



THE STATE OF COMMUNITY & ETHNIC MEDIA IN CALIFORNIA:

Impact, Resource Gaps, and Opportunities



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ABOUT THE CORE PARTNERS

This report was commissioned by the Latino Media Collaborative. The Latino Media Collaborative is a multimedia agency and collaborative of media organizations focused on developing high-impact content and support for a media sector that fosters an informed and highly engaged Latino community. Through capacity building programming, strategic partnerships, content development, and policy advocacy, the collaborative is focused on creating opportunities to strengthen and build resiliency within the Latino media sector.

ABOUT THE CENTER FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Center for Social Innovation provides a credible research voice that spurs civic leadership and policy innovation. We also aim to integrate researchers, community organizations, and civic stakeholders in collaborative projects and long-term partnerships that boost collective impact. Importantly, the Center seeks to shift away from a “problem” narrative to an “opportunity” narrative for marginalized communities and localities. The Center for Social Innovation focuses on five key areas: Civic Engagement, Economic Mobility, Immigrant Integration, Leadership & Entrepreneurship, and Place Making. Specific to our work in Inland Southern California, our activities in collaborative research, policy innovation, and narrative change are aimed to more fully realize the region’s potential in terms of its civic activities, philanthropic investments, and growing nonprofit sector.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
Recommendations	7
Introduction	8
Data & Methodology	9
Diversity and Dynamism: A Snapshot of the Sector	10
Community Impact: Content and Connection	13
Impact of the Pandemic	17
Government Engagement & Investment: Gaps & Opportunities	19
Best Practices: Seattle & New York City	22
Recommendations	24
Endnotes	26

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ethnic media plays a pivotal role in sustaining the fabric of democratic life in multicultural California, informing and engaging its many minority communities. The hundreds of outlets, however, remain largely invisible and marginalized, a “giant hidden in plain sight.”¹

This report combines findings from an original survey of 106 ethnic media outlets in California and 19 in-depth interviews. It documents the current landscape of the state’s ethnic media, their diversity, challenges, and impact, with a focus on gaps in government investment.

Findings demonstrate that ethnic media ensure representation of communities and give their members access to accurate, critical information. The perception of “ethnic” media as supplementary to “mainstream” media is fundamentally misguided. Ethnic media are media in their own right, and valuable assets that support a diverse, resilient communication infrastructure.

The work of ethnic media documented in this study harkens back to a long history of advocacy, identity formation, and community organizing by outlets serving the nation’s BIPOC communities. For one, the Black press, since its emergence in the 18th century, fought for liberation, instilled racial pride, and became a symbol of freedom in a system that forbade enslaved people to read. Especially in the face of today’s unprecedented, sweeping crises in public health and racial justice, the work of ethnic media must be viewed through the lens of self-representation and empowerment. Investing in ethnic media unequivocally is an issue of equity, ensuring that all communities can participate equally in economic, social, and political life.

As a minority-majority state, California has the opportunity to set a standard for investing in the work of ethnic media, ensuring their sustainability and autonomy, and empowering diverse communities.

While the term “ethnic” media may conjure a status that is secondary to “mainstream” media, this report suggests that ethnic media are not just supplements to mainstream media. They are local media in their own right, and valuable assets that support a diverse, resilient communication infrastructure.

KEY FINDINGS

California’s ethnic media sector is robust and diverse, with a long history and constantly evolving.

- Roughly 300 ethnic media outlets, representing an incomplete count of the highly fluid sector, publish and broadcast in California, serving at least 38 different ethnic, racial, and cultural communities.
- The state’s ethnic media report in at least 36 languages other than English, which are spoken in more than 15 million households. Because many households are linguistically isolated, in-language media outlets are an indispensable source of information.
- The ethnic media sector’s history is long: 22% of the outlets surveyed are more than 40 years old. Newer players are also constantly emerging, with 19% founded in the last 10 years and 5% in the last 5 years.

Ethnic media provide trusted, community-specific information and stories. They are a key community institution, and one-dimensional audience metrics cannot capture their influence or appeal.

