.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah, when we were trying to name things, people would start referencing things in the the movie like "Oh, what about Master Blaster:" And I'm like, "I don't really know what that means." And they'd say, "That was a character in the movie." And I'm like, "I really need to watch this again."

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

Maybe we really don't want to go down this road. Maybe it's just a name. This is the thing we call it. So, you launched in mid-July. Has the trajectory been where you were hoping it has been?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah. Everybody that we interviewed for a job at Thunderdome we basically told them, "You have to be ready to stare into the face of complete change and understand that the job you're taking today might not be exactly what it'll be in six months. There'll be plenty to do, but how this is going to play out may not be the way we think it's going to."

I think for the most part, we feel pretty good about the trajectory, but we're still struggling with the technology. We have to do a lot via email and a lot via some very inefficient systems. To the point where when we tried this very early experiment with the Olympics, we got feedback from one guy who said, "I've got two problems with how this worked -- poor communication and way too many emails." It would seem like they're kind of oxymoronic, but they're not, because if you send a lot of emails, it's actually bad communication. It might not be have been too much, but it's lousy communications to send somebody 50 emails a day with Olympics updates.

So, we've made a lot of progress since then, where in a couple of weeks, we'll be able to roll out a system that kind of takes all of the content we're producing across all the papers and puts it in a repository, at least the last two weeks. It makes it much easier to search and find stuff, so we're making progress as we go, but it's going to take a full year to roll out all the technology to make it work. But I think the shared-services pieces is less dependent on that. They can just work with projects in the field and they don't have to worry about that as much. But the building of the verticals and the sharing of content is still a little bit tougher.

It's All Journalism - Sean McCalley

So it sounds like that system, and tell me if this is fair or unfair, it sounds like you have your own central wire.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah, that's certainly a part of what we're trying to do. The reason we're trying to change the cost structure here is, there are a lot of ways that we're trying to change it. One of the ways is we have a lot of people paying for things like movie reviews from syndicates. We have papers that review movies. Why would a paper on one side of the company be paying somebody for movie reviews when the Denver Post is writing movie reviews? Let's look at our bottom line and let's look at what we're paying for and make sure that everything we're paying for is adding some kind of value and can't be acquired elsewhere.

A great example of how the power of all of these papers working together can be helpful is we had a technology writer in Michigan at the Oakland Press in Pontiac write a tech review that he thought was pretty good, and he sent it to Thunderdome and said, "If you guys could share this out, that would be great. I think it's a pretty good piece." Shared it out and 25 of the 75 papers picked up that review and ran it. It got 7,000 page views on the Oakland Press site and now it's gotten over half-a-million collectively in the company. So you see a 70x increase just because he bothered to share it with somebody.

And I think every time a paper sees a piece that they wrote shared out and this sort of long-tail effect comes on, I think they start to realize, "Yeah, why wouldn't I want more people to see what I'm doing? Who cares if it's not on our site?"

And part of what's going to happen is, in the new world, once we have SEO [search engine optimization] and our systems in place, the Oakland Press will get a big bang for being the originator of that story. They'll end up seeing a nice swing of traffic back to them and see their own Google profile kind of bumped up. So there'll be an even upside for them to share it out, because the traffic will come back to them.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

So it does link back and then they can also put like, I'm the reporter and I work for the Oakland Press or whatever.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

In that case, they just took the story and pasted it into the site, but what's going to happen with this, I won't go into the boring details of what a canonical url is, but basically what it means is the url will identify who the originator of the story was and that will help their Google rank.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

Part of your job is visiting all of these newsrooms. How many newsrooms?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Seventy-five dailies, a couple of hundred weeklies.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

So how do you get people to, for lack of a better word, think the way that you need them to think for what you're doing?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

We just try to lay out the reality. We just did a Thunderdome Roadshow, where we visited 11 sites and basically had the other properties around the largest property drive in and we basically got in front of all 75 newsrooms and all the weeklies and explained to them, "Here's where we are after six months of doing this and here's what's working and here's what's not." Very transparent. But, we always start out with the basic showing them some charts about why this is the strategy.

We have the advantage of having 75 papers. Thunderdome is a scale-play as well as anything else. If you have five newspapers building a centralized team doesn't make any sense. You just don't have enough papers to make that work financially. Seventy-five you do.

