**Rethinking Race in Independent News**

Last May, I attended a retreat on Independent Journalism with the hope of bringing more infrastructural support to the field. I came out of that convening, however, with the realization that the very way we talk about independent journalism contains an unspoken racial bias—a bias we need to correct.

In some ways, the heart of my job as Executive Director of the Media Consortium—a North American network of independent journalism outlets--lies in defining what independent journalism is. What I hadn’t thought about was that the way we define what we do sets the terms for inclusion and for exclusion. When we say what we are, we are also saying what we are not.

That means that understanding where structural racism hides often requires us to define our terms and then interrogate those definitions.

**Definitions**

Up until now, I felt that I had a good elevator pitch defining independent journalism: Independent news outlets are the alternative to the corporate media.

I still think this definition is pretty good. But it’s different from the way that Latino, Black and foreign language outlets define themselves. These outlets prefer to call themselves “ethnic” or “community” media rather than “independent” media. The reason is that these outlets define themselves primarily as advocates for their community.

So “community” and “independent” name themselves differently. They also may have different business models. Many (though not all) independents are nonprofit, while most (though not all) community media are forprofit.

When we look at their core values, however, these outlets are very much akin. Community outlets are mission driven to advocate for their communities. Independent outlets are mission-driven to answer to their stakeholders rather than to shareholders.

Listen to Univision [anchor Jorge Ramos summing up the role of community media](http://newsbusters.org/blogs/tim-graham/2014/11/29/univision-anchor-jorge-ramos-speaks-out-advocacy-journalism-neutrality):

"The best of journalism happens when we take a stand: when we question those who are in power, when we confront the politicians who abuse their authority, when we denounce an injustice.…"

"The best of journalism happens when we side with the victims, with the most vulnerable, with those who have no rights. The best of journalism happens when we, purposely, stop pretending that we are neutral and recognize that we have a moral obligation to tell truth to power."

How is Ramos’ community-based account of the role of news different from the mission-driven stakeholder-centric vision held by those in independent news? It isn’t.

Both community and independent news outlets want to speak truth to power. All of these outlets want to side with those who have no rights. All of them are willing to take a stand against injustice. All of them speak for specific communities.

**The Structural Racism that Defines “Independent”**

Why, then have we seen so little convergence between community and independent news outlets? I’m afraid the answer is that the definition of independent news contains a structural racial bias.

The problem, I think, is that independent news tends to define itself in opposition to “mainstream” corporate media.

Community media—Latino, Black and foreign-language news—defines itself as media **for** a community. It’s a definition that names its audience, its topic, its mission. Independent news defines itself as news that “you won’t see in corporate media.” We define ourselves **against** the corporate media, as the feisty opposition.

By casting ourselves as the opposite of corporate news media, have independent journalists restricted our area of operations to what we believe the corporate media actually is, and to what we think the “mainstream media” should cover? Sometimes, yes.

For example, it’s very easy for independent journalists to get caught up in the two-party political horse race, even though few of those candidates actually speak for the majority of Americans.

We cover complex issues like climate change that we believe corporate media should be covering. How often, however, have we covered climate change from the perspective of people of color—or even more broadly, with a focus on people, as opposed to policies?

I love independent journalism because there are so many times we do break the mold. There are so many times we speak for [youth in the foster system](http://www.radioproject.org/2015/06/failing-our-youth-an-inadequate-foster-care-system/) (Making Contact), or [rural Latinas denied reproductive health care](http://rhrealitycheck.org/article/2015/08/10/report-texas-latinas-disproportionately-harmed-2015-legislature/) (RH Reality Check), or for [small ethnic businesses trying to stay put](http://www.yesmagazine.org/people-power/this-nyc-real-estate-co-op-helps-small-businesses-stay-put) as cities gentrify (Yes! magazine).

But when we think of independent journalism mainly as the alternative to corporate media, we place ourselves within the corporate media’s limited orbit. And that too often has meant that we have blinded ourselves to the communities the mainstream media never sees—the Black, Latino and foreign language communities in our midst.

Police violence against Black men and women did not just begin to happen (see this story from [2013 of an 11-year-old arrested](http://azinformant.com/in-search-of-the-truth-witness-accounts-vary-in-holding-of-11-year-old/)). Yet most independent news media began to “see” this violence at the same time as corporate media. Korean papers—and [New America Media](http://newamericamedia.org/2011/09/workers-file-suit-against-local-nail-salon-for-labor-violations.php)--had published stories about illegal working hours at nail salons four years ago, but most independent news media did not “see” this story before the corporate media.

Talk to any editor at a Black, Latino or foreign-language outlet and you will hear similar stories—stories lost because no one outside of that specific community was looking for those stories, and because the outlets inside the community did not have the reach, resources, or sometimes the interest to push those stories out to a wider audience.

**Independent News as Community News**

What’s the solution? Well, what would it mean to reimagine independent news as community news?

Perhaps we might look first at where our different communities overlap. Some outlets do that now—for example, the very small Race, Poverty and the Environment was founded on the belief that racial and economic justice could not be separated from environmental justice. Colorlines has been a leader in applying a racial justice lens to a wide range of issues. New America Media , Feetin2Worlds and CUNY’s Voices of NY each provide training and a staff of translators to bring issues from foreign language media into the mainstream and vice versa.

We need to support these outlets and build more like them that have “feet in two worlds.”

We also should look at how outlets can work together. Too often, Black media, Latino media, foreign language media, and “independent” media operate in separate silos. What if we could break those silos down, so that outlets serving different audiences could share content and resources?

At a time when dailies are dying and news deserts are spreading; when disparities between the rich and poor are growing; when we see evidence that racism and sexism never went away but are stronger than ever—this is the moment when we need independents and community media to work together to provide the public with rich local, regional and national news that reflects the experiences of all those living in this country.

The Media Consortium is spearheading this dialogue. Under the rubric “Break the Silos” we are travelling across the country, attending conferences of our peers and colleagues, and working with them to create strong partnerships between outlets on the local, regional and national level. We hope to be able to make a larger announcement about that work by the spring of 2016.

Meanwhile, no matter which direction we go, outlets that now call themselves “independent” need to have a deep conversation about identity. It’s time to come up with a definition of our sector that positively defines what we do, as opposed to what we stand against. I welcome your participation in this conversation.