- Ethnic media carry significant local coverage. Among the outlets surveyed, local content comprises 68% of the coverage.
- Examples of impactful, community-specific coverage — especially the content related to COVID-19 and the civil unrest following George Floyd’s death — attest to the importance of investing in a diverse local communication infrastructure that serves different communities’ needs.
- As many as 30% of the outlets started covering the pandemic in January, before it became an issue of widespread concern in the United States. Of the outlets surveyed, 61.8% provided fact-checking or debunked pandemic misinformation.
- Ethnic media have deep ties with the communities they serve. In addition to providing news and information, they play multiple roles: information call center, event organizer, community advocate, connector of community assets, a voice for their audiences. Their reporting strengthens the community.

The sector is dominated by small-scale, independent, local media, strapped for resources and financially vulnerable, but lean and tenacious. The pandemic has exacerbated the challenge of sustainability.

- 73% of the outlets surveyed are locally and independently owned.
- 65% of the outlets have fewer than 5 full-time staff, while 22% have only one full-time staff.
- 28% of the outlets surveyed were operating at a loss before the pandemic. Several prominent outlets ceased operations in the last five years, including six newspapers published by the Eastern Publishing Group, and Channel 18’s Asian programming.
- At the time of the survey, mid-April to mid-May 2020, a quarter of the outlets reported a revenue loss of more than 70% due to COVID-19. Overall, the pandemic has wiped out half the sector’s revenue.
- To save on costs, 16% of outlets said they might reduce local coverage, and 28% might reduce the overall volume of publication, resulting in a loss of critical information to underserved communities. There is little room for cost reduction as many ethnic media already are barebones operations.
- 14% of the outlets are at risk of shutting down before the end of the year, potentially leaving a news desert for some communities.
- Outlets are accelerating efforts to develop their business models but face systemic barriers. It is not uncommon for ethnic media producers to pull in personal resources or income from other businesses to keep the outlet afloat, driven by a commitment to inform the community.

Advertising is still the lifeline of ethnic media, and outlets are trying to diversify revenue streams, but a stark gap exists in the availability of advertising contracts and grants.

- Advertising is the primary revenue source for 69% of outlets surveyed. Still, a reported 43% audience growth in the year before the pandemic has not always translated into advertising revenue gains.
- A major gap exists in the availability of advertising contracts. Only 38% of outlets have had advertising from mainstream businesses and institutions.
- Philanthropic funders increasingly recognize the value of ethnic media, but the resource gap is significant, and eligibility criteria for grants can be prohibitive for small-scale outlets.

Government agencies have under-invested in the state’s ethnic media. The result is inequities for ethnic media and the communities they serve, and missed opportunities for leveraging a key asset to strengthen the work of government.

- Not counting the 2020 Census, fewer than half of ethnic media outlets surveyed have had advertising from government departments.
- Ethnic media outlets reported inequities in advertising opportunities from government agencies, arising from neglect of small players and outlets serving BIPOC communities, and systematic barriers in the procurement process.
- Government departments often send press releases to ethnic media, suggesting they understand the efficacy of ethnic media, but that understanding has not translated into spending advertising dollars in these outlets.
- Lack of advertising in ethnic media has downstream consequences in terms of equitable economic, social, and political opportunities.
- Ethnic media can serve as trusted brokers between the government and their diverse constituents, ensuring culturally relevant, effective messaging and facilitating problem solving.
- The 2020 Census is a good example of ethnic media engagement. The state worked with sector leaders and devoted \$30 million to advertising in ethnic media outlets. Of the outlets surveyed, 82% have placed ads encouraging census participation. Census ad contracts have been critical in sustaining the outlets.

Seattle and New York City’s robust local programs for engaging and investing in ethnic media can serve as policy models.

- Seattle’s Ethnic Media Program acts as a central liaison between government departments and ethnic media, coordinating ad buys and partnerships.
- A mayoral executive order in New York City, issued last year, mandated that 50% of each city agency’s advertising budget should be spent with ethnic and community media. A 2013 study found that only 18% of the city’s ad spending went to ethnic media.
- Both city’s programs have a designated position for ethnic media engagement and host a central database of outlets. Both emphasize relationship-building with ethnic media and outreach to government departments.

RECOMMENDATIONS

State, regional, and local government should:

- Create diversified, equitable advertising programs that make ethnic media a priority.
- Develop a centralized, coordinated process at the local level for government agencies to engage and advertise with ethnic media.
- Require transparent, detailed data and reporting on the recipients and dollar amounts of advertising contracts, to enable analysis and assessment of spending allocation and gaps.
- Provide education and training for government departments, especially Public Information Officers and communication staff, as well as other decision makers in the funding ecosystem to raise the profile of ethnic media and support effective partnership with ethnic media.
- Cultivate meaningful, lasting relationships with ethnic media grounded in mutually beneficial premises.