So we just walk them through. Look, print is still a huge chunk of our revenue, but, if you look at any number about where the revenue's going and how fast the decline is accelerating, you know you've got to figure out how to cut your production cost in print or you're not going to make it. You look at any study about where people get their news and information from below the age of, forget about below the age of 30. Below the age of 60 at this point. It's clear the trends are all digital. And so, what we don't want to do is to sit here and wait it out.

I always say that if the water was sort of up to your waist five years ago and it was up to your chin three years ago, I mean, now it's pretty much where you're going to be under before too long. And if you're sitting there hoping it just recedes, you're going to drown, because the business is just dying.

It's All Journalism - Sean McCalley

So far, what would you say is the biggest challenge of getting all these component parts to work as one?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

I think the challenge is more social than it's anything else. The technology will get there. I think you still have to convince newsrooms that this makes sense, and newsrooms, people always say nobody likes change. I think that's probably true and I would argue that newsrooms like it even less than almost any other culture I've ever been in before.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

That has been the perception of many people over the last five or 10 years.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yes, and I've been doing this since 1995, so maybe I'm just a little, I've been doing this too long. But, I think they get comfortable in the way they do things and trying to change that dramatically is a big step and telling people who've been running their own websites for a long time that you're not going to have to worry about the non-local stuff still scares them, even if, in the end, none of them are there really to produce national and international news. They're there to cover the communities. I think that's the hardest part and that's why we're doing the roadshow and it's why we're taking a very methodical approach to winning people over.

If you polled the entire company on Thunderdome today and it was a secret ballot, I'm sure there's a big chunk who would still say "I don't get it" or "I think it's a bad idea." But, it's our job to make sure we get those out over the next year.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

You're one of the chief advocates of digital first as an approach for a newsroom. For you, where did that come from? What was the "ah-ha" moment?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

The "ah-ha" moment for me was back in the late '80s, actually.

I'm a Long Island kid, a big Mets fan, and they were actually good back then. And I was in college, senior year, living off campus and I had a friend who had a CompuServe account, and I was complaining how it was impossible to get a Mets' score. You've got to wait for George Michael to come on at 11 or you've got to call Sportsphone, where they're charging you two bucks a minute and talking as slowly as humanly possible to get the rate up. And he was showing me, "Oh yeah, you can just dial on and get the score here."

It wasn't, today, you get the speed of the pitch 1 second after it's thrown. Back then, it was like every three innings or something. But I remember thinking like, "Wow, why would I not want to get information that I want when I want it?"

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

Why would I wait for tomorrow for today's paper?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Why would I wait? How is this going to lose out?

Nobody voted for a thing thrown on your doorstep at five in the morning that had yesterday's news in it. That was like the best we could do. From a technology standpoint, it was the best we could get and the fastest we could get in-depth information to you. Once something came along that was going to make it more personal and faster than that, how is that not going to lose out? So, for me, I just remember thinking, "This is the future."

And I was working at the Post at the time, part time, and I was still there five years later when they started WashingtonPost.com, or started this company that eventually became WashingtonPost.com and begged them for a job and went over there in 1995 and have been there ever since.

But for me, that was the "ah-ha" moment of just like, the personalization and the speed of information, for me, why would I pass on that?

It's All Journalism - Sean McCalley

The magic of Davey Johnson.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yes, exactly, exactly.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

As an entrepreneur, how exciting is this? I know you've had multiple projects and this is a big one. And you're finally seeing it kind of, we're almost there. How are you feeling about entrepreneurial journalism, about what you're doing? Do you think this is a big step?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

It is. We're "intrapreneurs" We're inside a company, obviously, so we don't have the, we're not fully entrepreneurs, but I think this is an entrepreneurial effort. It's basically a major, major effort to restructure how newsrooms operate and how their cost structure is.

For me, I've always been very interested in the financial piece of this, because I think too many people get too geeked up, as I was saying earlier, about all the technology and how it's making journalism so much more exciting than it's ever been. But always in the back of my mind I'm thinking, "Who cares if you can't pay for any of this?" It doesn't matter.

And that's why Thunderdome is exciting to me. Instead of sitting here and hoping the water will recede or, just cutting, cutting, cutting the newsrooms until you have nothing left to produce a product with, our strategy is we're swimming for something. We're swimming for shore here. This is not a helpless strategy. This is an offensive strategy

that says, "We're going to get to a place in which we're going to build a new structure that's sustainable and, hopefully, it'll work and others will follow."

