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*

As technology and declining business models have forced major changes in the country’s news media landscape, independent journalism and independent journalists assume an ever more prominent and necessary role in providing the country’s news and ensuring public accountability of its political and business establishment.

The decline in private and social investment in journalism has left the news media landscape in crisis. Growing concern about money in politics, income inequality, police brutality and a host of other issues, coupled with the public’s increasing distrust of how journalists are covering the news, has laid bare the urgent need for a healthy news media to serve our communities and our democracy. Trying to pick up some of the slack from legacy media, independent and community journalism is facing a growing challenge.

“Alternative media was always supposed to be supplemental,

but what happens when mainstream news leaves a vast, gaping hole?”

**Jo Ellen Kaiser**, Executive Director, The Media Consortium

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 the public’s distrust. A mix of 30 independent journalists, funders, media association representatives, academics, media outlets, entrepreneurs and media activists gathered under the aegis of Journalism that Matters over three days at The Pocantico Center of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund to explore ways to begin answering this complex and challenging 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 entire meeting was conducted using open space technology. We started with no agenda. Participants created the sessions they attended. The aim was to create the “hallway conversations” that we know are where most of the work gets done. One result of this process is that the most profound experience over the three day meeting happened Friday evening, when one group called out the “white supremacy” that governs what we refer to as the independent journalism sector. That moment informed our subsequent conversations and action items on Saturday.

The Pocantico meeting was also intentionally meant to start a conversation, and not finish it. We declared at the start that there would be no “Pocantico Declaration” and that we would create no new organization. Our aim was to jumpstart a conversation that would then continue with a broader representation of independent journalists, technologists and the public. To that end, the entire proceedings were“on the record.” In addition to this report, you are invited to read the detailed notes from each session that appear in the appendices. Please do follow up with either the organizers or with any of the leaders of action steps if you have any questions.

We began our meeting on Thursday evening by first trying to map the independent journalism ecosystem. That led us to open up fundamental questions: who is our audience? Who is our community?

On Friday, as we tried to connect questions around audience to revenue, we quickly realized that there would be no one solution to the challenges facing independent journalism. However, it also became clear that, given a rapidly transforming news media environment, nascent business models, and quickly-changing technology, all participants said they felt the 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 were quickly confronted with the challenge of how to make institutions work now, while also thinking expansively about the future, the potential solutions that emerge, and how those solutions could benefit some or hurt others at the expense of the overall resilience of independent journalism.

The result were ideas and actions that fall into three broad categories. We did indeed spend considerable time on our most immediate problem, “How to Get the Money… and Who From.” We also considered the longer term issue of “Building the Infrastructure to Support Independent Journalists, Outlets and the Sector.” Most agreed, however, that the heart of our conversation ended up being “Audience and Community.” We start there.

**Section 1**

**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 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 our audience—both for impact and revenue—we asked the following questions:

* How do we listen to what the audience wants? How do we turn the audience into advocates for independent journalism?
* How do we get 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 answer the 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. The most unexpected outcome of these discussions was the joint realization 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.

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

1. Diversify and Democractize Impact
2. Empower Our Community

**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 United State’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 our 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 is not simply making our staffs more diverse, though that would be an important and useful step. We must restructure how we think about independent journalism to include ethnic and community journalists and journalism outlets. And these journalists and outlets must not be treated as an afterthought or as a source for stories, but as equal partners in a shared journalistic enterprise.

“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

In the clearest terms, we affirm that achieving true racial equity means ending white supremacy in independent journalism. Our current practices prejudice us 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 our communities, we must rethink who is a journalist, what kind of journalism is produced, and who is considered a trusted source.

Specifically, we recognized that as journalists and editors we tend to have implicit racial bias, and that our news outlets tend to have a structural racial bias. We specifically called out the following biases that favor a white persepctive when we cover the news as independent journalists:

* Individual: White men are too often passive participants in conversations about diversity.
* Individual: Editors and journalists miss or overlook important nuances between peoples and cultures that are indistinguishable to outside observers.
* 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 have the tendency to put reporters in silos (i.e. - the “Latino journalist,” the “Asian journalist,” etc.)
* Structural: There is often a lack of honest exchanges about diversity and bias between editors and other stakeholders, and between reporters and the communities with which they should be engaging with.