Foundations, nonprofits, and academic institutions should:

- Invest a portion of the communications budget in advertising with ethnic media.
- Intentionally invite ethnic media, as equal and valuable players in the local news ecosystem, to events and opportunities that are open to mainstream media, such as conferences, collaborations, and grants.
- Recognize the multi-dimensional nature of ethnic media's impact.
- Inject resources into the most critical areas of need, such as content production, translation, web development, and social media strategies.
- Highlight the work of ethnic media in journalism conferences, industry publications, and classrooms.
- Support research about ethnic media, especially the gaps and opportunities in resources and funding, needs assessment, and audience behavior.

INTRODUCTION

Defined as media produced by and for ethnic, racial or cultural minorities², ethnic media has been a cornerstone of the country's multicultural democracy since its inception³. They include media serving various immigrant groups, African Americans, as well as indigenous populations. According to a 2005 landmark study of ethnic media commissioned by New California Media, ethnic media reached 57 million Americans, almost a quarter of all American adults. The study called the sector a "giant hidden in plain sight"⁴ — monumental in its reach and impact, but largely invisible. This description remains true today, in 2020. The sector is still underutilized in information outreach efforts, and underinvested in by philanthropic and government agencies.

Some promising progress has been made in recognizing the importance of ethnic media. In 2019, the Democracy Fund commissioned several reports on media that are led by and serve BIPOC⁵. City University of New York (CUNY)'s Center of Community Media, a longtime supporter and advocate for ethnic media, produced a study on the state of the Latino news media in 2019⁶, and this year released a timely report on innovators in the sector that compellingly showcases the impact and tenacity of ethnic media⁷. Another landscape analysis on ethnic media in New Jersey, led by Montclair State University, also was published last year⁸. These efforts signal a much-belated acknowledgement that ethnic media, and the underserved communities they represent, need to be seen and heard.

California — as the nation's most diverse state where the minority population is really the majority — could lead the way in recognizing ethnic media as vital institutions and investing in their growth. This report offers a snapshot of the sector, with a focus on the impact of ethnic media on their communities, revenue challenges, and shortfalls in current government investment. It makes the case that government investment in the sector is urgent, worthwhile, and essential. The report concludes with a set of recommendations for investing in and elevating the work of ethnic media.

DATA & METHODOLOGY

CENSUS

To establish a census of the ethnic media outlets in California, we began with a directory developed by Ethnic Media Services, an organization with a long history and extensive experience working with the sector. This directory was updated and expanded in March 2020, with input from media organizations such as California Black Media, ImpreMedia, Hoopa Radio, and the Center for Community Media at CUNY⁹. We then cross-referenced the directory with several databases, including the National Newspaper Publishers Association (an association of Black publications), the Center for Community Media's State of Latino News Media, and the center's Los Angeles Ethnic and Community Media directory¹⁰.

We then checked the outlets to make sure they are still operating and that they meet our inclusion criteria. To be included in this study, outlets have to be produced by and for a specific ethnic, racial, cultural, or linguistic group, and they must target the local audience in California. Our inclusion criteria are guided by the understanding that outlets serving minority groups have a distinctive role and face particular challenges endemic to their audiences' marginal status. Therefore, for the purpose of this study, we excluded outlets that cater to a hyperlocal or local community without explicit references to serving minority groups.

Based on our criteria, California has 276 ethnic media outlets. Using information provided in the existing directories and on each outlet's website, we coded these outlets according to ethnic/racial communities served and language of publication or broadcasting.

SURVEY

An online survey of these ethnic media outlets, conducted from mid-April to mid-May, 2020, contained 46 questions about the outlet's basic profile, organizational capacity, revenue sources, content, and experience working with government agencies, as well as a section about COVID-19's specific impact of on the outlet and its coverage of the pandemic.

Outlets were offered the opportunity to receive a one-hour consultation with the Center for Social Innovation at University of California, Riverside. The research team conducted two rounds of phone outreach following the initial email recruitment. Several industry leaders on the study's advisory committee also contacted their networks personally to encourage participation.

