



Supporting Independent Journalism to Thrive

The Pocantico Center of The Rockefeller Brothers Fund

May 14-16, 2015

JOURNALISM
that matters 

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Executive Summary

How do we cultivate a vibrant, powerful, and resilient independent journalism ecosystem?

On May 14-16, 2015, Journalism That Matters convened a diverse group of 30 journalists, funders, editors, publishers and others to grapple with the present and future of independent journalism. Out of a rich and sometimes contentious dialogue about funding, community and race, a visceral understanding emerged that the key to sustainability centers on a deeper engagement with the audience and a commitment to better meet community information needs. Further, in that dialogue, specific ideas were floated that addressed not only issues of revenue, but also the need to gain community support by being more representative and diverse.

In this summary, we highlight:

- Meeting context
- Meeting highlights and commitments to action
- Conclusions from the organizing group

The report itself explores the above question in depth. A [web site](#) links to the report and also provides the session notes and related materials produced by participants at the meeting.

Meeting Context

We knew the future of independent journalism would involve a rethinking of revenue. The initial impetus for this convening was Bill Moyers' musing in an interview just before retiring that our democracy would be profoundly strengthened if large foundations could devote a tiny fraction of their budgets to a trust fund for independent journalism. Moyers has been a longtime champion of feisty journalism free from the undue influence of government, corporations and other powerful interests - the basic definition of independent journalism.

So while his idea of a trust fund was somewhat utopian, it led us to ponder the urgent question of how to help this sector survive and grow during these challenging times. Further, with mainstream media undergoing a radical reshaping, we had to ask what role independent journalism should and could play in the evolving news and information ecosystem. It quickly became apparent to the organizing committee (and later, to participants) that finding money was intimately intertwined with exploring a broader view of our identity as an independent journalism sector.

With this in mind, rather than a narrowly focused convening on revenue, we created a broad-based meeting intended to open up questions and explore a number of possible answers. Because the Pocantico Conference Center could only accommodate 30 people, we worked hard to invite an exceptionally diverse mix of individuals who identified with the

independent news sector: diverse not only in the type of organizations they represented -- from foundations to associations to small news outlets -- but also by race and gender and their role in the media community.

To work with this range of perspectives, the meeting used Journalism that Matters' preferred convening methodology, [Open Space Technology](#), a process in which participants at Pocantico created the agenda based on what mattered most to them. This approach interrupts habits of thought and encourages cross-fertilization to spark innovative, collaborative thinking that inspires new ideas.

While we didn't definitively solve the revenue question, we did put it in a broader, more promising context. A more inclusive view of independent journalism and why it matters became a foundation for further work in three principal areas:

- Putting audience and community at the heart of it all
- How to get the money... and who from
- Building infrastructure to support individual journalists, outlets, and the sector.

In essence, we came away with a redefined roadmap for independent journalism centered on diverse audiences, community information needs, and audience/community engagement as primary drivers of the news system rather than just content production and distribution. Many participants also gained a deeper appreciation for the potential synergy of collaboration between independent and community and ethnic/foreign-language journalists. Collaboration can help shape a broader, more inclusive identity for independent journalism that brings together new allies for action.

To support this important shift in thinking, ideas on ways to strengthen the sector's infrastructure emerged, with people from different subsectors of the independent journalism space talking to each other for the first time; thoughtful discussions arising on how to brand the sector overall, making it more distinct and visible to a wider audience; and freelancers organizing to use their reporting skills to document abysmal pay industry wide.

The promise of the Pocantico meeting is this: a chance to build a foundation with a broader, more inclusive sense of identity and a more complex and thoughtful approach to infrastructure. This foundation can then help the sector find new sources of support and revenue.



Meeting Highlights

A broader view of independent journalism

As organizers, we explicitly asked that participants refrain from defining independent journalism going into the meeting. Our expectation was that a richer understanding of it would emerge through our interactions. It did.

It challenged the participants to forge for themselves a broader view of the independent journalism ecosystem and a larger umbrella of potential allies and collaborators on news for varying communities and audiences. For many, independent journalism is journalism that is an alternative to corporate mainstream media. It can be non-profit, such as non-profit investigative centers, or for profit, such as alternative newsweeklies or hyperlocal digital news sites.

It could include print, digital or broadcast outlets organized around issues, regions, and communities that could produce fact-based enterprise stories, local and lifestyle news, and/or that advocate for particular positions or communities. Or, it could include all of the above. And for many at Pocantico, the bigger tent includes for-profit ethnic and foreign-language media in the mix on various platforms, with editors who may see themselves as advocates for their communities and audiences that see themselves and their issues reflected in the news they read.

But they all share the traditional journalistic values of speaking truth to power and being a voice for the voiceless. Given the profound changes in legacy media, independent journalism is a key information source for a growing number of communities across the country and assumes even more of a watchdog role essential to preserving a healthy democracy. With more voices from all corners of society chiming in on today's civic dialogue, independent journalism is more valuable in a country and in a world undergoing major transformation.

While the question of finding more funds provided the initial spark for this gathering, a key outcome for many was an intuition that the sector will thrive by becoming more inclusive – both within outlets and within the sector as a whole. This sector will not thrive based solely or primarily on private foundation money or on advertising. Economic sustainability will likely emerge from stronger relationships with community, with resources coming from niche donors, local communities, community foundations, and other sources, such as public funding.

Putting audience and community at the heart of it all

Early in the meeting, it became clear to many that in such a wide-ranging and broad conversation analyzing the varied players and challenges in the independent journalism world, “audience” and “community” should be the real center – the true heart – of an independent news ecosystem.

For independent journalism to survive, the “top-down” or unidirectional way of looking at independent news media – with the journalists at the center – needs to change. Today’s journalism demands more of a conversation, more meaningful engagement with the community. With this shift, independent journalism can derive more strength, broaden its power and influence, increase and embolden its allies, and find more ways to gain more revenue, increase resilience and ensure sustainability.

Value Diversity. As noted above, one clear way to grow the audience and think more comprehensively about independent journalism and its potential for greater influence is to more genuinely embrace racial and ethnic diversity. Journalists must also break out of the silos they now work in by sharing resources and collaborating in peer-to-peer networks, and partnering on stories with foreign-language and ethnic media journalists and outlets. By collaborating as peers, independent, community and ethnic/foreign-language journalists can leverage one another’s strengths.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- **Convene a conference of independent, community and ethnic and foreign-language media** in spring 2016 to connect colleagues, and facilitate substantive collaborations that will transform what people believe is news and explore how working together can mutually strengthen them all. The conference would be a way to tear down the walls that now divide too many in these sectors, strengthen the flow of information between different members of these sectors, smooth the pathways for editorial collaborations, and create a peer-to-peer network for sharing business ideas and funders. It begins to actualize the vision of a more inclusive independent news sector.
- **Assess the viability of acquiring a legacy media outlet** to test the idea of operating with community at the center by researching a media outlet ripe for this, analyzing why previous proposals of this type succeeded or failed, and determining what information and potential funders or investors would be needed to come up with a plan.



Pocantico participants discuss working conditions for freelance journalists, and ways to improve the infrastructure of the independent journalism sector. (From l to r), Esther Kaplan, Craig Aaron, Jeff Yang, and Valeria Fernandez.

How To Get The Money... And Who From

In the face of collapsing media business models and limited funding from foundations, independent journalists and media outlets need to broaden streams of revenue... and do so quickly. Given the absence of a single, simple solution, conference attendees identified promising ideas to diversify fundraising tactics, diversify and broaden audience, and seek technological tools that can help promote the journalism work, engage with the audience and increase revenue.

For example, in the philanthropic area, community foundations remain a largely untapped resource. Further ideas involved delving into ways to boost corporate and individual charitable giving and, in the longer term, securing more public support for journalism. Rounding out the funding ideas: approaching high net-worth individuals and other donors concerned about the increase of money in politics with a creative approach to match political giving with solutions-oriented giving.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- Educate more **community foundations** about independent journalism and create the appropriate messaging and campaign to raise funds.
- Establish a **working group on revenue** to delve more deeply into business development and new sources of money, such as earned income, corporate and individual charitable giving.
- Initiate an effort to **connect with networks of wealthy donors to pitch for matching donations** vis-à-vis political campaign ad spending.
- Start a process for discussing and advocating for **public funding** for journalism.

Building infrastructure to support individual journalists, outlets, and the sector.

Freelancers. Everyone at Pocantico appeared to agree that working conditions for most freelance journalists are terrible and ultimately affect the quality of the journalism being produced. Some at the gathering agreed to assess more fully what efforts have been made and explore more effective ways of organizing freelancers, creating an industry standard for matters of pay, working conditions, royalties, access to resources, and other concerns.

Pocantico participants called for an audit of independent journalists to document working conditions and share the results with the industry and the public. This would serve as the beginning of a push for reform, joint activism and solidarity on this issue.