So how do we recognize unconscious biases and initiate open and honest discussions about this? How do we get editors and hiring managers to buy in to authentic racial equity? How can we strengthen operations and build relationships in communities where they may not be strong enough?

One structural question was whether using the term “ethnic and foreign-language media” to describe what are also mostly independent media in nature promotes a conceptual and functional separation of thousands of publications across the country, mostly community news outlets, from the larger media landscape.

Are these journalists being ghettoized? Who is ethnic? Or better still, who is not ethnic? Could these publications that inform immigrant communities and communities of color be an integral yet unrecognized part of independent media? Or are both independent media and foreign- and English-language local publications all community media?

As a start, some suggested we burst the silos open and tear down the walls between independent journalism and foreign-language, ethnic and community media. We agreed that community had to be at the center of our work.

**Action Step: Creating a Convening of ALL Independent News Media**

A committee of the Pocantico participants agreed to **convene a conference of independent, community and ethnic and foreign-language media** in spring 2016 to connect these colleagues, and facilitate, disrupt and create explosive 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 break down the silos most in these sectors are in, 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. We seek explicitly to invite community media in as equal partners: to create concrete ways for community media to expand their voices and specific action steps for them to step up to another level in business practice.

Participants committed to this effort and to recruiting others to be involved in making this happen: Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, The Medium Consortium, chair; Juana Ponce de León, of the NYC Council Speaker’s Office, formerly with the NY Independent News Association; Chris Faraone, Dig Publishing, Boston; and Richard Logan, The Reva and David Logan Foundation.

For more details on the convening, please see Appendix xxxx.

**Democratize our Audience and Empower Our Community**

To open up our audiences, we agreed we must **Empower our community**. That means putting the community and its information needs at the heart of the journalism work, moving away from the unidirectional habit of journalists producing and the audience simply consuming the news. Journalists need to listen more and assume less.

“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 journalist to do. We need to open up that dialogue.”

**Craig Aaron**, President and CEO, FreePress

Our discussion around ethnic and community media led to deeper conversation around what it means to empower community. Unlike the broader detachment from the public that usually characterizes legacy media and some in the predominantly white independent journalism space, most ethnic and foreign language media use journalism to advocate for their community. Their close relationship to their community strengthens their connection and engagement with their audience.

The community media model of empowering community raised a number of questions: when does empowerment become advocacy? Is it necessary to embrace advocacy journalism in order to support racial equity and empower community? If we turn our efforts to engaging the public, do we leave behind the critical role independent 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 consensus on these questions. However, examples that emerged from our sessions indicated that empowering community could be a rich resource even for nonprofit investigative outlets. For example:

Example 1: After publishing a story that crunched data in order to report on school cops and disparities in discipline, The Center for Public Integrity taught activists and journalists in other communities how to use the data in their areas, empowering the community and broadening the work’s impact.

Example 2: The Center for Investigative Reporting has started providing street poets and playwrights with the background data their reporters have used to write stories in order to get youth and others involved in the broader conversation about news in their communities.

The value of empowering the community is first and foremost to create more impactful journalism. By empowering the community to tell its stories, journalists will learn more about what the community needs to make a difference in their lives.

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

“I fundamentally believe journalism that invests in the community

will invest in you. They know when you are on their side.

It takes time and effort and it’s a culture shift.”

**Molly de Aguiar**, program director for media and communications,

Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation

Others were not so sure, arguing that community engagement efforts take resources and don’t always lead to ongoing engagement. Some also noted that engagement does not always lead to revenue—that is, the value for allies may be cultural rather than monetary. We asked: How do you get people engaged, keep the engagement going, and then ultimately have it generate revenue?

As the answers to those questions continue to be debated in the future, many agreed there is much they can learn from one another now and some potential ways to look at solutions.