The survey resulted in a final sample of 106 participants. Based on the 276 outlets contacted, the response rate was 38%, a substantial rate compared to other studies that surveyed local or ethnic media¹¹.

INTERVIEWS

From among the survey participants, we selected 19 outlets for follow-up interviews based on criteria that would ensure good representation of the sample outlets' range: ethnicity, geography, scale and history of operation, and experience working with government agencies. The outlets, interviewed in June 2020, included Asian American (Cambodian, Chinese, Filipino, Punjabi, Vietnamese), Black, Eastern European, Latino, Middle Eastern, and Native American media. Following an interview protocol, two research assistants interviewed publishers, editors, or advertising representatives of these outlets in English and, when requested, in Spanish. Interview questions covered three areas: revenue, needs, and the impact of COVID-19; advertising from mainstream businesses and government agencies; and the outlet's coverage and impact on the community.

DIVERSITY AND DYNAMISM: A SNAPSHOT OF THE SECTOR

Based on results from our database work in April 2020, the ethnic media sector in the state has 276 outlets¹². As the sector is highly fluid, with ethnic communities fast growing and newer formats constantly emerging, we estimate that this number undercounts the sector by at least 20%. As of August 2020, Ethnic Media Services' directory has been updated to include 320 ethnic media outlets.

Together, these 276 outlets reflect the demographic diversity of California, and represent the major ethnic and racial communities and countries of origin. In broad terms, 39% of the outlets serve the diverse Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) communities, 29% serve the Latino communities, and 12% serve the African American communities (Table 1). The high number of AAPI outlets may be explained by the diverse languages and national origins within the broad racial category¹³, whereas the Spanish language largely connects Latino communities from different origins. These outlets serve at least 38 different ethnic communities, including small communities such as Oaxacans, Nepalis, and Tongans.

The state's ethnic media report in at least 36 languages other than English¹⁴. In a state where more than 40% of the population speak a language other than English at home, ethnic media could reach as many as 17.3 million people¹⁵. A third of the ethnic media produce content in both English and another language, either because their ethnic community is bilingual or because they cater to a multigenerational audience of first-generation immigrants and their native-born offspring.

ETHNICITY	COUNT	PERCENTAGE
AAPI	108	39%
Black	32	12%
Latino	81	29%
Middle Eastern	26	9%
Native American	8	3%
Other	22	8%

*TABLE 1. Communities served by ethnic media in California
The "Other" category includes Russian, Portuguese, Jewish, and Multiethnic outlets.*

*** Our survey sample closely mirrored the census in terms of the distribution of ethnicities served. For the remainder of this section, we refer to findings from the survey.**

The ethnic media sector in California has a long history (Figure 1). Of the outlets we surveyed, 22% are more than 40 years old, attesting to the role of ethnic media as long-standing institutions that have witnessed the history and transformation of their ethnic communities. At the same time, new outlets are constantly emerging, driven in part by demographic and technological shifts. Of the newer outlets, 19% were founded in the past 10 years and 5% in the last 5 years. This suggests a need to keep abreast of changes in the ever-evolving sector.

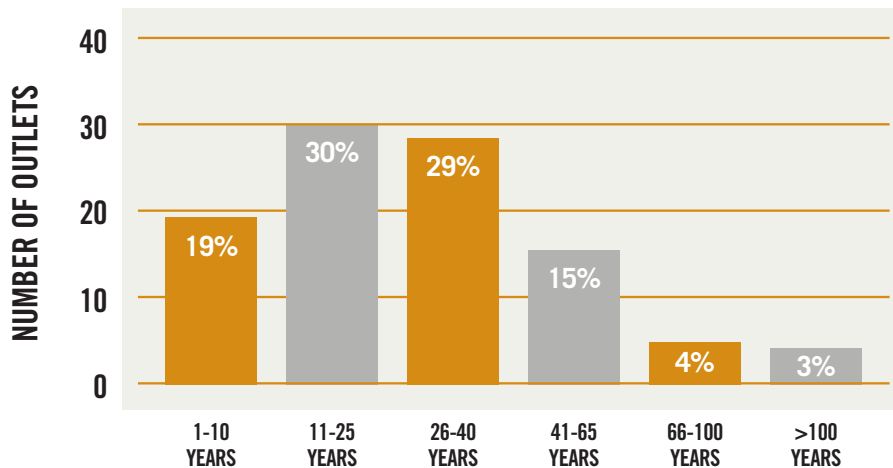


FIGURE 1. Age of outlets

The sector is adapting to the changing technological landscape. Almost half of the outlets surveyed are newspapers or magazines with both print and online editions, and 11% are digital-first or web-only operations. 9% of the outlets reported producing a mix of text, audio, and video programming. At the same time, 7% of the outlets - all of them more than 30 years old - remain print-only publications.