Outlets. At least 14 associations support independent journalism outlets, many serving 100 members or less. They offer peer-to-peer networking, training, and resource sharing, from legal services to discounted products to technical assistance. Associations are also useful in helping foundations by distributing “block grants” to media outlets and individuals among their membership, a bureaucratic process that some foundations would not undertake individually for small allocations. Among the opportunities for partnerships discussed at Pocantico: shared services and products; discounted services, discounted products, ad networks, shared back-end services, and shared conferences.

Sector-wide. Just as corporate media and public media are sectors that are widely recognized and appreciated, many participants felt that independent journalism as a whole would be well served to make a case for itself as a distinct and critical element of the news and information ecosystem. Journalists at the gathering committed to explore launching a branding campaign to grow public awareness of the value of independent journalism. To increase the impact of the sector overall, some also suggested a unified branding campaign of independent journalism outlets with a national reach that could increasingly attract the audiences of legacy media and the broader community.

PROPOSED ACTIONS

- **An Audit of Independent Journalism Workers**
Plan and complete an **audit of independent journalism workers**, both staff and freelance, to document and expose pay rates, workers’ rights, protections and benefits, workload and diversity issues by late 2016.
- Develop the idea of a **branding campaign** to grow public awareness of the value of independent journalism.



Participants agreed that to thrive, we must explore a broader view of our identity as an independent journalism sector and of the growing communities and potential new audiences it must serve. Those pictured (from l to r), Jeff Yang (background), Jennifer Preston, Michael Stoll, Esther Kaplan, Linda Jue, Valeria Fernandez, and Jo Ellen Green Kaiser.

Conclusions from the organizing committee

We began with Moyers' trust fund idea, but early conversations with funders made it clear that creating such a trust at this time was unlikely given the range of funding motivations and priorities. So the organizing group pivoted to a broader reason for coming together: *connect a diverse mix of people in an environment conducive to a deep, reflective exchange with an expectation that their interactions would lead to breakthroughs for participants and for independent journalism.*

Our successes came from more than conversations on new revenue generation ideas. We brought people out of their silos, expanding the view of who makes up the independent journalism sector. We brought the conversation about race into the room, and in doing so, we realized that the core mission of independent journalism should involve a more inclusive view of audience and community. In effect, we remapped the news ecosystem.

The discussions about race also brought into higher relief two major observations: a) decision-making positions within the independent media hierarchy remain occupied mostly by white males, and b) much of independent media has historically defined itself as a counterpoint to mainstream media. In doing so, it has fixated on the same core audience: mostly white, affluent, and often elite. This has been a large element of the structural racism that stands in glaring contrast to the professed public interest focus of independent journalism.

From that realization came unusually deep discussions about race. Easily half to two-thirds of the group left with a vivified perspective of who independent journalism does or doesn't serve. Many attendees commented on this being the most diverse gathering on the future of

independent journalism that they'd ever attended. Nearly half of the participants were people of color, which produced the critical mass to enable genuinely honest, productive conversations about race.

Most participants were so visibly, poignantly, and at times uncomfortably moved by the discussions that they remarked on being left with an indelible influence on their thinking and actions. Our emphasis on obtaining this high level of racial and ethnic diversity, which Journalism That Matters has done in previous gatherings, was key to creating conditions for the informal and intimate conversations about race and life experience that, for many, led to a visceral redefinition of the sector. With a clearer mission, driven by real engagement with the full spectrum of communities, independent journalists and media can differentiate themselves from most of their counterparts in the commercial sector.

Pocantico participants will continue down a number of different paths informed by this broader vision. Some will work on new revenue models. Some will work to build stronger support for freelance journalists. Some may merge old organizations or build new ones. We hope, however, that the main work to come out of Pocantico is a new effort to build an identity as an inclusive, vibrant independent news ecosystem. This ecosystem would embrace investigative, issue-based, local, community, ethnic and foreign-language news outlets working together and with the communities they serve to provide the richness and diversity of information the U.S. public needs and deserves.

The organizing group

Peggy Holman, Linda Jue, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Sally Lehrman, Iván Román, Ricardo Sandoval-Palos, Stephen Silha

We thank the C. S. Mott Foundation and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund for their support of the Pocantico convening.

For a full list of the participants at the Supporting Independent Journalism to Thrive gathering, see page 43 or click [here](#). Details on the action steps are [here](#).

The broad and varied conversations at,
and specific commitments emerging from,

Supporting Independent Journalism to Thrive

*The Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund
Tarrytown, New York – May 14-16, 2015*

Introduction

We know the story all too well. Technology and declining business models forced big changes in the country's news media. The sharp drop in private and social investment in journalism left much of the news media landscape in crisis.

Growing concern about money in politics, income inequality, police brutality and a host of other issues has laid bare how having fewer media resources available makes it tougher to provide essential news coverage and hold the country's government, political and business establishment accountable.

This has helped fuel the public's distrust of how journalists are covering the news. Trying to pick up some of the slack from legacy media, independent and community journalism faces a growing challenge.

Great independent journalism is being done. But many journalists, either through organizations, media outlets or on their own, are working in silos, enjoying successes that don't scale, or replicating some problems of legacy media that have fostered public distrust.

Looking for solutions, a mix of 30 independent journalists, funders, media association representatives, academics, media outlets, entrepreneurs and media activists were brought together for three days to explore a complex question:

How can we broaden financial and other types of support so that more fact-based independent media organizations and journalists can not only survive, but collectively grow into a vibrant, powerful and resilient media sector?

The gathering was organized by Journalism That Matters, with support from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, and held at The Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund in Tarrytown, New York. It was clear from the start that this meeting would not elicit definitive answers. It wasn't meant to.

Rather, we gathered to share common concerns and explore varying approaches to solving problems independent journalists and outlets encounter every day, and more they expect to face in the future.

We met to see who's working in the independent journalism sector and to start conversations that could then continue at future meetings, where we hope to have a broader representation of independent journalists, technologists, young people and other stakeholders.

We did not meet to issue a "Pocantico Declaration," or create a new organization. We brought together folks who could explore the issue from where they sit in the independent journalism ecosystem *as well as think more broadly about the possibilities we may see in a future news media landscape.*

We assembled an ethnically diverse and gender-balanced group of folks, some of whom were new to this discussion and this kind of gathering. The Pocantico meeting incorporated these people into the expanding crowd across the country that's offering ideas and taking action, jointly or individually, to meet the challenge.



While the retreat-type setting at Pocantico limited us to 30 people, there were advantages to working with a smaller group. Using a meeting process called Open Space Technology, we started with an agenda in which participants set the starting points of discussion and actually shaped the topics primed for deeper

conversation. This also helped create the "hallway conversations" that we know are where most of the work gets done.

Participants grappled with difficult questions from one session to the next. Rich, sometimes contentious dialogue and a dynamic exchange of ideas helped generate potential solutions and action items. Overall, the gathering offered the opportunity to debate new ideas, reconsider old ones, express grievances, meet others in the sector, deepen existing relationships, and share experiences and hopes for the future.

We began on Thursday evening by creating rough maps of the independent journalism ecosystem. That led us to some initial, fundamental questions: What is our audience? What is our community?

On Friday, as we tried to connect questions around audience to revenue, it became clear that there would be no one solution to challenges facing independent journalism. Participants were keen on exploring ideas to solve the overarching issue of general sustainability of the sector, while also delving into smaller-scale strategies to establish

relationships and clear pathways for the various stakeholders to collaborate, with a goal of becoming stronger. Achievable sustainability and strength would lift the entire sector.

But it was also very clear that, given a rapidly transforming news media environment, nascent business models, and quickly changing technology, there is a sense of urgency to act.

“Yes, there is an expiration date to the current economic expansion. The industry needs to be in a better place before the next recession hits. Otherwise the whole field will suffer.”
Richard Tofel, President, ProPublica

Participants immersed in their sessions were quickly confronted with the challenge of how to make survival and sustainability work for institutions now, while also thinking expansively about the future. They considered potential solutions and how those answers could benefit some or hurt others and crimp independent journalism.

The result: ideas and actions that fall into three broad categories. Within each category, the report is organized around principles identified during the meeting. Many agreed that a vital component to achieving sustainability, and the real heart of the independent journalism sector, is “**Audience and Community.**” We also considered the immediate and longer-term issues seen in the section “**Building Infrastructure to Support Individual Journalists, Outlets and the Sector.**”

However, we spent considerable time on the issue that originally brought us to Pocantico: our most immediate problem reflected in the section titled “**How to Get the Money... and Who From.**”

This report starts there.



Participants in the Pocantico gathering explore ways independent journalism can thrive, gain a wider audience, and have more influence and a bigger impact in the country's civic dialogue. Pictured (from l to r), Chancellor Williams, Barbara Raab, Ivan Roman, Esther Kaplan, Robert Rosenthal, Sarah van Gelder, Julie Schwiertert Collazo, Valeria Fernandez, Chris Faraone, Michael Stoll, Jay Harris, Gail Ablow, Bill Buzenberg, and Martin G. Reynolds.