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

And not to put too much of a downer on this, but in September the Journal Register Company filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy, which caused a lot of speculation about the company and its business model. What are your thoughts about that filing and the progress that has been made since then?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

The filing, if you read John Payton's blog post on that, is pretty much exactly what it was. It was a need to restructure the costs in a way that will make it sustainable going forward.

The Journal Register had gone through this in 2010, before John was CEO, and they really didn't address the cost structure piece of this. When you get down the road to leases and pension models and there's just things that you have to look at, and bankruptcy gives you a chance to look at those with a fresh eye and take another shot at them. I think anybody who works at the JRC will tell you, one, they were terrified when they heard that news, and, two, nothing has changed in terms of the operations of the JRC side of the company since it was announced. We continue to hire. There hasn't been any brakes put on anything that we're doing since that was announced.

I don't think we'll be the last company to do that, and for the same reasons. If you look at buildings, for example, and this is something that's not normally talked about on a journalism podcast, but if it comes to cost structure. We have buildings that used to have presses in them, used to have an active loading dock, used to have a mailroom that had a ton of people in them. And now, all that's left, is a centralized printing. We use one-tenth of that space for the newsroom and a little bit for advertising and the rest is just sitting there empty. But the leases are still as onerous as they were 20 years ago. And it's those kind of things you're trying to take another shot at with a bankruptcy.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

You're sort of trying to shed some of the holdovers from your legacy --

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah, shedding legacy costs basically describes it in three words.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Not only are you hiring, but we're seeing tweets all the time, you know, "We've got this new web manager. Apply for this." Tell us, from a hiring standpoint, what you're looking

for, what you want from new journalists. Obviously, you still have to write in print-style, but you have to be flexible. Tell us about that.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Well, I think we're looking for, I consider myself one of the luckiest guys in the business to have two chances, with TBD.com and with this, in the last five years to hire a newsroom from scratch, which not many people get to do.

So, what we're looking for is fearlessness. You're willing to try anything, any new tool that comes over the transom. You're going to grab and try something with. And it might very well completely tank. So, I want people who understand that failure is not something we're afraid of. Many of the pieces of Thunderdome will fail as we go forward, and the key is just pushing forward on the ones that don't.

I was at a conference, ONA, a little while ago, and I was saying, "I don't want high-maintenance." I just don't want people who are causing a lot of trouble. I don't want temperamental types. I want really smart, reliable. And as you know, temperamental types can be found in a newsroom, here and there.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Just a few, though.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Just a few. We're looking for people who are willing to work together and don't get turf.

I want to take 40 people and throw them at this thing and say, "You guys are going to figure out the future of this, go ahead and do it. And if you need guidance, then let us know. But otherwise, just take whatever hill you think is the right hill to take. And we'll sort of directionally point you, but we're not going to micromanage you." And so, we just want open-minded people.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

For young journalists who are in school or thinking about going into the field, what advice would you give them at this point?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Be great at something.

I think one of the things I've seen coming out of journalism schools a bit too much is people who tell you how many different things they can do. And then you say, "But are you great at any of them?" Because if you can kind of shoot video and kind of write and

you can kind of tweet and you can kind of do this, I think you're probably going to kind of be looking for a job for a while.

Figure out what it is you want to be. All those things are great add-ons. If you're a great reporter and you want to do video and you're active in social, thumbs up. But you've got to pick something you really want to be good at. Pick a core thing to go after.

I think you find too many people who kind of awe you with the list of skills, but you're not sure which is the one they actually are going to be able to take and run with. Utility players in baseball are valuable, but they're not usually the stars on the team. Figure out what you really, really want to be good at and you can remain open-minded about what storytelling is.

I think we're finally starting into that phase where people are acknowledging that stories are not always text, from a newspaper perspective.

One of the interesting things that we've done at Thunderdome in the last three months is we don't have sections for a lot of these people yet. Like the person who is running health doesn't really have a section to run. So what are they going to do in sports if they don't have their own section to publish to yet? So what are our sports people doing? They're doing all this stuff with Storify and Sponge and Meograph and timelines, and they're figuring out all these ways to tell stories that are not traditional.