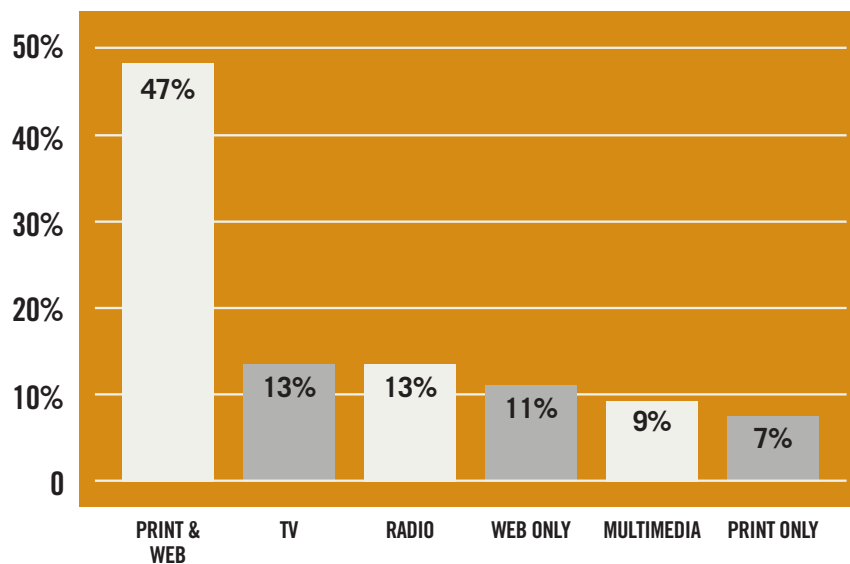


FIGURE 2. Format of ethnic media outlets in California

All but two outlets surveyed engage with social media, and 76% use more than one platform. Ethnic media outlets leverage many of the same platforms as mainstream media, with Facebook and YouTube being the most widely used. But also prevalent are digital platforms specific to a community, such as WeChat for Chinese, KakaoTalk for Koreans, and VKontact for Russians. A recent study that zoomed in on 50 innovative ethnic media outlets in the nation documented more than 25 digital platforms used¹⁶.

The sector is dominated by small, community-based outlets that operate with limited resources. In terms of ownership, 73% of the outlets surveyed are owned locally and independently, 11% are nonprofits, and only 10% are part of a larger national or international corporation (Figure 3). For staffing, 65% of the outlets have fewer than 5 full-time staff, while 22% have one or no full-time staff (Figure 4). In terms of frequency of publication, about two out of five outlets publish content weekly or biweekly, and 47% publish daily.

