**What We Achieved at Pocantico**

On May 14-16, Journalism that Matters held a Pocantico convening titled “Supporting Independent Journalism to Thrive.” I was fortunate enough to join Peggy Holman, Stephen Silha, Ricardo Sandoval Palos, Ivan Roman, Linda Jue and Sally Lehrman on the organizing committee.

The aim of the convening was to start a conversation rather than to produce a declaration. Proceedings were all “on the record,” and a complete account—with a summary, report, and transcripts of every aspect of the convening—may be found at xxx. I join my colleagues in hoping that this transcript leads to a wider, broader and deeper rethinking of the sector.

Yet, I also felt that there was an unexpected but very specific outcome from the Pocantico meeting that should be highlighted: many of us at this convening came to understand that there is an unspoken structural racial bias built into what we call “independent media.” Specifically, that bias shows up in the way that news outlets serving foreign language, latino, and Black audiences are almost always excluded from the definition of independent media.

**Definitions**

At Pocantico, we dissuaded participants from defining terms, fearing that a whole weekend could be spent on semantics. However, definitions hold power. By defining what we are, we also define what we are not—we set the terms of inclusion and for exclusion. Understanding where structural racism hides often requires us to define our terms and then to interrogate those definitions.

The terms “community” and “independent” are not often used together.

The term “independent journalism” is used most often to refer to journalism that is an alternative to media owned by “mainstream media,” meaning large for-profit corporations. Independents can include non-profit investigative centers; for-profit “alternative” newsmedia; hyperlocal digital news sites; and outlets organized around issues, region, or point-of-view. What brings these outlets together is an agreement that unlike corporate media they are mission-driven, answering to stakeholders rather than shareholders.

“Community media” is an omnibus term often used interchangeably with “ethnic media” to describe Black, Latino and foreign language media. These news outlets are for-profit and advertising driven, providing “news to use” for very specific demographic groups. For example, the Korea Daily in Atlanta might cover the opening of a new Korean grocery store while the Omaha Star might feature local Black high school students who won college scholarships. Editors see themselves as advocates for their community; audiences see themselves and their issues reflected in the news they read.

Univision [anchor Jorge Ramos summed up the role of community media](http://newsbusters.org/blogs/tim-graham/2014/11/29/univision-anchor-jorge-ramos-speaks-out-advocacy-journalism-neutrality) when he spoke after receiving an award from the Committee to Protect Journalists:

"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. All of these 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.

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

Why, then have community and independent news not converged before now? At Pocantico, one group of journalists of color provided a (to me) startling two word answer: white supremacy.

Independent news often defines itself in opposition to “mainstream” corporate media. By casting ourselves as their feisty opponent, however, independent journalists have restricted our area of operations to what we believe the “mainstream” should cover. We have in essence placed ourselves within their 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, but most independent news media did not “see” this story before the corporate media.

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 and barely surviving 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 is the grandparent of this movement, providing a staff of translators to bring issues from foreign language media into the mainstream and vice versa.

We also should look at working together. Pocantico participants noted again and again how Black media, Latino media, various foreign language media, and “independent” media operate in separate silos. What if we could break those silos down?

What if we in the largely white independent media didn’t have to wait for a #Ferguson to happen to know what our colleagues in Black media long knew—the prevalence of police violence against young black men and women? What if we didn’t have to wait five years before the story of Korean nail-salon workers, a staple of Korean newspapers, hit a white audience? What if outlets like ProPublica could deliver muckraking stories tracing money in politics to a Black audience, to a Latino audience, to a Filipino audience?

What if outlets could work together to share their resources so that we could finally offer the public rich local, regional and national news that reflects the experiences of all those living in this country?

This vision of a new independent community news is the one that came out of Pocantico. Would such a reimagined independent community news be better able to find the support it needs to thrive?

We don’t know. What we do know is that the most stable source of funding for independent and for community media has always been from their audiences, whether via subscriptions, donations, or small-business ads. Strengthening those bonds to audience, and bringing that audience higher quality news they can use, can only, in our opinion, open up new avenues for revenue.

Pocantico participants will continue down a number of different paths. 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 will be a new effort to build a vibrant news ecosystem that embraces investigative, issue-based, local, Black, Latino and foreign-language news outlets working together to provide the U.S. public with the richness and diversity of information they need and deserve.

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