

### 3 Takeaways Podcast Transcript

Lynn Thoman

(<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

#### Ep. 179: U.S. News & World Report CEO Eric Gertler On Why Today's Most Critical News Story May Be The News Media Itself

*This transcript was auto-generated. Please forgive any errors.*

**INTRO male voice:** Welcome to the 3 Takeaways podcast, which features short memorable conversations with the world's best thinkers, business leaders, writers, politicians, scientists, and other newsmakers. Each episode ends with the three key takeaways that person has learned over their lives and their careers. And now your host and board member of schools at Harvard, Princeton and Columbia, Lynn Thoman.

**Lynn Thoman:** Hi, everyone. It's Lynn Thoman. Welcome to another 3 Takeaways episode. Today, I'm excited to be with US News & World Report CEO, Eric Gertler. I'm excited to find out what's happening with the news and how we can all detect fake news. Welcome, Eric, and thanks so much for joining 3 Takeaways today.

**Eric Gertler:** Lynn, I'm excited too. I'm excited to join you. So, thank you for having me as a guest.

**LT:** It is my pleasure. What has happened to the revenues of the top newspapers and magazines?

**EG:** When you think about it, we've moved from print magazines, print newspapers, into digital media. And what that has meant is that, if you take a large newspaper, you're selling one advertisement, full page ad, for a lot of money. Now you've got to make up for it with lots of eyeballs, which is the terminology, lots of people coming to your [web]site to get that money. So, what people often say is we've shifted from analog dollars to digital dimes. And for the business to work today, you need lots of people coming to your site or you're just not making up the revenue, and that's the trade-off today on these digital news sites. You need lots of eyeballs to make it work.

**LT:** And is it working? What's happened to the revenues? Are they down a bit or substantially or are they up with lots more digital eyeballs? And what are the implications?

**EG:** It certainly varies. What has happened is you've seen a lot of advertisers want to invest, meaning advertise on the largest site. So, you've seen some of the large social media sites - Google, Facebook, Twitter, now known as X - get a lot of advertising dollars, but other sites that have large audiences are doing quite well. We have north of 40 million people coming to our site, so we're getting millions of dollars of advertising. Other news sites are as well. Those that had successful magazines that have not been able to transfer or shift into the digital world have not fared so well.

**LT:** So, it sounds like the market has pretty much split with the top media newspapers and magazines doing well and the rest suffering?

**EG:** Yeah. And that was really no different in the old world too, but I think it's the network effects - that the more users you have, the more dollars you get, the more influence you have - and that's

certainly a trend that we've seen in the digital era.

**LT:** How does the current trend toward immediacy of everything - instant everything, from news to purchases - impact the news industry today?

**EG:** It's a great question. What happens is there's almost no time for reflection. You're getting the next piece of information, you're moving from one fact to the other fact, and that doesn't allow for an opportunity to contextualize what is happening. And in fact, what we do at US News is we don't do what you're talking about. We're not following every single event. We're trying to be more of a second day news site, meaning we're providing you context, we're providing you analysis, we're trying to help you have an understanding of what is going on. What does this mean to you? How is this particular event affecting you? But you're right. Those that are following social media, don't get that context. They are just getting that quick adrenalin rush of, "This just happened."

**LT:** According to Pew Research, the average minutes per visit for the top 50 US daily newspapers has dropped from three minutes, which to me seemed very quick about 10 years ago, to about a minute and a half today. What are the implications of that very short glance at the news?

**EG:** I think there's different ways we're looking at. Certainly, on any one site, people are looking at less information. But it used to be that someone would come to a site and they'd look at several stories. Now, very often, they're coming and looking at one story on that particular site. But I think the implication of your question is a concerning one, and that is are we providing enough information to users, or more importantly, are consumers being engaged sufficiently with the news? So, do we have a population that is sufficiently up to date and current with what's going on? And that is a concern.

**LT:** Older people, which is to say people over 55 years old, still prefer TV and print as a source of news, but younger generations now choose digital and particularly social media. 18 to 24-year-olds, as you know, now cite social media as their main source of news. What are the implications?

**EG:** And to add to those stats, I think what I've read recently is, in that 18 to 24-year-old group, 25% get their information from TikTok. So, we have a generation of information consumers that are getting the most superficial bits of information. There's no context, there's no understanding, there's no history tied to that. It's very concerning. And you see now when there's protests that are going on on any number of issues and then you ask the protesters about what they're protesting and they don't even know why they're doing it. Many observers have said that we are lacking in basic civics in terms of understanding this country, and certainly the news consumption is evidence of that too.