Section 1. HOW TO GET THE MONEY... AND WHO FROM

The same problems of diminishing resources to produce news that has plagued legacy media has also hit the independent journalism ecosystem. In some ways, the urgent crisis caused by a lack of revenue is deeper at media outlets, institutions and individual journalists already strapped by smaller budgets and unreliable revenue streams.

The mix of participants at the **Supporting Independent Journalism to Thrive** gathering have experienced or witnessed these difficulties first hand given their roles in the independent journalism landscape. Money was the subtext in many conversations and is, of course, key to the sector's long-term growth and stability.

The gathering's participants agreed on a key principle related to revenue:

- **Create Broad-Based Funding Mechanisms.** We agreed on the need to broaden the variety of revenue streams for media outlets, focusing in particular on three source areas: philanthropy, public support and individuals, including audience and community members.

As participants worked to define micro and macro strategies to support independent journalism on the business side, several questions and salient points arose to offer a broader context to the discussions.

Diversify tactics. There is no one-size-fits-all solution to tackle the problem of sustainability.

Diversify and broaden the audience. What is now termed “independent journalism” needs to target and build a younger, more diverse (i.e. less white) audience in order to grow the pool of donors and members. In addition, a more inclusive universe of independent journalists and outlets – for-profit hyperlocal sites, ethnic, foreign-language, and community media, and more – would help outlets focus content more on the needs of demographically broader audiences. These efforts would, in turn, help inform future strategies around sustainability.

Tools and technology. The next generations of journalists and tech experts need to be part of the search for tools that can help distribute and promote content that is being created, while securing ways to become more efficient, connect more with the audience, increase revenue, and reflect the changing ways people consume their news.

Building infrastructure. To achieve sustainability, news outlets need to define what it is that they want to sustain. For example, some need to engage in “right-sizing,” which could entail such solutions as merging back-room services among a number of news outlets. Many outlets must think beyond their editorial product and spend more time and money on developing more efficient business practices.



(From l to r) Kevin Davis, Ricardo Sandoval-Palos, Richard Logan, Robert Rosenthal and Jay Harris discuss ways to receive more funding and community support for independent journalism.

Revenue: Develop Broad-Based Funding Mechanisms

In a number of sessions, Pocantico participants examined how to build and diversify revenue sources. There was agreement that the best funding mechanisms would:

- Be recurring and more constant
- Be independent of government and special interests
- Be accountable
- Feature equitable distribution
- Be suitable for multi-platform outlets
- Leave space for contributions small enough to be affordable to the public

Some revenue generation, especially around products and services, will be particular to an outlet. Participants thus concentrated on the three revenue sources that are or could be shared by most outlets in the independent and community journalism space: foundations, individuals, and public/government funding.

Revenue: Foundations

There is no one way that foundations fund journalism. Some prefer to fund infrastructure for small organizations. Others target their journalism funding at specific topics or interest areas. Still others prefer steering their money to a particular type of journalism, such as investigative journalism or hyperlocal coverage.

As legacy media dedicates fewer resources to certain areas of news and journalism, some independent media organizations have received funding to pick up the slack, particularly in investigative reporting, or to collaborate with legacy media on larger, long-term projects. However all those present at Pocantico – large organizations, small organizations, freelancers and funders alike – concluded that there is not enough money now in

philanthropy alone to meet the urgent needs of independent journalism. Any organization primarily dependent upon foundation money, participants concluded, is going to be unstable given the amounts of funds available.

A frank conversation between foundation program officers and other participants opened up the following questions:

Q: Why do large foundations often appear to steer their funding towards large news organizations or towards collaborations between certain large independent and legacy outlets, even when the impact of the journalism produced is not apparent?

A: Some large foundations are averse to risk. Some, as part of their big-picture strategy, consciously fund projects at relatively large organizations or entities.

Q: How do foundations think about impact?

A: Some program officers offered that measuring impact is very tricky. They admitted that sometimes their assessment of impact is just intuitive, and is often influenced by the depth and longevity of the relationship with a grantee.

Q: Several participants raised the concern that sometimes funding specific journalism projects, although important, does not necessarily help independent media become more resilient in the long term.

A: Some funders pointed out that foundations are responsible for granting money according to their respective missions, which may be issue-focused. Other funders agreed with the concern: "Funding journalists' salaries [for specific projects] is not sustainable over time," one funder noted. "Funding infrastructure is what's sustainable."

Q: How do foundations choose which outlet to fund?

A: The mission of the foundation and its goals plays the largest part. However, funders noted that it is vital for journalists to establish a good relationship with a program officer so they can credibly demonstrate a media outlet's capacity and the clarity of its journalistic mission.

Some independent and freelance journalists said they were frustrated by what they perceive to be an elitist, closed system featuring "serial fellows," people who get a fellowship supported by a foundation who then get more fellowships because of the previous fellowships they received.

Funders warned that a similar kind of journalistic elitism could happen if foundations insisted that grantees pay a living wage to its journalists, as some at Pocantico suggested, and therefore favor outlets that could afford to do so initially or when the grant funds run out.

Community foundations emerged as an area within foundation philanthropy that could be tapped for more funding. Since community foundations often focus on many different interests in one geographic area, they often have difficulty sorting out which organizations to support and may not understand the value of independent and local journalism to their community. At Pocantico, many participants agreed that the independent journalism sector needs to educate the community foundations' program staff about what they do and the role they play in the community.

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Proposed Action

Prime Community Foundations to Support Independent Journalism

Participants called for initiating efforts to **get independent journalism and this gathering's ideas onto the radar screens of community foundations.**

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Revenue: Individuals

Everyone at the Pocantico gathering seemed to agree that the independent journalism ecosystem in general needs to do a better job of reaching and tapping into support from individuals and that this could be a fertile area for revenue growth.

“The more you are working to actually get into the community, the more sustainable you'll be over time. What's hard about that is the culture shift and the fact that it takes a long time.”

Molly de Aguiar, Program Director for Media and Communications,
Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation

Several participants offered Democracy Now! as a model for engagement, mentioning that despite its smaller audience relative to bigger outlets, its audience is intensely engaged and loyal and is more predisposed to offer support.

Richard Tofel of ProPublica referenced a report noting that contributions from individuals, not institutions, constitute most of American philanthropy. If one percent of all philanthropy were directed toward journalism, journalism would be funded abundantly. He suggested an effort to persuade Americans to “put journalism on the list” of their automatic or compulsive giving to charities, along with schools and the arts.

Several ideas flowed from that:

Donors to political campaigns. Some suggested an all-out push to persuade donors to political campaigns, particularly those who are appalled by current campaign spending madness, to commit to contributing \$1 to “fighting and fixing” the problem – that fight and

that fix to include journalism – for every dollar they contribute to political races. A marketing effort to target that specific audience could include:

- Developing a common slogan that could be used by individual media organizations as well as for any collective campaign.
- Coordinating promotion efforts on a common day, such as was done on Giving Tuesday. (First Amendment Day, marked in some places for late September, was suggested as a possible date, though it’s not clear that there is a nationally recognized date.)
- Pitching the notion to a network of wealthy donors.
- Identifying political donors who would publicly support the campaign.
- Examining the Gates “Giving Pledge” model to see how we might emulate that success.



Robert Rosenthal (l) and Sarah van Gelder explore a vision of the future of independent journalism that involves technology and community engagement.

Related to this and other possible joint fundraising efforts was discussion of whether we might come up with an acceptable formula for allocating funds contributed into a pool. Some thought it might be worth putting time into trying to devise such a mechanism, but others cautioned, “there lies madness.”

Donations through corporate and public platforms. A systematic effort to persuade companies such as Apple to make donating to media easier through their tech payment platforms, for instance, through a donate button embedded in iTunes.

Payroll. Donations through payroll done via a check box on pay stubs.

Support from high net-worth individuals. Contacting family foundation officers who handle the assets, and in some cases the charitable giving, of high net-worth individuals and encourage them to think about journalism as a public good worthy of support.

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Proposed Action

To be followed up on by varying committees of participants at the gathering

- **Establish a working group on revenue** to delve more deeply into business development and new sources of money, such as earned income, corporate and individual charitable giving. **Craig Aaron**, Free Press; **Jay Harris**, Public Intelligence, Inc. formerly Mother Jones; **Kevin Davis**, KLJD Consulting, formerly Investigative News Network (INN); **Linda Jue**, G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism
- **Initiate an effort to connect with networks of wealthy donors** and pitch a match for political spending. **Craig Aaron**, Free Press; **Esther Kaplan**, The Investigative Fund, The Nation Institute; **Jay Harris**, Public Intelligence Inc., formerly Mother Jones; **Richard Tofel**, ProPublica

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Revenue: Public/Government Support

A variety of subsidies already exist for the media. Yet several participants wanted to explore how to broaden a constituency to back a campaign for government support for journalism. Participants noted that public support models for journalism have worked in parts of Europe: the BBC is funded by a tax on televisions; the French government funds purchases of books published by French publishing houses.