* **Community engagement**. Are there lessons to be learned from how these ethnic and community media outlets connect closely with their audience, 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 common characteristic of many community news outlets, it warrants discussion on how independent media works. What distinguishes advocacy from activism? There was consensus that activism had no part to play in balanced journalistic practice.
* **Leverage one another’s strengths**. Couple on-the-ground perspectives of foreign-language and minority editors with the journalistic prowess of independent journalists. Establishing collaboration across “ethnicities” can produce coverage that resonates with a broader audience and is more reflective of the true diversity of our people.
* **Mutual respect**. Shift the paradigm and level the editorial playing field by giving equal ownership to independent and community editors in collaborative journalism projects. All are at the table from the start.
* **Culture and language**. Many sustainable community publications have a strong presence online that amplify their local print editions, nationally and internationally, and 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 with each other to exert influence and gain access. There may already be a lot of answers out there that can be studied and adopted as opposed to looking elsewhere for new solutions.
* **More openness on race**. People are talking about white privilege in the open. This was not the case a decade ago, and it’s a reflection of a societal demand that is both a challenge and an opportunity for change.

So if there was much to learn from one another and much strength and influence to be gained from collaboration, some participants said the logical next step would be to bring folks from these sectors together to spark communication and get the conversation going.

“You create very solid relationships where these things evolve.

We’ve talked about sustainability in terms of funding, but there is

also a need in terms of the flow of information.”

**Juana Ponce de León**, Director, Media Diversity Relations

NYC Council Speaker’s Office

**Action Step: Tools and Techniques for Empowering Communities**

Use pre-existing conferences and convenings to discuss how independent news outlets can better use new technology tools and cutting-edge social justice practices to better empower their audiences.

[Organizers will share this report with executive directors and conference programmers at independent news associations, suggesting they add programming on community engagement].

**Section 2**

**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 changing independent journalism ecosystem hard. In some ways, the urgent crisis caused by a lack of revenue to effectively operate and produce the news was even felt more harshly by 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 of the conversations and considered key to achieving stability and resilience in the long-term.

The gathering’s participants agreed on four key principles related to revenue:

* **Recognize and Communicate Best Practices and Failed Experiements.** We assessed independent journalism as a business, analyzing what outlets need to be financially successful and sustainable;
* **Create Broad-Based Funding Mecahnisms.** We agreed on the need to broaden the variety of revenue streams for media outlets, focusing in particular on three source areas: audience, philanthropy, and public support. (For more details on the perspective of independent and freelance journalists, see Section xxx);
* **Grow Public Awareness of the Value of Independent Journalism.** We discussed the value of a marketing campaigndesigned to showcase the benefits provided by the sector.
* **Develop Brands with National Reach and Impact.** Along with a branding campaign, we discussed the idea of acquiring failing legacy media outlets.

As the 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 and more diverse (i.e. less white) audience of readers, listeners and viewers to grow the pool of donors and members. In addition, embracing a more inclusive universe of independent journalists and outlets – for-profit hyperlocal sites, ethnic and foreign-language, community media, and more – would help outlets focus on the needs of the people the content is being produced for, which in turn would help inform future strategies around sustainability.

**Tools and technology**. The next generation of journalists and experts in technology need to be part of this search for the tools that can help distribute and promote the great 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 will get their news.

**Building infrastructure**. To achieve sustainability, news outlets need to define what it is that they want to sustain. Some need to engage in “right-sizing,” which could entail establishing an infrastructure or merging back-room services with others to survive, and not simply put all their revenue into the editorial product.

**The Independent Journalism Business: Recognize and Communicate Best Practices**

Pocantico participants, keen on seeing independent journalism outlets grow locally, regionally and nationally, sought to shape what they have learned from their experiences into essential advice on what prospective commercial and non-profit independent media operations need before they turn on the lights for the first time.

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 rent or hire people with those skills to be a natural part of the original team.

**3. Learn how to lead**. The right CEO is not necessarily the journalist/founder. The leader needs to know how to get 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; someone who can close the loops in the operation and do some fill-in work when needed.

There is no one answer to how people lead an enterprise of this type successfully. The person 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 leadership 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, but journalists often don’t pay as much attention to social media as they should, and don’t have time to keep up with the extremely fast evolution happening in the social space. Likewise, business staff often don’t have the right know-how or focus. Someone needs to be on social media and marketing around the click, because bringing eyes and ears back to the site/outlet is vital both to build audience and to build donors.

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

Some of the outlets’ own marketing today seems to be aimed squarely at foundations or funders, some of whom are interested in coverage of particular topics or issues, for example. But many funders actually want to know how the outlet is targeting and serving the community and the audience, and, importantly, who they have identified as their audience.