You know, I was reading a George McGovern obit last month, and it was done in Storify and it was awesome. It was clips of all his speeches, but weaved into a narrative. Reading a 60-inch obit that's just text of McGovern is not nearly as interesting. You're starting to see this storytelling morph into this true multimedia. When I say multimedia, I mean the actual story has like three or four different forms in it. And I think we're experimenting with that and I think you're going to see more of that. And that's what we're excited to watch as the Thunderdome develops.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

What's been the feedback from your audience?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

The audience really doesn't, I mean, the audience is our newsrooms, really, at this point, because we don't have any sites that are Thunderdome. In fact, it's a brand. You'll never see the brand. We're never going to put anything out there that says, "This is produced by Thunderdome." It's invisible publicly.

So the audience is really the newsrooms, at this point. And I'd say it's hit or miss, I think. Some have, because the technology isn't where it needs to be yet, they're not able to use nearly as much of this stuff as we're sending out. It takes time in the current system to say, "Hey, there's a story that's been written that may be of interest to you." Then

you've got to cut and paste it into a template. So, it's not as easy as it needs to be for them yet, and I think some of them don't really get why national/international should be on their sites at all. Local should always dominate these sites.

One thing I should make clear about Thunderdome, we're not updating anybody's site locally. The local editors update the sites. They take whatever they want from us and put it where they want to put it. We're not forcing stuff into the homepage or anything like that. So I think we just have got to keep pushing on them to understand that this will add value to you and add page views to you that locally you can also go make money again. So, there's a lot of upside here. But it's still hit or miss. I won't lie about that. That's part of why we're going around and talking about it so much.

It's All Journalism - Sean McCalley

When you have your creative meetings and stuff right now, what's the next big problem that you're trying to solve, or what solution are kicking around right now?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

I think the next big problem to solve, for us, is monetization, not specific to Thunderdome, but we're looking at some really interesting ways that we can drive some revenue. We're using Scribd.Alive a lot now for live events, and we had a live event around the first debate that got a million-and-a-half page views from papers that aren't even part of our company, that were just picked up because we put it in the Scribd.Alive syndication engine and like, "Boy that's interesting. How can we monetize that kind of traffic?" We can put an ad in Scribd.Alive. We spend so much time trying to monetize our own sites, sometimes we forget we'll have traffic on other people's sites that we can monetize too. So it's trying to figure it out.

Thunderdome is a unique model and it's going to give us some opportunities to monetize uniquely as well, and that's where the sales folks and I spend a lot of time talking about is, "How do you take this new model and really, fundamentally, blow it up?"

When you have a common design for your websites and common design for your newspapers, you can sell advertising across all your properties, which, right now, is very complicated for us to do cause how different they all are, and so that's really the next model is the money.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

One of the projects that you mentioned a little earlier was TBD.com. What did you take away from that?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

I took away from it that we were onto the right thing.

The reasons why it all fell apart are, nobody believes us, but they're still even a mystery to me to some extent, because it all happened so suddenly. When you're three months into something that's done no external marketing, which people don't know. They all think we got a lot of it. We didn't. It was just a lot of social. But in terms of external marketing in the city, we got bupkis. We were up to 800,000 uniques a month and 8 million page views, which seemed like a not a bad place to be. And we'd done some things that had gotten a lot of attention.

So, what I took away from that was the model is still right. The combination of reporters producing professional journalism but partnering very closely with their community is the right model and is the only one, frankly, that's going to be economically viable.

You're going to have to keep your newsrooms at a manageable level and you're going to have to leverage the people that already live in this town to help drive interest in what it is you're doing. I still believe truly in that.

The only takeaway from it, I guess, I could say that would be a negative one would be, maybe we could've staffed it a little less at the start. But to do what we were trying to do, I thought we needed to go right off the bat and have a sizable newsroom.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Do you think, just talking about the model you said, having reporters get really into the community and close to their sources. It's interesting you say that because now, this Project Thunderdome venture, has more of a national scope.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Yeah.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

So you're saying, sending reporters out, to different papers to sort of be the extra hands is helpful, but how do you do that? How are you a reporter who all of a sudden has to know Cleveland and doesn't know Cleveland? What's your idea for that?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

That's why we're going to leave it up to the local editors on what is that story, and if that story requires a lot of local knowledge, you should have your own staff do it. And the maybe if you need to send one of the SWAT team reports -- SWAT team reporters? We have lots of cool names. If you want to send them out to cover a prep game, go ahead and cover a prep game. Whatever you need that you can't cover because you need to take your native staff and you've got to put them on something.