Participants acknowledged that it would be difficult to rally around public support for journalism in the U.S. without mechanisms to protect journalists from political pressures such as those currently battering the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. The postal rate subsidy model used in the U.S. was content neutral and worked well. Participants also noted that another major sticking point would be how to decide what organizations and individuals qualify as “journalists” to benefit from that support.

Many participants concluded that gaining public support would be a long-term, difficult campaign, but an area worth supporting. Net neutrality was cited as a similar campaign that took a long time but resulted in a big win. Specific ideas discussed included:

- Creating tax breaks or other incentives to encourage media ownership by local owners and communities of color. This could be modeled on the successful but discontinued “minority tax certificate” program at the FCC. Other polices might make it easier for news outlets to become nonprofits.
- Introducing a modest spectrum fee that could fund a public media trust; or setting aside a portion of the government revenue from the upcoming “incentive auction” to support a fund for local journalism.
- Taxing a tiny percent of the hundreds of billions spent on advertising or amortizing tax-deductible advertising expenses to create a trust fund.
- Placing a very small tax on electronic devices to create a trust fund.

But do people really value journalism enough to support something like this? Maybe not framed solely as “journalism” per se. Yet information sharing is highly valued and more people are actively participating in media. Some concluded that the question of a public subsidy for journalism is tied to the question of the credibility and democratization of journalism.



(Clockwise from left) Barbara Raab, Esther Kaplan, Chancellor Williams, Jennifer Preston and Craig Aaron explore the idea of more public or government support for journalism and other funding issues.

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Proposed Action
Explore a Push for Public Funding of Journalism

Start a process of discussing and **advocating for public funding**, acknowledging that it could take 5-10 years to get anywhere. **Craig Aaron** of Free Press to lead that discussion.

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Section 2. PUTTING AUDIENCE AND COMMUNITY AT THE HEART OF IT ALL

Much of the conversation at Pocantico returned again and again to the idea that the audience, and the broader community that could form part of that audience, must be at the center of the independent news ecosystem. Audience and community can provide independent journalism with its strength, broaden its power and influence, increase and embolden its allies, and lead to more paths to revenue and economic sustainability.

To realize the value of developing a deeper relationship with audiences – both for impact and revenue – we asked the following:

- How do we listen to what the audience wants? How do we turn the audience into advocates for independent journalism?
- How do we inspire the community to value independent journalism enough to increase its influence and maximize its impact?

The open-space process we used led us to deepen these questions. Instead of turning directly to technological tools or marketing fixes to immediately answer questions about audience, participants began to rethink what we mean by audience and community, and to reframe how we interact and define our audience and our work. A principal outcome of these discussions was the realization by many at the gathering that we had to address issues of racial equity in independent journalism in order to even talk about audience and community in the 21st century.



(From left to right clockwise) Ivan Roman, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Juana Ponce de Leon and Tracie Powell discuss community media and its relationship to an increasingly diverse audience.

We agreed on two interlocking principles related to our audience and community:

- **Diversify and Democratize Impact**
- **Empower Our Community**

Diversify Impact: Move Racial Equity to the Center of Our Work

As is the case with legacy media, the journalists and media outlets that constitute what many consider independent journalism are overwhelmingly white. We do not need to refer to the country's changing demographics to tell us that we are doing a disservice to the national community if we do not include the voices of people of color. We know that stories about every aspect of our lives, from the economy to the environment, would be richer if we included the perspectives and lived experiences of people of different races, ethnicities and nationalities.

We were clear, however, that the task in front of us goes beyond making the staffs and contributors at independent journalism outlets more diverse, though that remains a vital step. We must rethink how independent media can broaden their audiences. One avenue discussed extensively by some participants was to explore better collaborations with ethnic, immigrant and community outlets.

Efforts have been made in the past to connect these media with independent media, but the outcomes were often dissatisfying to the parties involved. At the time, few could predict the financial, social and professional cultural disparities between sectors that carved out difficult terrains to traverse. But now, with lessons learned - and the understanding that there are more lessons ahead - participants expressed optimism about revisiting the possibilities of collaboration as a way to enhance the viability, reach and impact of all these sectors.

“It is not just that we need to do it to have more inclusion and have more people in the mix. It's good business. If we don't open the doors... see who is around us, who this audience is... If we aren't creating relevant, resonant products for them, they are going to continue to ignore us.”

Ricardo Sandoval-Palos, President, Board of Directors,
Fund for Investigative Journalism

The discussions about reaching more diverse audiences inevitably led to calling out what many felt was the elephant in the room. Achieving true racial equity means ending what some at Pocantico bluntly called white supremacy in independent journalism. Though the term caused a great deal of discomfort in the room, others insisted on its use to drive home who dominates the positions of power in our media system. Current practices prejudice media to favor the white experience, particularly when it comes to what and who is covered. To create independent journalism that truly represents and gives voice to all our communities, we must rethink who is a journalist, what kind of journalism is produced, and who is considered a trusted source.

Specifically, participants recognized that too many journalists and editors carry unexamined racial biases into their work, and that our news outlets tend to operate with unrecognized structural bias. The following “blind spots” were specifically spotlighted:

- Individual: White men too often remain passive participants in conversations about race.
- Individual: Editors and journalists often don’t recognize important cultural and social nuances among people of color and immigrants.
- Individual: Journalists and editors aren’t trained to identify unconscious bias.
- Structural: Editors often are told to cultivate ideas through their own subjective lenses and seek a journalist and story to fulfill their vision.
- Structural: Editors tend to stereotype reporters of color into their respective ethnic or racial niches (i.e. - the “Latino journalist,” the “Asian journalist,” etc.)
- Structural: There is often a lack of honest exchange about diversity and bias between editors and other stakeholders, and between reporters and the communities with which they should be engaging.

So how do we recognize the unconscious biases that are built into our thinking processes and social structures? How do we initiate open and honest discussions about them? How do we encourage editors and hiring managers to change their practices, think more broadly about reaching more potential audiences, and build authentic racial equity? How can we strengthen operations and build relationships in communities where they may not be strong enough?

Again, some participants pointed to closer relationships with ethnic and immigrant media as part – but only part – of the solution. Simply reaching out to more culturally mixed audiences does not address the individual self-analysis or institutional change required to solve unconscious and structural bias. However, establishing a more peer-based relationship with immigrant and ethnic media can open the door to the kind of honest – and safe - dialogues necessary to begin to unpack those problems.

Just considering what defines a peer-based relationship already points to challenging questions. Past collaborations often resulted in lopsided relationships in which ethnic and immigrant outlets or individual journalists were treated as ancillaries to projects, or merely as sources for stories or conduits into communities. Differences in business practices, newsroom cultures,



Jo Ellen Green Kaiser writes down her suggestions for a breakout session to flesh out the idea of a convening for all independent, community, ethnic and foreign-language journalists.

available resources as well as editorial missions posed frequent obstacles to smooth working relationships. Such divergences have also stymied attempts to share resources and create mutual efficiencies by incorporating ethnic and immigrant media into the independent landscape.

Still, those attendees who have worked or continue to work with ethnic and immigrant outlets insist that collaboration among that sector, independent and community media remains important to the growth and sustainability of all. Mechanisms need to be established to negotiate the disparate terrains. Successful collaborations require an intimate understanding of the priorities on all sides. Above all, people need to move out of their respective isolation to develop relationships that will enable true cultural and professional diffusion.

To start doing this, Pocantico participants agreed to move ahead with a convening.

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Proposed Action

Create a Convening of Independent, Community and Ethnic/Immigrant News Media

A committee of Pocantico participants agreed to begin work on **convening a conference of independent, community ethnic and immigrant media** in spring 2016. The objective would be to further the conversations started at Pocantico and forge stronger connections that could lead to more productive partnerships. Specifically, the conference would help strengthen the flow of information among the various sectors, explore more viable pathways for editorial and other collaborations, and possibly create a peer-to-peer network for sharing business and funding ideas.

Participants committed to this effort and to recruiting other partners and co-sponsors: **Jo Ellen Green Kaiser**, The Media Consortium; **Juana Ponce de León**, NYC Council Speaker's Office; **Chris Faraone**, Dig Publishing, Boston; and **Richard Logan**, The Reva and David Logan Foundation. For more details about this prospective convening, see links in [Create a Convening of ALL Independent News Media](#).

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Democratize our Audience and Empower Community

To open up our audiences, we agreed we must empower communities by putting their information needs at the heart of the journalist's work, moving away from the unidirectional habit of journalists producing news and the audience simply consuming it. Journalists need to listen more and assume less.

The value of empowering communities is first and foremost creating more impactful journalism. By enabling communities to tell their own stories, journalists develop a keener understanding about what people need to know – want to know – in order to make a difference in their lives.



Craig Aaron discusses his observations about a particular subsector of the independent journalism ecosystem. (From left to right) Ivan Roman, Tracie Powell and Chris Faraone look on.

“Journalists need to go in with more humility. It is a two-way street. Often it stops at ‘we’re here to do public service’ and we don’t ask what’s missing in the content and what they want the journalists to do. We need to open up that dialogue.”