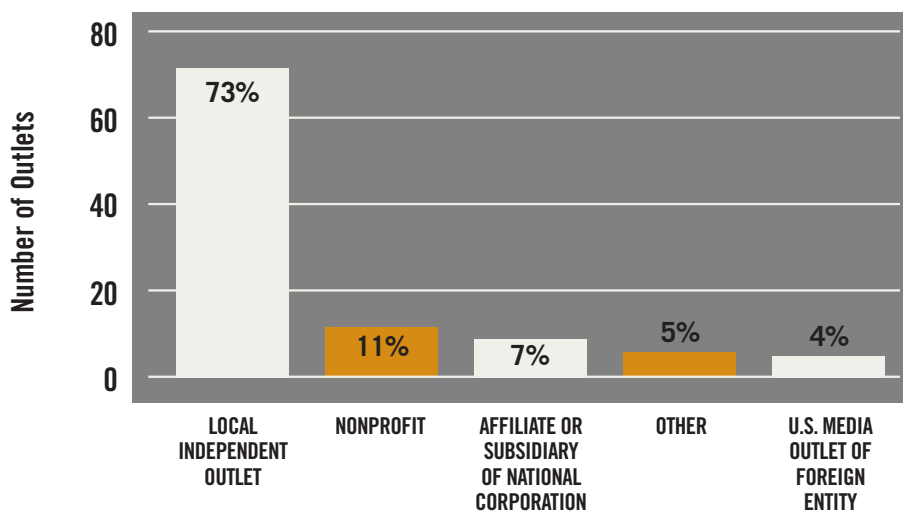


FIGURE 3. Ownership status of outlets

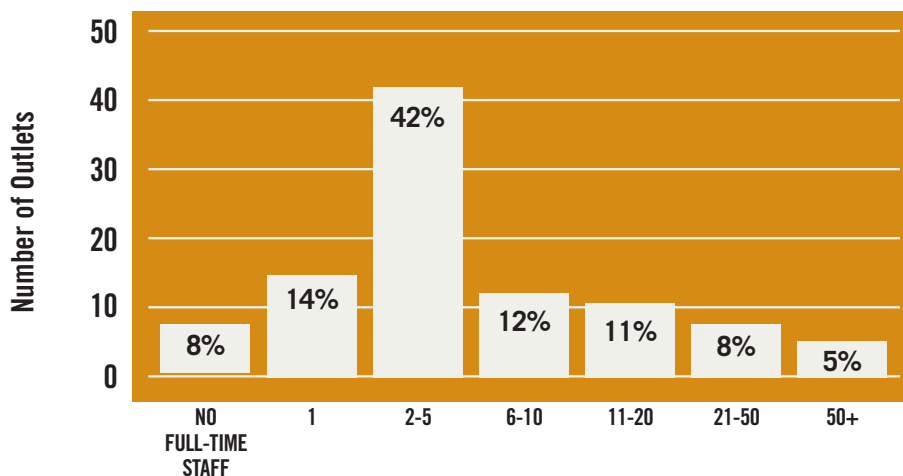


FIGURE 4. Number of full-time staff employed by outlets

COMMUNITY IMPACT: CONTENT AND CONNECTIONS

In this section, we elaborate on the impact of ethnic media in California, viewed in relief against the backdrop of the pandemic and civil unrest. Ethnic media is indispensable for two interrelated reasons: It serves as a trusted vehicle for communicating essential information and stories in-language for those with low English proficiency and for community members with specific needs who often are under-represented in mainstream media. Ethnic media also are vital institutions that are deeply embedded in the community. They connect their minority group audiences with local businesses and community organizations to advance their well-being.

INDISPENSABLE AND TRUSTED LOCAL NEWS

Although an important function of ethnic media serving first-generation immigrants is to provide them with news of their home country¹⁷, many outlets — particularly small, independently owned ones serving specific geographic areas — also have their gaze turned toward the local community. In the aggregate, 68% of the coverage by the outlets surveyed was local content pertaining to the city, region, or state of California. Almost half of the outlets surveyed reported that more than 75% of their stories were local (Figure 5). This local orientation was noted by a recent study on Latino media in the country that suggested bigger newsrooms are strengthening their local coverage¹⁸.

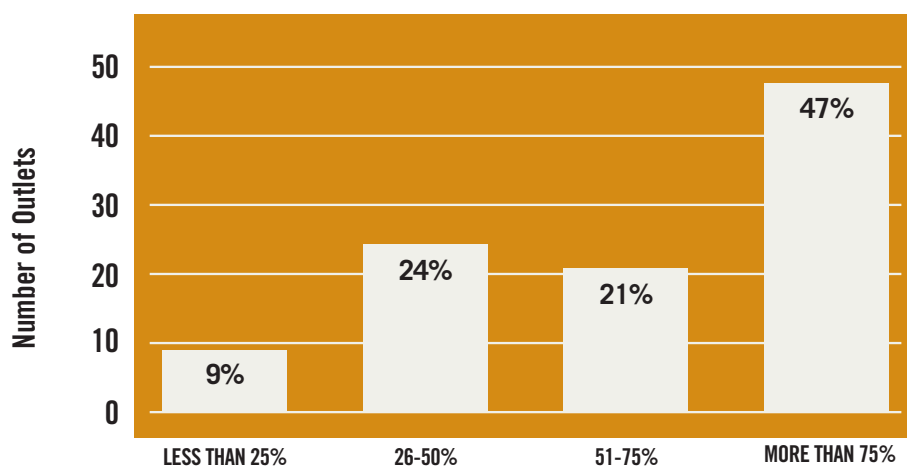


FIGURE 5: Proportion of the outlet's content that is local coverage

Resource constraints in these newsrooms limits the amount of original reporting, creating uneven levels of such reporting from outlet to outlet. Almost a third of the outlets, 29%, reported that less than half their content was original reporting. At the same time, 37% of the outlets reported producing more than three-quarters of original reporting. It should be pointed out that both the extent of local coverage and original reporting are self-reported data, and would benefit from a systematic content analysis.