**LT:** It is horrifying.

**EG:** It is.

**LT:** You mentioned TikTok. TikTok has about one billion active monthly users, Facebook is even larger, claiming about three billion active monthly users. Given the huge scale of these social networks and also the ease with which posts, including news posts, can be shared, what gets shared the most?

**EG:** It's often video. It's often these memes. It's something that's funny. Einstein's theory of

relativity, that's not being shared among people. So, the problem is you're seeing kids spend more and more time watching these videos and engaging in social media, and most of it is incredibly superficial.

**LT:** It used to be that journalists never showed their politics. Now many seem to scream their politics. What's the impact of this new either generation or new time of ideological journalists?

**EG:** It's a great observation. It is a concern that, in one sense, we used to have a world where those opinions were in a newspaper, for example, on the op-ed page, in the editorials, and the stories themselves were relatively unbiased. And I'm not being naive, because we certainly know that in some newspapers that are right of center, the Wall Street Journal has a particular slant, and the New York Times, left of center, has a particular slant. But we weren't in a situation where we were arguing about the facts. Today it seems like the facts have become opinion, and so there's lots of biases in these articles. And we all remember the famous quote of Daniel Patrick Moynihan that said, "You're entitled to your own opinion, but you're not entitled to your own facts." It seems to me that those biases are also coming through on the facts. So, it raises a flag for media and it goes to, again, the importance of having trust and high reputation in our media.

**LT:** And trust in news has dropped dramatically along with trust in government and other institutions. The decline of trust in journalism, you just said concerns you, but what can be done to improve it?

**EG:** So, you're right. We have seen a general decline of trust in almost all of our institutions - in media, in government, in our education institutions. I think that the only two institutions that have not shown a decline have been the military and small business, in some of the reports. But we need to have trust in the media. If a democracy is going to function properly, I think in that case, to your point, we need to write unbiased stories, we need to mark opinion when it is opinion, reporting stories as reporting stories. I will tell you at US News, we take this very seriously. It's one of the reasons why we are on all of these reports often considered one of the highest trustworthy news sites. And in fact, about a year and a half ago, we initiated an opinion section, which we called The Forum, and we purposely provided a pro and con on the opinion. So, people had a sense of both sides of the issues. There are not a lot of news sites that do that, but we don't want to get to a point where the real news and the fake news are indistinguishable, because that would be very scary.

**LT:** And how can people get a full and objective understanding of the news? They can start with your site, with US News & World Report, to see the pros and the cons on each issue. But how else can they get a full and objective understanding of the news?

**EG:** Well, look, I thank you for the plug. We'd love for people to start on our site. We know that that's not always the case. We know that you have big broadcast sites, FOX, CNN, MSNBC, each of which have a different slant. I think that media organizations need to continue to reinforce what they're doing and understand that their trust is on the line every single day, and not to take it for granted. And that doesn't mean that the standard is perfection, because there is no perfection in this world, but it is writing great stories, but when you get it wrong, you admit it, you let people know and continue to, again, wake up every day understanding that your trust is on the line. And I think that's about the only way you can continue to do that.

**LT:** What do you see as the role of journalism in a democracy?

**EG:** Obviously, it's hugely important. When you ask me that question, I'm reminded of Thomas Jefferson's famous line that if he had to choose between a government without newspapers or newspapers without a government, he would not hesitate to prefer the latter, and to him meaning newspapers were critical to ensuring a healthy government. And the founders of our Constitution understood that, which is why the freedom of press was the First Amendment to the Constitution. It's number one. I think that we need to make sure to have a healthy, vibrant and free-flowing democracy, that's a product of great newspapers, healthy news, allowing for a very productive and healthy conversation.

**LT:** How can people detect fake news?

**EG:** It's getting more and more difficult. Often, these stories that are absolute fakes are incredibly viral because it's not only that the stories are being done that are fake, but the people that are doing it know how to ensure that they're sent virally and very quickly. Ultimately, it's also technology making sure that we notice those fake news, but it's also making sure that we're countering that with, as we talked about, really good, very trustworthy information from brands and news outlets that people know, understand and respect.

**LT:** It's so hard to tell these days.

**EG:** It is.

**LT:** US News & World Report does a lot of rankings, including college rankings, best hospitals, best places to live, and many, many others. How important are rankings?