**6. Revenue, revenue, revenue**. With all these pieces in place, three solid lines of revenue must be identified. As a safety margin, each of the three lines needs to be robust enough to support 100 percent of the total operational costs. This seems too obvious to overlook, but there are too many folks going into ventures just with great ideas. And that’s not enough.

In non-profit news operations, for example, a good developer or development team – someone with a good list of contacts in philanthropy and wealthy donors – is essential. It should be someone who can own the challenge of finding money to keep the enterprise going, and usually journalists will have no clue how to function on that end of the business side.

In a non-profit outlet, the leaders also need to identify how collaborations, products, and stories will general separate revenue streams, each one robust enough to cover all operational costs. That’s why someone who can identify those revenue streams is important and it’s essential he or she be part of the team from the start.

**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 special government interests
* Be accountable
* Feature democratic distribution
* Be suitable for multi-platform outlets
* Feature 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 the infrastructure for a small organization, others target their journalism funding towards specific topics or areas of interest, while 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 concluded – large organizations, small organizations, freelancers and funders alike – that there is not enough money in philanthropy to meet the urgent need. 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 independent and legacy media, 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: Similarly, individual journalists freelance journalists said they were frustrated by what they perceive to be an elitist, closed system featuring “serial fellows,” people who get a fellowship and then get more fellowships because of the previous fellowships they received.

A: Funders warned that the same kind of journalistic elitism could happen if foundations insisted that grantees pay a living wage to its journalists, therefore having to favor outlets that could afford to do so in the first place or especially when the grant funds run out.

Q: How do foundations think about impact?

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

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 mission, which may be issue-focused. Other funders agreed with the concern: “Funding journalists’ salaries 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 in order for them to gain confidence in the media outlet’s capacity and in the clarity of its journalistic mission.

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 don’t understand the value of independent and local journalism to their community. Many 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.

**Action Step**: Richard Tofel of ProPublica and Molly de Aguiar of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation agreed to initiate efforts to **get independent journalism and this gathering’s ideas on to the radar of community foundations**. De Aguiar also agreed to collaborate on messaging. Down the road, the effort might involve delegations of journalists and community leaders.

**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 the 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 support it.

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 reflexive 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 (which includes 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 Sept., was suggested as a possible date, though it’s not clear that there is a nationally recognized date.)
* Pitching the notion to the Democracy Alliance. (Finding a member of the Alliance to sponsor a presentation of the idea would be needed.)
* Identifying political donors who would publically support the campaign.
* Examining the Gates “Giving Pledge” model to see how we might emulate that success.

Related to this and other possible joint fundraising efforts, there was some 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 some 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 during payroll elections.

**Support from high net-worth individuals**. Contacting family officers that handle the assets and in some cases the charitable giving of high net-worth individuals to get then thinking about journalism as a public good.

**Action Steps to be followed up on by varying committees of participants at the gathering include**:

* **Establish a working group on revenue development** to delve deeper on business development, sources of money, corporate charitable giving, individual giving. Should have their first call in June. Craig Aaron, FreePress; Jay Harris, Public Intelligence, Inc. formerly Mother Jones; Kevin Davis, MakingNews.biz, formerly Investigative News Network (INN); Linda Jue, G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism
* **Initiate an effort to connect with the Democracy Alliance** and pitch a match for political spending. Craig Aaron, FreePress; Esther Kaplan, the Investigative Fund, The Nation Institute; Jay Harris, Public Intelligence Inc., formerly Mother Jones; Richard Tofel, ProPublica

**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 public tax dollars; 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 a 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 and 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:

* tax code revisions or an income tax break for journalists or publications
* taxing 20 percent of the true commercial value of the public airwaves given in subsidy to commercial media and directing those funds to support journalism
* using part of the revenue from broadcast spectrum sales
* a tax on every cell phone to create a trust with those funds

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

**Marketing: Grow Public Awareness of the Value of Independent Journalism**

Whether it’s doing 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 the impact of independent journalism in a fractured and specialty-driven news media environment serving an extremely diverse community, not only do startups need to have solid foundations, but large national “brands” of independent journalism should be developed and promoted to the public.

Some of the participants questioned this strategy, concerned that a branding campaign would focus on preserving the outlets and ways of thinking that currently exist, instead of focusing on 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.

“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

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

It actually turned out, for many in the room, that both the marketing and transformational approaches were not incompatible and that they both have the same ultimate goals.