Craig Aaron, President and CEO, Free Press

Many felt that in today’s journalism world, genuine connection with communities is key to journalism’s growth and survival. That theme drove deeper discussions about what empowerment really means.

Unlike the broader detachment from the public that usually characterizes legacy and some independent media, most ethnic and immigrant outlets use journalism to advocate for their respective communities. Their close relationships with their communities strengthen engagement with their audiences.

The community media model of empowerment raised a number of questions: When does empowerment become advocacy? Is it necessary to embrace advocacy journalism in order to empower the community or to support racial equity? If we turn our efforts to engaging the public, do we leave behind the critical role journalism plays in educating the public? Isn't the essence of investigative journalism digging up information the public does not yet know?

We arrived at no overall consensus. However, examples that emerged from our sessions indicated that empowering communities could be a rich resource even for nonprofit investigative outlets. It could be key to building the kind of community engagement that ultimately attracts financial and other support to independent journalism and journalists.

Example 1: A story from the Center for Public Integrity about school cops and disparities in discipline had a big impact because it was amplified by a partnership with the Center for Investigative Reporting's "Reveal" radio program. The centers had crunched nationwide data on school discipline disparities, ranking them by states and communities. The worst cases were those showing disproportionate disciplinary action against disabled and African American students in Virginia. Journalists and advocates in other places learned how to get the data for their communities to localize, replicate and broaden coverage of the issue.

Example 2: The Center for Investigative Reporting started providing street poets and playwrights with information their reporters have used to write stories in order to involve youth and others in the broader conversation about news in their communities. This approach allowed CIR to also get information from those youth, establishing new sources and creating a loop of community involvement and engagement.

Example 3: The Fund for Investigative Journalism helped student journalists at Georgia State University, who were deeply connected with their surrounding community, tailor a proposal to fund and showcase a story that students and the community wanted done. By working with the students to refine their proposal, the Fund helped them maximize funding, empowering the students and the community to seek the impact they were after.

Some participants believe that empowering the community creates relationships with news outlets that can be symbiotic. As outlets produce stories the community values, the community will better understand the value of independent journalism. Outlets can thus create an "army" of allies who can be advocates for journalism when called upon in the marketplace or in the sphere of public policy.

"I fundamentally believe journalism that invests in the community
will be rewarded with investment from the community. They know
when you are on their side."

Molly de Aguiar, Program Director for Media and Communications,
Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation

Others were not so sure, arguing that engaging the community takes resources journalists or media outlets often don't have, and it doesn't always lead to ongoing engagement. Some

also noted that engagement does not always lead to revenue—that is, the value of allies may be cultural rather than monetary.

We asked: How do you get people engaged, keep the conversation and engagement going, and then ultimately have it generate revenue? Social media? Technology? Media literacy education? Advertising and public relations? Town hall-type meetings? Online and email campaigns similar to political and issue advocacy?



Michael Stoll points to distinctions between "audience" and "community" in independent journalism. Looking on (from l to r), Jennifer Preston, Linda Jue, Kevin Davis, Stephen Silha, Michelle Garcia and (seated) Gail Ablow and Jo Ellen Green Kaiser.

As the answers to those questions were left for continued debate, many agreed there is much they can learn from one another now, including potential new ways to look at solutions.

- **Community engagement models.** Are there lessons to be learned from how ethnic and immigrant media outlets connect closely with their audiences, from where they derive public support and sustainability? Some of these enterprises have various ways of engaging their communities, everything from public appearances to festivals to concerts. Also, editors and journalists who work to inform communities of color and immigrant communities are trusted community leaders and are considered advocates as well as informers.
- **Advocacy vs. activism.** Although advocacy is a characteristic of ethnic, immigrant and many independent news outlets, a discussion arose as to how to define it and how to distinguish it from activism. There were many points of view on advocacy and its evolving role within independent journalism. However, there seemed to be an intuitive understanding that activism has no part to play in balanced journalism practice.

- **Leverage one another’s strengths.** Couple on-the-ground perspectives of ethnic and immigrant editors, for example, with the journalistic prowess that they and independent journalists mutually bring to the task at hand. Establishing collaboration across “ethnicities” can produce coverage that can actually connect with a broader audience and is more reflective of the true diversity of the communities.
- **Mutual respect.** Shift the paradigm and level the editorial playing field by giving equal ownership of a collaborative project to independent, community and ethnic/immigrant editors. All are at the table from the start. The community can often tell when they are not, and may regard certain coverage with suspicion, which in turn can hinder engagement.
- **Culture and language.** Many sustainable community publications have a strong presence online that amplify their print editions, nationally and internationally. They can do so because they have “a captive audience” defined by culture and language. What is community and culture for independent media?
- **Solutions ready to be plucked.** Certain niche media organizations already network to connect with broader audiences, exert influence and gain access. There may already be a lot of answers out there that can be studied and adopted as opposed to struggling to find solutions.
- **More openness on race.** People are talking more openly about white privilege. This was not the case a decade ago and reflects a societal demand that is both a challenge and an opportunity for change, for conversation, for engagement and for community empowerment.

Clearly, the conversation about community empowerment mirrored the conversation about racial equity and diversifying impact, arriving at the same conclusion: If there was much to learn from one another, as well as much strength and influence to be gained from collaboration, the logical next step would be to bring folks from the various sectors together to spark more dialogue.

All roads led to the convening now under discussion for spring 2016, referenced earlier in this report. Many also suggested using other media conferences to discuss how ethnic, immigrant, community and independent news outlets can better use new technology tools and cutting-edge social justice practices to better empower and engage audiences.

“You create very solid relationships where these things evolve.
We talked about sustainability in terms of funding, but
there is also a need for a flow of information.”

Juana Ponce de León, Director, Media Diversity Relations
NYC Council Speaker’s Office

Independent Media Acquiring Legacy Outlets



Martin G. Reynolds (far right) discusses his take on funding in the independent journalism space. Looking on (from l to r) Valeria Fernandez, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Bill Buzenberg and Chancellor Williams.

Some participants at Pocantico wanted to examine another way of engaging and empowering the community more – increasing the number of independent voices by taking over some publications in what is called legacy media.

The goal would be to improve the quality of local news and boost community engagement by changing the mission of former legacy media outlets unavoidably driven by profits for shareholders, and focus instead on supporting and sustaining journalism and community information.

“Independent media is pretty much all small ball. We can play big ball and still keep our morals. We tend to get really caught up in minutia, but we need to think big and bold.”
Martin G. Reynolds, Senior Editor. The Oakland Tribune,
Hayward Daily Review, Fremont Argus

Participants understood that the first step is to create a business plan that would include: researching potential legacy media takeover targets; understanding why previous proposals of this type succeeded or failed; determining what information potential funders or investors would want; and assessing the financial viability of the project.

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Proposed Action **Explore the Acquisition of Local Media Outlets**

Martin G. Reynolds of the Bay Area News Group and **Michael Stoll** of San Francisco Public Press will take the lead of completing the assessment regarding acquiring a legacy media. **Kevin Davis**, KLJD Consulting, formerly of Investigative News Network, **Craig Aaron** of Free Press and **Ricardo Sandoval-Palos** of the Fund for Investigative Journalism pledged to help with this effort. **Michelle Garcia**, freelance journalist and filmmaker, also agreed to assist where she could in some of the research.

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Section 3. BUILDING INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT INDIVIDUAL JOURNALISTS, OUTLETS AND THE SECTOR

In addition to the specific discussions about funding, revenue, audience and community, Pocantico participants spent time talking about the infrastructure of the sector.

Principles related to infrastructure were discussed:

- **Recognize and communicate best practices and failed experiments**
- **Grow public awareness of the value of independent journalism**
- **Develop brands with a national reach and impact**

Recognize and Communicate Best Practices and Failed Experiments

To explore the guiding principle, **Recognize and Communicate Best Practices and Failed Experiments**, we:

- Assessed the needs and challenges faced by **independent journalists and freelancers** who find themselves without pensions, and often without health care, legal support, and more.
- Looked at independent journalism as a business, analyzing what **start-ups and media outlets** need to become financially successful and sustainable.
- Discussed the need for stronger, more sustainable **independent journalism associations** to support the many needs of journalism outlets.

Unlike many of the other Pocantico discussions, the sessions about building support for individual journalists and for associations focused almost entirely on action steps. This focus on action points to a critical need for addressing the weak infrastructure of our sector.

Independent and freelance journalists – Action Steps to Tackle the Challenges

Participants agreed that journalists, whether staff or freelance, are journalism's idea machines. Yet working conditions are terrible and freelancers in particular, despite several efforts to improve the situation, are not organized in an effective way to change these conditions.

Even as journalism staff salaries have more or less kept pace with inflation, freelance rates have collapsed – and staff positions are being converted into freelance jobs. In the case of freelancers, much of the time spent on research to identify and solidify a story or story ideas is often not factored in to any compensation. Nor do freelancers – nor staff reporters at some independent outlets – receive benefits, legal support, or professional development dollars.