But even outlets that do not produce original reporting add value by translating from English language media and government sources. Ethnic media often are the primary source of local news for populations with low English language proficiency. In California, 26% of Asian American and 19% of Latino households have such limited proficiency¹⁹. For some language communities and in some areas of the state, the proportion of linguistically isolated populations can be as high as 46%²⁰. This is one example of when audience numbers should not be the sole criteria of impact. Among smaller language communities, ethnic media may be smaller-scale operations with a reach of a few thousand, but these are a few thousand people who otherwise would be disconnected from critical information. Ethnic media ensures access to civic and public information for all communities.

The chaotic information environment of the pandemic is a prime example of ethnic media's vital role. These outlets have played a central role in connecting their audiences with local resources, translating and verifying essential information about testing, small business loans, and local ordinances, as well as providing original reporting about the community. Several media outlets we interviewed also engaged experts in their own community, such as public health professionals, attorneys, and CPAs, to speak directly to their audience in a linguistically or culturally relevant way.

More important, in a sweeping crisis that affects everyone and yet impacts communities differently, ethnic media highlights the need for a diverse communication infrastructure that supports communities' varied needs.

More important, in a sweeping crisis that affects everyone and yet impacts communities differently, ethnic media highlights the need for a diverse communication infrastructure that supports communities' varied needs. Vietnamese media like Little Saigon TV worked with local nail salons, an industry with particular health guidelines for operation, to navigate the state's timeline for reopening. Filipino outlets like the Asian Journal pushed for ethnically disaggregated data on COVID-19 cases, as many Filipinos are employed as healthcare workers and caregivers. Latino outlets like Alianza Metropolitan News and El Observador provided detailed reporting on the vulnerability of farmworkers and day laborers, an essential but often invisible part of the economy.

Ethnic media also are working to counter the rampant misinformation during the crisis, and they do a particularly good job detecting and tackling misinformation specific to their own communities. For example, when the pandemic first erupted in California, Chinese outlets like US News Express investigated rumors about suspected cases of COVID-19 in the community that were circulating on WeChat, the social media platform used by the Chinese diaspora. These rumors alleged personal details of suspected cases, including workplace information and businesses they had visited prior to contracting COVID-19, which caused panic and an unnecessary financial hit to the businesses. Black media addressed the initial rumors that African Americans are less affected by the novel coronavirus. Overall, 61.8% of outlets surveyed have provided fact-checking or debunked misinformation about the pandemic.

For the issues of police brutality and racial justice, too, the most relevant and urgent stories varied across communities. For some, such as the Filipino publication, the Asian Journal, it called for difficult cross-generational conversations about racism and anti-Blackness within their own communities. Keenly aware of the lingering memory of the 1992 Los Angeles uprising, Korean outlets assured readers that no damage has been done to Korean businesses, and reported on community efforts in solidarity with the movement for racial justice, such as the scholarship fund created by the Korean American Association of Los Angeles for low-income Black students. Black media, of course, have been a strong and consistent voice against systemic injustices, "covering the George Floyds of the world for a long time," as one interviewee said. The difference with mainstream coverage, as summed up by the publisher of a Black newspaper, is "who we choose to cite as the authority, and how long we stay with a story."

Similar examples can be seen around the nation, where ethnic media outlets rise to the challenge of supporting critical information needs in times of crises, and speak directly to a community's specific needs and concerns. These are the fundamental building blocks of trust, a word frequently invoked during the interviews. At a time when trust in the media is diminishing²¹, it is more important than ever to recognize and leverage the relationship of trust with ethnic media. "Communities don't all trust one media outlet," said the manager of a Punjabi outlet. "They trust their own ethnic media outlet more than any kind of media."