The irony of Thunderdome is the mission that the staff came up with, which was to empower local newsrooms, which people think is weird because of the national/

international focus, the who idea is we will do all of that. And that allows you in Ohio to say, "I now have another body to cover something in Cleveland that I didn't have before." So it is a local play. I mean, in the end, that's what it's all about. It'll free people up to community editors, hopefully, because we've opened about 15 or 20 community newsrooms now, which is part of the newsroom that community can walk into and meet with journalists and grab coffee. This is all about local for us.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

And everybody's in New York, right now, right?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Most, yeah.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Most are in New York, so they're going to go out from New York to wherever they're needed. Are you guys going to have sort of regional little hubs?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Well, we've only hired one so far, so we're trying to figure out whether the other two reporters should be geographically -- we're probably looking maybe one on the West Coast, maybe one closest to our hubs of papers, which really the big chunks are California, Colorado and a whole bunch in the East. So, we'll figure out where to go based on who we get. And we may just decide we only need to send one person in the three. We don't have a lot of experience yet in actually figuring out how to sort of get them out into the field.

So many crazy things have happened in the last six months, but the one thing we can't seem to get happen is a big story in one of our local markets where we can test the concepts. We're still waiting on that one. But our SWAT reporters are writing all sorts of national stories that are getting a lot of traffic, so that's been good. But we'd like to test the local/national kind of combo.

It's All Journalism - Sean McCalley

So what is the cost of that logistics? Are you concerned that in itself it may be ...

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

We're into logistics now.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

We've budgeted for what we think the travel will be and we'll see if we're over it, we'll figure it out again next year and save some things this year. But we've talked a lot about the logistics, that's why we're talking about putting them in different parts of the country.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

Let's talk about the industry in general. What do you see some companies doing that you think are going in a good direction that maybe's going to help them survive? And what do you think some people are not doing that they should be doing?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

The subject always comes up when you raise this about paywalls. We have 23 in the company, so we're not paywall free. They were part of the Media Newsgroup when we started managing them last year.

I know there's this growing thread that says, "Well, if more and more papers are going to paywalls, it must be the right answer." My response to that is always, "Because a lot of newspapers are doing something digitally, why would everybody think that was the right answer?" We don't have a great track record in terms of doing the right things digitally, so we'll wait to see on that one.

I still think that's a strategy that works fine if you just boil it down to today's revenue and you say, "Well, we're not selling enough ads on our website, so we're not losing any ad revenue, but we're adding subscription revenue, so it's obviously the right strategy."

My argument to that is that the Web is always such an open medium and the minute you put walls up, look at the thing I was talking about before, about being able to monetize traffic offsite. We're looking to actually grow our traffic on other people's sites and monetize that. You really can't do that if you're behind a meter. At some point, people are going to hit that paywall and you're done.

So, I think it's a fine strategy for today and next week and maybe the next couple of years, but if you're really trying to take advantage of the Web itself, you've got to stay pretty open, in my mind, and you've got to be able to build audience and you've got to be able to get people from all over this Web. They call it a Web for a reason. It's all about connections, and the minute you put the wall up, even if it's a meter, the connection is a little bit broken.

So, I still think that's a short-term strategy that people will realize is probably not the best, but I also will caveat that with there may be properties that, based on a specific geographic situation, can make that work, but I think it's going to be a smaller number rather than a larger.

I think you're seeing people attack the tablet, which everybody has to attack and mobile in general.

I still think you see too many apps that look like the websites. We had this thing where the websites looked like the newspapers and the apps looked like the websites and you end up with something that hasn't really evolved generationally in 15 years.

We did an app. We have a really good mobile team where we launched an application, the Denver Post app, which is now on 50 of our sites, the templates. It's just much, much smarter. It's a cleaner, good look. It's all about swiping and it's not about headlines and blurbs and photos. It's basically very image driven and has got some beautiful work done in terms of how we display very newspaperly things like comics. Mario Garcia wrote it up as one of the best news apps he's ever seen and he's a pretty good source on news design, so I still think you see too many apps that just look like the front page of the paper and not acknowledging how people use these tools completely different than the Web. You've got to design for the platform.

It'll be interesting to see what responsive design does to that because responsive design is all about designing it once and having it fit to the screen. It's going to have to be more than that. You're going to have to fundamentally change what you've featured on your mobile sites versus your websites and we'll see if that can be done within responsive design. It probably can.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

I want to give a shout out to ONA. I saw you at the San Francisco conference and, you know, there's a lot of creativity there. There always is. But do you see it moving forward to more people becoming a little more aware of the business side, which is obviously your wheelhouse? Or is it more still design and creativity and apps or is it all of it?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

It's all of it. There's so much at ONA you can kind of pick your, uh ...