“We’re referred to as freelancers who contribute ‘content’. Such terminology does not reflect the risks, investment and contribution of our journalism.”

Michelle Garcia, independent journalist/filmmaker

From discussions about how to better value and support the work of independent staff and freelance journalists, these main action items emerged:

Make use of existing resources. A number of networks exist to support individual journalists, ranging from the Freelancers Union, which supports all types of freelancers, to associations aimed at specific groups of journalists, such as the National Association for Hispanic Journalists. Independent journalists should also look to trade and worker organizations, especially ones organized in creative fashion like [SAG-AFTRA](#), [NWU](#), [ASJA](#), [etc.](#) Where possible, don’t reinvent the wheel. (For more details and analysis of some of the resources out there, visit the session notes [on best practices](#).)



(From l to r) Julie Schwiert Collazo, Tracie Powell and Michelle Garcia share stories about compensation and advertising issues for digital news sites.

Assess the terrain. More research is needed on several issues relating to journalists’ working conditions, including: the controversial methods of aggregators like Facebook and Twitter of using content from news sites and individual journalists without compensation; compensation models from other industries; legal and regulatory

protections and other mechanisms outside of

journalism that govern how people are getting paid; and efforts by the National Writers Union and other entities to address compensation.

Audit to document workers conditions. In particular, Pocantico participants expressed enthusiasm for a grant-funded audit of all reporters within independent journalism, both freelance and staff, that would document and expose (1) freelance reporter/producer pay, rights, protections, benefits; and (2) staff reporter/producer pay, benefits, workload/productivity. The level of diversity among freelancers vis-à-vis staff journalists could also be assessed and the reasons for that.

Use journalism to expose journalism “sweatshop” work. Several Pocantico participants suggested using independent journalism’s own tools – investigative and journalistic reporting – to expose the poor working conditions many journalists endure, and how it adversely affects the journalism that is produced. Conversely, stories could also be told giving positive visibility to those who provide good wages, benefits and protections to their reporters.

Create a Bill of Rights for Journalists. A core group of Pocantico participants felt that the independent news sector should work towards creating a Bill of Rights or a common set of standards for freelance journalists and staffers in independent journalism.

Other industries, such as pro sports and entertainment, have minimum rates and standards that are written out. With photos, music, and other forms of creative content, the creator nominally retains control to a certain point, though musicians are still figuring out how to secure payment for their work. But journalism seems to be the exception in these national conversations about working conditions and basic protections.

The common set of standards would include guidelines for freelancers on issues like freelance rates, kill fees, compensation for research and other work not reflected in the actual word counts, guidelines for content aggregators, ownership, and what legal and other work protections might be available especially for international reporting. For staffers, it could include guidelines on potential caps on content production. It was felt two separate bills of rights are needed – for freelancers and for staffers – to reflect their respective realities and avoid pitting the groups against each other.

Develop some leverage. Questions about how to make any new Bill of Rights enforceable quickly emerged. Several ideas surfaced, but it became clear that any discussion of this would have to continue in the future, particularly after the details of the current working conditions were exposed in the audit.



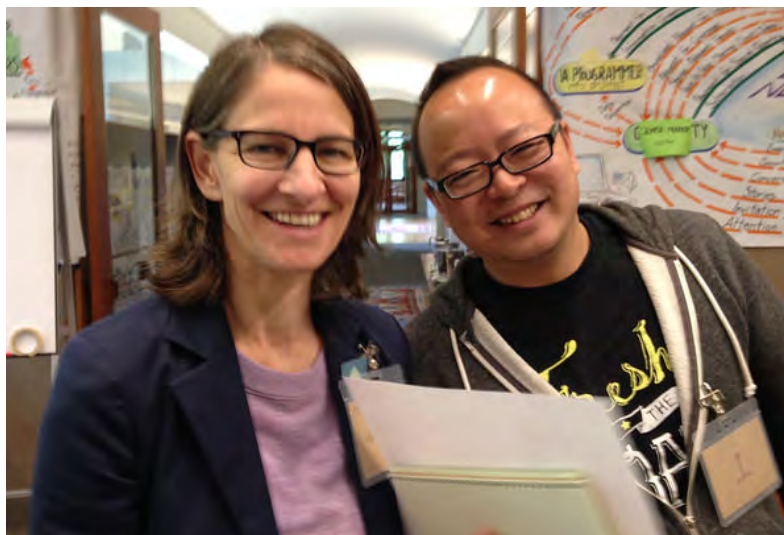
Julie Schwietert Collazo makes a point about the role of ethnic and foreign language media seen as leaders and advocates for the communities they serve. Among those looking on, Stephen Silha, Ivan Roman and Craig Aaron.

Some suggested instituting a possible “Good Housekeeping stamp of approval”, which would identify to journalists and to the public those media outlets that are doing right by their staffers and freelance contributors. Highlighting outlets already doing this could be one way to start the ball rolling.

Funders were also seen as another pressure point. Support from foundations, which mostly fund projects or coverage on a certain issue, could be limited to those media outlets that have agreed to accept the protections in the Bill of Rights. To get grants, media outlets could be required to follow best practices regarding journalists’ working conditions. Some brought up Nike as an example of having to improve pay and working conditions for their subcontractors’ employees in Bangladesh once retailers said they would not stock products made in sweatshops.

Some cautioned that major media outlets could respond to this pressure by eliminating the use of freelancers entirely, which happened with some internship programs. Funders who lack the desire or the expertise to monitor media’s treatment of journalists may also not want to participate.

Lawsuits, public pressure or shaming, and organizing journalists to boycott outlets that refused to improve working conditions were suggested. The legal basis for any lawsuits would have to be explored and it was unclear if public shaming would work at some outlets when they had such little resources to begin with.



Esther Kaplan and Jeff Yang get together to discuss ways to tackle compensation issues and working conditions for freelance journalists.

Trying to organize journalists, including journalists on staff who could show solidarity, might be more promising. The question arose about how to get journalists to the table. Some labor actions in the past have been beneficial. The audit and its results could be the disruption needed in the market and among journalists to prompt them to take action for change. It also made sense to contact and collaborate with, if feasible, the Writers Guild, the Newspaper Guild, the National Writers Union, the Authors Guild and others.

Another part of the solution, some concluded, was to get enough major media outlets to follow certain working conditions so that there’s the potential to create an industry standards. The more who participate, the easier it is for journalists to boycott offending outlets in solidarity, building pressure for wider acceptance of minimum standards.

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Proposed Action
Plan and Complete an Audit of Independent Journalism Workers

Pocantico participants felt that the most important first step would be to plan and complete an **audit of independent journalism workers**, both staff and freelance, to document and expose pay rates, workers’ rights, protections and benefits, workload and diversity issues by late 2016.

Jeff Yang, columnist with Wall Street Journal Online, agreed to lead the effort with the following Pocantico participants committed to aiding in various parts of the project: **Esther Kaplan**, Editor, The Investigative Fund, The Nation Institute; **Valeria Fernandez**, independent journalist; and **Ricardo Sandoval-Palos**, President, Board of Directors, Fund for Investigative Journalism.

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Independent Journalism Businesses: Making Them Stronger from the Start

Conference participants from larger, more robust media organizations expressed keen interest in seeing other independent outlets thrive equally as well. They sought to shape what they had learned so far from their experiences into essential advice on what the elements of successful growth and sustainability are, from startup through maturity.

Those involved in the discussion were well aware of the disparate, often shifting levels of personnel, resources and competencies among different organizations. So they offered their advice with the understanding that most organizations will have to work at their own pace to install the elements that will allow them to move from one stage of development to the next. However, the point is to move.

Furthermore, organizational differences notwithstanding, there is a minimum threshold that should be met before anyone turns on the lights, and that is a business plan. Not, as one person remarked, “the 50-page tome popular in the ‘80s,” but just a few pages outlining a 3-5-year vision, projected funding needs, and a plan for minimum viability. A business plan forces journalists forming startups to pay attention to what they need to do on the business side instead of just jumping into doing the journalism. Nor is the plan immutable. It’s common that the expectations going in will change once operations are in motion. Note that the learning never stops. Even those at longstanding organizations continually assess how well their business practices work.

Finally, it’s important for journalists, whether business savvy or not, to understand they play a key role in attracting revenue. It’s their vision, their work that philanthropists or underwriters are supporting, and they need to get comfortable with a proper, uncompromised role in conveying the importance, even urgency, of what they do.

The breadth of the combined experience of the participants in this discussion spanned the range from raw start-ups to transforming moribund organizations to working with long established independent news outlets to forming associations to bring financial, technical, and editorial resources to outlets sector wide.

Here are their six key points:

1. For truth, look in the mirror. Understand what you don't know about your potential business, and about people, money and time management. Unless your goal is a home-based freelance enterprise, someone on your team needs to be competent in business basics like accounting, budgeting, marketing, and the administrative duties that accompany those activities.

2. Plug the holes. Once that self-assessment is done, be ready to learn some of the skills or hire people with those skills to be a natural part of the original team.