One step in this direction was not to start from scratch, but rather identify existing organizations with the right talent, leadership and strategy whose weaknesses can be addressed.

**Action Step: Create a Campaign for Independent News**

Undertake a branding and messaging campaign on behalf of independent news media.

Kevin Davis to lead this effort.

**Develop Brands with National Reach and Impact**

Aside from bolstering established and new independent media outlets or creating start-ups, some of the participants at Pocantico wanted to look at increasing the number of independent voices by taking over some of what is now legacy media. The goal is to improve the quality of local news by changing the mission of legacy media from enriching for-profit companies to 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 Reynolds**, Senior Editor – Community Engagement

Bay Area News Group

Participants understood that the first step is to create a business plan that would include: researching potential legacy media outlet 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.

**Action Step**: **Martin 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 outlet. **Kevin Davis**, formerly of Investigative News Network, **Craig Aaron** of FreePress 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.

**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 some time talking about the infrastructure of the sector.

On the one hand, we discussed the challenges facing independent and freelance journalists who find themselves without pensions, and often without health care, legal support, and more. On the other hand, we discussed the need for stronger, more sustainable associations to support the many needs of independent journalism outlets.

“It’s time for journalists to articulate the value that journalists bring to the table.”

**Martin Reynolds**, Senior Editor, Community Engagement,

Editor of the VOICES Project, Bay Area News Group

Unlike many of the other sessions, the sessions about building support for indivdiual journalists and for associations focused almost entirely on action steps. This focus on action points to the strong need for infrastructure building in 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 are not organized in any 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 jobs 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.

In 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. Journalists should also look to trace and worker organizations, especially ones organized in creative fashion like [SAG-AFTRA](http://www.sagaftra.org/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank).

Where possible, don’t reinvent the wheel.

**Audit worker conditions**. More research is needed on several issues relating to journalists’ working conditions, including: the history of efforts to sue aggregators like Facebook and Twitter for stealing content; 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 Writers Union and other entities to address compensation.

In particular, Pocantico participants expressed enthusiasm for an audit that would build off of the [survey of investigative freelance reporters created by Laird Townsend of Project Word](http://projectword.org/sites/default/files/PW_Freelancer_Survey_Feb2015.pdf) . This grant-funded audit of all reporters within independent journalism, both freelance and staff, 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 for production. It was felt two separate bill of rights needed to exist for freelancers and for staffers to reflect their realities and avoid pitting the groups against each other.

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.

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 the outlets that are already doing this now 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 their 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 some major media outlets could respond to this pressure by eliminating the use of freelancers entirely, which happened with some internships. Some 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.

Trying to organize journalists, including journalists on staff who could show solidarity, might be more promising and the question arose about how to get journalists to the table. Some labor actions in the past have been beneficial and the audit and its results could be the disruption needed in the market and among journalists to get them more open to taking action to force change. It also made sense to contact and collaborate with, if possible and/or feasible, the Writers Guild, the Newspaper Guild, the 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 standard. The more that do it, the easier it is for more journalists to boycott the others in solidarity, building up the pressure for more outlets to accept the minimum standards.

**Action Step**:

Pocantico participants felt that the most important first step would be to plan and see through the completion of 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, is leading 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.



**Independent Journalism Associations – Better Together?**

At least 14 associations support independent journalism outlets (see appendix xx). Many of these associations are small, serving 100 members or less. Several are underresourced. Others, especially those with large memberships, have healthy budgets but may not be meeting all of their members’ needs. One working group at Pocantico spent some 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 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 401k plans, health insurance plans, and a credit line 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, grant record-keeping, website 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 publication or website their size.

**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 and a culture of standing apart and questioning power.

On the other hand, there are clear cultural 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 values and solution journalism while INN espouses 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 NNPA—The Black Press of America.

**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 already held a convening of associations in 2013, and it and the Association of Alternative Newsweeklies have already shared a joint confernece are now 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 collaborations, 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.

**Action Step:**

See: Convening All Independent Media. As part of the effort to break silos between non-profit, local, foreign-language, black, and latino independent news media, Jo Ellen Green Kaiser of The Media Consortium committed to bring together the associations supporting those media to deepen conversations aroudn possible partnerships and pooled resources.

Conclusion?