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

You don't want to say "poison?"

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

No, no, I was trying to think of the word that they use to ... and I'll skip that because I can't think of it, a more Saturday morning moment.

I think there's so much at ONA that the thing you have to worry about, like, you don't want it to get too big. You know, the point where people ... the great thing about ONA is for me, it's like a high school reunion. I've been doing this for a long time. I know everybody at that conference and so much you get out of a hallway conversations. But, I think the panels have to continue to focus on creativity. We do a lot on business. We do a lot on culture, which I think is still a huge issue.

What I love about ONA is walking the halls and seeing like the editor of the L.A. Times talking to a 22-year-old developer somewhere and drawing something on a board. It's people who'd never probably meet in their normal walk of life, like just ginning something up in the corner of a hotel hallway somewhere. It think it's been great. I've been on the board now for seven years. To watch how it's evolved in that time is truly amazing. The conference this year was --

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Huge.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Huge. Just in terms of the reviews and adding the midway, which was this whole innovation part of ONA, got really strong reviews.

I'm excited about where it's going and it's been a fun year as president. I'm very proud of that organization. When I got into it eight years ago, the board was pretty much all people running large media organizations. And they were pretty much all men, or mostly men, very little diversity on the board. And now, we have diversity on the board almost any way you look at it -- what medium they work in, again, what their backgrounds are, race, gender, ethnicity, so it's really good.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

I think you're a good person to ask this question to, because a lot of our listeners are students and educators. And I think they know they need to network, and they know they want to network. I went to ONA and I was new there. And I didn't know that I was sitting next to the editor of the L.A. Times. How do you use the organization? How would you give somebody a tip or a toolbox to say, "Yeah, join ONA for the obvious benefits." How do you use it as a young journalist?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

The young journalist, certainly, the networking piece, we have chapters now in about 20 cities around the country, so if there's a chapter and there isn't one where you are, you can start one. We have one at Mizzou [University of Missouri], now that's one of our biggest chapters. So, certainly you can get involved in that way.

There's a benefits page on the site [www.journalists.org], which will kind of lay it all out, but there are a lot of benefits we provide in terms of training, in terms of access to people who can fill your brain with all sorts of cool ideas, legal protections, in some cases.

So, as a young journalist, I think the best part of it is just the networking and the learning part. Then, once you get into a professional environment, some of the other stuff, the

big issues and legal kind of kick in a little more. But I think it's really just being part of the group and bouncing off of other people.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Restart your engine, basically, right?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

And a lot of people say that, "It's been a tough year and I've had," in the cases of the mainstream press, where people will say, "I've had to lay a bunch of people off, and I go to the conference and I'm all down and after three days, I feel like, you know, we're going to be fine."

It's the same way I feel about, I was just saying to somebody in New York, yesterday, there isn't one person sitting in this newsroom in Thunderdome that thinks journalism is dead. Not one. Everyone of them knows it's going to make it. They don't know exactly what it's going to be and how it's going to get there, but none of them are sitting there gloom and doom. I've been to too many conferences where the tagline of the conference should be just "We're all going to die." You know? The minute ONA ever gives off the feeling that journalism is in trouble, then we need to redo it completely.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

We've been speaking with Jim Brady today about lots of different things, Thunderdome, the future of journalism. Thank you for coming in Jim.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Sure. It's a pleasure.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

Where can people find out more about Thunderdome?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Actually, thank you for asking: www.insidethunderdome.com We just launched our Thunderdome blog last week in which we're putting up kind of success stories, not only just from Thunderdome, but really good work that's been done in our newsrooms around the country. But it has profiles of who's working there and what we're trying to do.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

You can find out more about us at www.itsalljournalism.com and you can follow us on Twitter at @AllJournalism. Do you have a Twitter account?

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Oh yeah, @JimBradySP.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

He tweets about the Jets a lot.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

I tweet about the Jets a lot, sadly.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

Yeah, you might want to, well, I'm not going to say anything.

It's All Journalism - Megan Cloherty

Don't go there.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Turn it off on Sundays in the fall and winter.

It's All Journalism - Michael O'Connell

Thanks a lot for coming in.

Jim Brady, editor-in-chief at Digital First Media and president of the Online News Association

Sure.