3. Who's the leader? The right CEO is not necessarily the journalist/founder. The leader needs to know how to get his/her hands dirty on all fronts: s/he should be able to meet with donors and investors and then apply the funds to the right enterprise; attend and be comfortable in editorial meetings; understand the bookkeeper/auditor and be responsible to a board; can close the loops in the operation and do some fill-in work when needed.

There is no one best example of how people lead a successful enterprise of this type. The leader must be open to collaboration in the key areas of journalism, business wisdom and technology, supported by and in synch with a board that has the additional skills to help the media outlet's mission.

4. Prioritize messaging and social media. It is essential that someone on the team know how to market, promote and communicate the product, the stories and the overall mission.

Too often journalists believe they can do social media. They should be on social media, but journalists often don't pay as much attention to social media as they should. Nor do they have time to keep up with the extremely fast evolution in the social space. Likewise, business staffers often don't have the right know-how or focus. When feasible, resources should be allocated to hire dedicated staff to develop and implement a robust social media and marketing strategy. Bringing eyes and ears back to the outlet's site is vital to building both audience and donors.

5. Understand audience/community. The leaders of any outlet must identify and intimately understand their audience and community. Who are they targeting? Why? Are they limiting their options/possible revenue by not fully understanding their community?



(From l to r) Ricardo Sandoval-Palos, Linda Jue and Richard Logan help detail some key elements new media outlets should have in place at the outset to have a better chance of success.

Some outlets' marketing strategies seem aimed squarely at foundations or funders, assuming they are interested in coverage of particular topics or issues. Conversely many funders actually want to know how the outlet is targeting and serving both community and audience, and importantly, whom they have identified as their audience.

Engaging the audience continuously is key, which can be difficult given limited internal capacity. But a media outlet should be able to show its connection with its audience and how it is making a difference in their lives. That resonance with the community and the audience is important to sustainability.

6. Revenue, revenue, revenue. With all these pieces in place, a minimum of three solid lines of revenue should be identified. Ideally, each line should have the potential to generate enough revenue to alone support 100 percent of all operational costs in a downturn. This seems too obvious to overlook, but there are too many folks going into ventures with just great ideas. That's not enough.

However, for some of the participants, this goal on revenue was up for debate, considered aspirational, but not always practical. Also, any revenue goals to fund any project, collaboration or overall journalism work, whether from philanthropic sources or the marketplace, need to include the operations' overhead costs not specifically covered by project-driven fundraising.

Also, in nonprofit news operations a good development person – someone with good contacts and who knows how to develop strong relationships with foundations and wealthy donors – is essential. It should be someone who can own the challenge of finding money to keep the enterprise going and think creatively about all avenues of revenue. Usually journalists will have no clue how to function on that end of the business side.

In a nonprofit outlet, the leaders also need to identify how collaborations, products, and stories will generate separate revenue streams and optimize them to contribute to operational costs. Someone who can identify those revenue streams is essential and should be part of the team from the start.

Independent Journalism Associations – Better Together?

At least 14 associations support independent journalism outlets. Many of these associations are small, serving 100 members or less. Several are under resourced. Others, especially those with large memberships, have healthy budgets but may not be meeting all member needs. One working group at Pocantico spent time exploring whether these organizations could benefit the sector by working together, and if so, in what way.

All agreed that, in whatever configuration, independent and community journalism outlets need the infrastructure support associations provide. Associations offer peer-to-peer networking, training, and resource sharing, from legal services to discounted products to technical assistance. Associations are also useful in helping foundations by distributing “block grants” to media outlets and individuals among their membership, a bureaucratic process that some foundations would not undertake individually for small allocations.

Benefits of working together. Several suggestions were made for how smaller associations could work together, including merging, federating, or forming some other close contractual partnership. Benefits of such a partnership would include:

- **Shared Services and Products:** Members of all organizations would benefit from services and products offered by each organization.
- **Discounted Services:** A larger user pool might make possible services now impossible to acquire, such as quality 401(k) plans, health insurance coverage, and credit lines for business loans.
- **Discounted Products:** A larger user pool creates more incentive for companies to offer bigger discounts on their products.
- **Ad Networks:** Especially for digital and mobile ads, an increase in participants will equal an increase in sales and cpms.
- **Shared Back-End Services:** Associations could share, and thus realize a discount on services including accounting, bookkeeping, grants tracking, web maintenance, etc.
- **Shared Conferences:** Associations would realize a benefit of scale in increased sponsorships and exhibitors; attendees would benefit from increased networking and a wider variety of workshops.

This kind of shared services model could also be adopted by independent media outlets which, although editorially independent, could also cut costs or gain resources not otherwise available to a single publication or website.



(From l to r) Chris Faraone, Jeff Yang and Valeria Fernandez comment on ways for freelance journalists to get paid more and ideas on how media associations can become more effective at what they do.

Current and future challenges to working together. Participants recognized that the greatest barrier to such partnerships come from differences in culture and values. On the one hand, associations like the Institute for Nonprofit News, The Media Consortium, the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies and the Local Independent Online News Publishers have much in common: a commitment to investigative journalism, questioning power, and a culture of standing apart.

On the other hand, there are clear differences. Taking the above examples, AAN and LION's outlets are focused on local news, while INN and the Media Consortium outlets tend to report on regional and national news. The Media Consortium espouses progressive values and solutions journalism while INN emphasizes nonpartisan journalism. AAN outlets are for-profit, INN outlets are non-profit, while LION and the Media Consortium represent both types of outlets. And these comparisons pale in comparison to differences in culture between any of these associations and associations like the National Newspaper Publishers Association (NNPA), which represent the country's black press, and New America Media (NAM), a national collaborative of ethnic and immigrant media.

Counsel on how to proceed. Some suggested there was a need to start convening these associations to discuss if and how to move forward. Others suggested that some associations may have to lead the way. For example, The Media Consortium held a meeting of associations in 2013, and it and the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies have shared one joint conference and are in talks to explore deepening their partnership.

Others cautioned that starting the process slowly by successfully pooling resources one by one, which pushes the membership to ask for more collaboration, might be the way to go. No matter what the strategy, there was agreement that the news industry needs to be on

more solid, sustainable footing before the next recession hits. So there was some urgency to making progress on this front, in whatever model or form is settled on, sooner rather than later.

Grow Public Awareness of the Value of Independent Journalism Develop Brands with National Reach and Impact

Whether it's producing a great story, creating a solid media startup, or establishing a media outlet focused on independent journalism, it all starts with a good idea.

But to survive and last, so much more is needed. To increase reach and impact of independent media in more diverse communities and in a fractured and specialty-driven news media environment, it is essential to **grow public awareness of the value of independent journalism**. The media needs to develop branding and messaging, target particular audiences with potential for growth, and disseminate information about what they do.

Not only do startups need to have solid foundations, some suggested, but **large national "brands" of independent journalism should be developed** and promoted to the public. Building brands -- and businesses -- of significant scale has been key to both the economic sustainability and cultural impact of independent journalism organizations such as Mother Jones, The Nation, and Democracy Now. Can we identify and systematically build up other powerful national brands that reflect inclusive values?

Some of the participants questioned this strategy, concerned that a branding campaign aimed at building national brands would focus merely on preserving bigger outlets and their ways of thinking about their audiences and their business. A campaign of this type could drain energy away from the harder job of transforming the sector with a growth strategy that could sweep up entire new audiences and, in this way, gain more revenue.

Those who supported a marketing strategy felt that developing media brands with significant national audiences and impact would help other independent outlets compete for the larger audiences of legacy media. They suggested that existing larger independent media outlets are allies that need to be supported and targeted for growth into successful national brands. That, in turn, could help increase the impact of everyone's journalism.

An overall branding and marketing campaign would also create more awareness of and bring larger audiences to independent journalism as a disillusioned public looks for alternatives to get and share their news and information.

"Branding was a trigger word perhaps [for some], but branding for me is simply a business strategy, and we need to take business strategies more seriously in this sector. We're not talking about pulling in and contracting and forming more silos -- we're talking about getting out there and having more impact."

Linda Jue, Executive Director/Editor
G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism



Most concluded that a good branding campaign could accomplish both. It actually turned out, for many in the room, that developing national brands and marketing newer institutions and approaches in a sector that is in constant transformation are goals that can complement one another, if done right.

One step in this direction was not to start from scratch, but rather identify existing successful organizations with the talent, leadership and strategy whose

weaknesses can be addressed. How to determine all of this, some Pocantico participants agreed, would have to be part of future discussions if this effort moves forward.

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Proposed Action
Develop the Idea of a Branding Campaign for Independent Journalism

Taking into account the discussions at Pocantico and in coordination with the working group on revenue development referenced above, participants agreed to develop the idea of a branding campaign, possibly modeled on the “Red” campaign or other similar efforts.

Kevin Davis, of KLJD Consulting, formerly with the Investigative News Network (INN), is taking the lead of on this.