**EG:** I think rankings done right are very important. And the rankings that we do are designed to help consumers make important life decisions. And if you take best colleges, we live in a world where students are overwhelmed with a lot of information. This is an important decision. It is one, at that point, probably the most financially important decision. Going to college is very expensive. And we do our rankings where we are pulling together a lot of data to make it easy for students to compare and contrast. The same thing with hospitals. You're going in for a surgery, you're worried about a loved one. You want to make sure you're going to the right place. And so again, our rankings help to compare and contrast that in a way that makes it easy in a world where you're overwhelmed. Rankings that are completely subjective, who are the best looking actors and actresses in Hollywood, they're fun to look at, but they don't really help you in terms of your life making decisions. And that's the important difference. We try to make sure that our rankings are helpful in those situations where you're making important and sensitive life decisions.

**LT:** I think what's really helpful to me about your rankings is that they're transparent, that you can look at any of the data behind your rankings. For example, for your top colleges, it's less important to me who is number one versus number three or number six. But objective data, for example, the percent of applicants they admit and other data like that, where you can actually drill down and understand and compare the different colleges, to me is really important. And that's what I really like about your rankings.

**EG:** Well, thank you for that. We believe that more data is better, and we believe that being transparent is better. And so, we're very open about releasing the methodologies behind the

rankings. We want to make sure that there's not just the rankings, but lots of information, stories around the rankings to supplement the rankings, and we also want to make sure that we evolve over the course of time, and that we are responding to what our consumers need and want.

**EG:** And just one example, when our rankings for education started, they were only based on reputation surveys. 40 years later, our rankings are now based on 21 different data points that have evolved based on what is most important. And one example, today, we know that students and parents care about outcome measurements. Is the college doing what they say they're going to do? And are you able to find a job? Are you leaving college with manageable debt? Those are issues that we didn't think about 40 years ago, but those are very important attributes in our college rankings today.

**LT:** Eric, before I ask for the three takeaways, you'd like to leave the audience with today, is there anything else you'd like to mention that you haven't already touched upon? What should I have asked you that I have not?

**EG:** I just wanted to go back to a question that I think it's so important. And that is being a trusted source of information today. And we have hundreds of millions of consumers that come to our site every year in different rankings. And we do so because we believe that we're a trusted source. And we're a trusted source because our information is fact-based, it's based on the data that we just talked about. And it's advice that is really helpful to consumers. And as we discuss day in, day out, we want to make sure that we earn the trust of our consumers.

**LT:** Eric, what are the three takeaways you'd like to leave the audience with today?

**EG:** I thought that given that US News is going to be releasing a new section on leadership, that I would do three takeaways related to leadership. And I've also been reading a lot about Abraham Lincoln lately, so I'm going to incorporate some of his leadership traits. So takeaway number one is integrity and strong principles are always paramount. And as we know, Lincoln was willing to compromise on issues, but he was never willing to compromise on his core principles. And I think for those reasons, he inspired loyalty and he became known as Honest Abe.

**EG:** Number two, I think that the best leaders surround themselves with the smartest and most diverse minds around the table. And Lincoln surrounded himself by people who were, at times, his worst enemies. But he knew that he needed people with different backgrounds and different thinking. And I will tell you that almost 170 years later, after Lincoln's been president, we live in a world that's increasingly more complex, and so the diversity of those viewpoints and backgrounds is even more essential.

**EG:** And the last point is always giving credit to others. And, in fact, Lincoln himself went a step further, that he certainly gave credit where his credit was due, but he also took responsibility for things that went wrong. And what that did is that it gave his subordinates the sense that they were leading, and in that way, it was a very smart way to encourage his subordinates to be risk takers and to be innovative, because they knew that if they failed, Lincoln would take the blame for it. So, three takeaways on leadership with a lot of credit to one of our great leaders of this country, Abraham Lincoln.

**LT:** Eric, I'm looking forward to your leadership rankings, and want to thank you for taking the

time for 3 Takeaways today and for being a trusted news source for so many people. Thank you.

**EG:** Thank you so much.

**OUTRO male voice:** If you enjoyed today's episode and would like to receive the show notes or get new fresh weekly episodes, be sure to sign up for our newsletter at <https://www.3takeaways.com/> or follow us on [Instagram](#), [Twitter](#), [LinkedIn](#) and [Facebook](#). Note that 3Takeaways.com is with the number 3, 3 is not spelled out. See you soon at 3Takeaways.com (<https://www.3takeaways.com/>)

*This transcript was auto-generated. Please forgive any errors.*