**What Happens When Independents are Not Alternative?**

Independent journalism long has defined itself as an alternative to the “mainstream media.” The print journalism ecosystem was organized so that large for-profit chains would provide the public with the bulk of their local and regional news. Independent outlets provided a supplement and corrective to these chains.

Now, on the long tail of the digital revolution, mainstream news chains supplying local and regional news continue to lose readership and advertising--and to shed journalists. Cities like San Francisco, Denver, and Seattle are one-paper towns. National corporate news organizations [have cut local and regional bureaus](http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/entertainmentnewsbuzz/2010/02/abc-news-to-cut-half-its-domestic-correspondents-shut-down-all-bureaus-except-washington.html). While [TV news is still holding its own](http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/digital-news-audience-fact-sheet/), they also are losing audience to new companies like Buzzfeed and Vox which seem to function as our new tabloids, and to social media companies like Facebook and Google that make no pretense to practicing journalism.

How does independent journalism define itself now that independent outlets are no longer the alternative to local and regional news chains? Can or should independent journalism fill the gaping hole that has been left by the downsizing of mainstream media?

Some, including a contingent at the Pocantico gathering, believe now is the time for non-profit muckraking news to vie directly with corporate news for mass audience. No longer an “alternative,” independent news will become mainstream but not for-profit, fulfilling the highest ideals of a journalism that is for the people. ProPublica and Mother Jones are examples of self-defined independent outlets that have taken this path.

What became clear, however, is th

they are no longer an alternative? For many readers,

Local independents—like the weekly alternative papers—are doing better, but see declining ad revenues and tighter budgets in their future as well.

In response to this economic shift, many of the journalists laid off from mainstream outlets have gone freelance. What they find is that there is little or no infrastructure support for freelancers in the journalism ecosystem. Other refugees from the dailies have set up non-profit independent investigative centers, but these also struggle with finding a path to economic stability. The only cluster of independents with any sense of stability are point-of-view, largely issue-oriented outlets like Yes! magazine, Truthout, and Democracy Now!