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Some Closing Thoughts

Pocantico participants spent an evening and two days exploring ideas on ways for independent journalism to become stronger and more inclusive, and to have a deeper engagement with its audiences and communities. Many said they were glad to have been part of a meaningful and thoughtful discussion that took a broad view of challenges we face, while honoring the importance of the journalism being done. With a growing appreciation of possible connections between revenue and inclusion, they saw the potential to have much more influence and impact.

When asked at the close what touched them about the experience, here is a sampling of what they said.

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“I go to a lot of journalism gatherings and this one feels qualitatively different and it opened up new kinds of conversations. I feel less on the on the brink from bailing from this whole life and really invigorated. I hope these relationships and ideas persevere in the coming weeks and months.”

Esther Kaplan, Editor, The Investigative Fund, The Nation Institute

“What touched me most was the passion of the conversation about diversity. And that’s a very important part of my day job, but a kick in the pants every once in a while about how important it is is a really good thing, so I feel like I got one. We can always do better.”

Richard Tofel, President, ProPublica

“(The framing of the conference) brings us back to that point we all have. That love and that passion. Putting that at the forefront was centering for me and helped me through difficult conversations. I was touched by everyone’s efforts to articulate their personal and professional struggles and being honest about that. I appreciated everyone’s honesty.”

Julie Schwietert Collazo, freelance journalist, New York

“It has been very satisfying and reduced my cynicism about moving forward on this. I really was on the verge in the last two or three years of getting out of the media and getting out of everything altogether because I was feeling very disillusioned. I just felt like the work I was doing was going nowhere. So this has been really great. Thank you all for being here and for the rich conversations we all had. I am very touched... And I will stay in!”
Linda Jue, Executive Director/Editor,
G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism

“I found this to be a really invigorating experience, not only because of the things we talked about, but the people who I met here. I think there is going to be something coming out of this that is a happening, that is going to be an active and planned our plan for action. So my mind is officially blown.”
Jeff Yang, Columnist, Wall Street Journal online

“It’s really fresh to hear how other people are navigating the amazing work we are all doing at a time when not only is our sector in transition, but the entire world is in transition – it’s an extraordinary moment to be doing journalism.”
Sarah van Gelder, Editor in Chief, YES! Magazine

“What is important is the ongoing conversation. This is just a signpost in that process... You don’t try, you do. You don’t talk, you walk. I think that’s some of the things we’re building off this and propels us forward.”
Ricardo Sandoval-Palos, President, Board of Directors
Fund for Investigative Journalism



Stephen Silha, cofounder and board member, and Peggy Holman, cofounder and executive director of Journalism That Matters, the conveners and co-facilitators of the gathering Supporting Independent Journalism to Thrive.

Links to Appendices

Program Schedule

The materials created by participants are at journalismthatmatters.org/pocantico. They include:

Before the meeting

[Quotes from pre-meeting conversations](#)

[Recommended Readings](#)

[Bios](#)

During the meeting

[A rough map of the ecosystem](#)

[Draft principles](#)

[Action Steps \(Summary\)](#)

[Closing Thoughts](#)

Session Notes

Friday Morning

- [Who/What is Community Media?](#)
- [Who Funds? Who Gets? How Do You Measure?](#)
- [Not Free As In Beer or Free As In Speech, Free As In Lance: Is Organizing Independent Journalists A Game Changer?](#)
- [What constituents are essential for a successful independent journalism organization?](#)

Friday Afternoon Sessions, Round 1

- [How Do We Get Past the Blind Spots? How Do We Strengthen the Gatekeepers?](#)
- [Could We Imagine Public Support for Journalism?](#)
- [How Do We Listen to What Audience Wants, Turn Audience into Indy Journalism Advocates](#)
- [Structures to Support Independent Journalism / Federating Associations](#)

Friday Afternoon Sessions, Round 2

- [Exploring Best Practices & Navigating Possibilities](#)
- [Independent Media Acquiring Legacy Outlets](#)

Saturday Action Sessions

- [Create a Convening of ALL Independent News Media](#)
- [Macro Strategies and Sources of Money](#)
- [Rockefellerization of the News](#)

Who Was There

The organizing committee for the Supporting Independent Journalism to Thrive gathering sought to include as many different perspectives as possible in a small discussion group of 30 people.

The mix of media association representatives, freelance journalists, funders, academics, entrepreneurs, publishers and editors of media outlets and media activists were selected for their insight on the challenges they are facing in the changing independent journalism sector. They also lived up to the expectation of going beyond their own experiences to think more broadly about the needs of the independent journalism ecosystem to survive and thrive.

To bring new voices and fresh eyes in the room, we invited some people who usually are not part of discussions like these, and they brought some valuable thoughts and ideas to rich and dynamic dialogue.

We also worked to bring in diverse voices to contribute to such an important conversation. Women made up nearly half of those who attended and 43 percent of those in the small and large session discussions and the side conversations that forged the ideas and action steps that emerged were people of color. The participants were:

- **Craig Aaron**, President and CEO, FreePress
- **Gail Ablow**, freelance broadcast and digital journalist, New York
- **Bill Buzenberg**, Fellow at the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy; former executive director, Center for Public Integrity
- **Kevin Davis**, Principal, KLJD Consulting, formerly executive director with Investigative News Network (INN)
- **Molly de Aguiar**, Program Director, Media & Communications, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
- **Bill Densmore**, Research Fellow, Reynolds Journalism Institute/ InfoValet Project
- **Chris Faraone**, News and Features Editor, DigBoston
- **Valeria Fernandez**, independent journalist, Phoenix
- **Michelle Garcia**, independent journalist/filmmaker, New York
- **Jay Harris**, President, Public Intelligence, Inc.; formerly with Mother Jones
- **Peggy Holman**, Executive Director, Journalism That Matters
- **Linda Jue**, Executive Director/Editor, G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism
- **Jo Ellen Green Kaiser**, Executive Director, The Media Consortium
- **Esther Kaplan**, Editor, The Investigative Fund, The Nation Institute
- **Richard Logan**, President, The Reva and David Logan Foundation
- **Juana Ponce de Leon**, Director of Media Diversity Relations, NYC Council Speaker's Office; formerly with the NY Independent Press Association
- **Tracie Powell**, Founder, ALL DIGITOCRACY

- **Jennifer Preston**, Vice President, Journalism Program, The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- **Barbara Raab**, Program Officer, The Ford Foundation
- **Martin G. Reynolds**, Senior Editor, The Oakland Tribune, Hayward Daily Review, Fremont Argus
- **Iván Román**, Communications Consultant; formerly with the National Association of Hispanic Journalists
- **Robert Rosenthal**, Executive Director, The Center for Investigative Reporting
- **Ricardo Sandoval-Palos**, Supervising Editor, Morning Edition, National Public Radio; President, Board of Directors, The Fund for Investigative Journalism
- **Julie Schwieter Collazo**, freelance journalist, New York
- **Stephen Silha**, CEO, Frisky Divinity Productions; Board member, Journalism That Matters
- **Michael Stoll**, Executive Director and Editor, San Francisco Public Press
- **Richard Tofel**, President, ProPublica
- **Sarah van Gelder**, Editor in Chief, YES! Magazine
- **Chance Williams**, Program Officer, Open Society Foundations
- **Jeff Yang**, Columnist, Wall Street Journal online

Click [here](#) for participant bios.



Jeff Yang explains his views on how media associations can improve their services to journalists. Looking on (from l to r), Gail Ablow, Richard Logan, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Linda Jue, Martin G. Reynolds and Jennifer Preston.

Acknowledgments

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This report was compiled and written by: lead author **Iván Román**, communications consultant and former executive director of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists; **Jo Ellen Green Kaiser**, Executive Director of the The Media Consortium; and **Peggy Holman**, Executive Director of Journalism That Matters. **Linda Jue**, Executive Director/Editor of the G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism, served as editor of the report.

Meeting organizers:

- **Peggy Holman**, Executive Director of Journalism That Matters
- **Linda Jue**, Executive Director/Editor, G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism
- **Jo Ellen Green Kaiser**, Executive Director of the The Media Consortium
- **Sally Lehrman**, Professor of Science and Justice at the University of California, Santa Cruz; Senior Fellow on Journalism Ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics (advisor)
- **Iván Román**, Communications Consultant, formerly with the National Association of Hispanic Journalists
- **Ricardo Sandoval-Palos**, Supervising Editor, Morning Edition, National Public Radio; President, Board of Directors, Fund for Investigative Journalism
- **Stephen Silha**, CEO, Frisky Divinity Productions; Board Member, Journalism That Matters

About Journalism That Matters



[Journalism That Matters](#) convenes conversations to foster collaboration, innovation, and action so that a diverse news and information ecosystem supports communities to thrive. We believe journalism matters most when it is of, by, and for the people.

JTM is a 501(c)(3) that serves those who are shaping the evolving news and information ecosystem including emerging and traditional journalists, people and their communities, and others who contribute to civic discourse, such as educators, information technologists and librarians.

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