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Research has shown that ethnic and racial minorities prefer ethnic media over their mainstream counterparts. A 2016 national survey of Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders estimates that in California, 40% of first-generation immigrants prefer ethnic media to mainstream media when it comes to political information²². To the best of our knowledge, comparable, up-to-date data on the ethnic media preferences of other racial and ethnic groups are not available²³, but the 2005 New California Media study found that nationwide, 40% of African Americans and Arab Americans and more than half of Hispanic adults connect with ethnic media as their primary source of information²⁴. The preference for ethnic media partly reflects a linguistic choice, but it also captures the value the audience places on relevant content that represents and empowers the community.

The significance of ethnic media also transcends the specific communities they serve. Ethnic media can break important stories before mainstream media because of their close ties to the community and the diverse perspectives they represent. For example, during the pandemic, Punjabi Radio in Northern California had been reporting the lack of safety protection for workers at Foster Farms, a meat processing plant whose employees were mainly Latino and Punjab, before the Fresno Bee picked up the story. In fact, as many as 30% of outlets began covering COVID-19 in January, before it became an issue of widespread concern in the United States.

Examples like these serve as a reminder that ethnic media are not a supplement to mainstream media but are an essential part in their own right of the communication infrastructure in a multicultural society. While mainstream media absolutely has the responsibility to diversify their coverage of underrepresented communities and their newsrooms, ethnic media already perform that function well, and their work should be elevated and amplified. For all the conversations about reinvigorating local news, it would be a major blind spot and a missed opportunity if ethnic media are not taken seriously as valuable players in the local news ecosystem.

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A DEEPLY EMBEDDED COMMUNITY INSTITUTION

The relationship of trust between ethnic media and their audiences stems not only from their coverage, but also from the deep, tangible connections ethnic media have cultivated with their community. It was clear from our interviews that ethnic media are more than a source of information: They essentially play the role of connectors and community organizations.

For example, New for Chinese, an outlet based in Northern California, compared its work to an information hotline, with readers calling in to inquire about all aspects of their life, from government policies such as the latest pandemic reopening guidelines to personal matters such as immigration concerns or finding divorce lawyers.

Ethnic media's community service orientation can go beyond their relationship with local or ethnic businesses that are advertising clients. During the pandemic, ethnic media have been offering heavily discounted or free advertising to help small businesses stay afloat. Some outlets launched a special section covering how businesses are reopening and recovering. "Big companies look at everything in terms of money, but we are more concerned with the social aspects," the anchor of a Latino TV outlet said "We are, of course, a business, but we are more intertwined with the needs of the community."

Many ethnic media outlets, one interviewee suggested, are really civic leaders. Because their work is situated within underserved communities, they often take on advocacy roles alongside community organizations. For example, Punjabi Radio's coverage on Foster Farms' lack of safety practices, discussed in the earlier section of the report, prompted a Sikh community organization to demand changes. Black Voice Media, an independent news outlet in the Inland Empire, has been a strong voice for police reform along with activists since the shooting death of Tyisha Miller in 1999, which led to a consent decree to reform the Riverside Police Department.

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Asked what impact means to them, many interviewees invoked precisely these connections with the community. Ethnic media outlets routinely get phone calls or emails, or interact personally with community members about how their coverage is affecting them, such as when community members became citizens, received pandemic relief loans, or supported a campaign as a result of coverage they saw in their ethnic media outlet. “We are immensely proud that people are listening to us and making decisions based on our content,” the manager of a Punjabi outlet said. Some outlets also measure impact with responses to contests, surveys, or events. These represent a deeper form of audience engagement than clicks and likes.

Other outlets emphasized connections with community organizations as a measure of impact, such as when major organizations partner with them to promote or host community events. For Little Saigon TV, for example, their impact was affirmed when the Vietnamese Catholic church asked them to broadcast the daily mass during the pandemic, or when the Nailing It for America campaign²⁵, a donation drive organized by the Vietnamese community, partnered with them. In fact, many outlets have partnered in hallmark events that convene a large cross-section of the community. Examples are the Taste of Soul in Crenshaw, a south Los Angeles neighborhood, the Cambodian New Year's Festival in Long Beach, and Salvadoran Day in central Los Angeles.

These concrete, direct connections with the community are difficult to capture with one-dimensional, quantitative data, and are easily overlooked. Many interviewees, asked about one thing they wished funders knew about ethnic media, pointed to the outlets' personal relationship and tight bond with the community. “Government agencies underestimate our connections in the communities we serve,” said the publisher at a Black newspaper “[Ethnic media] can call any influencers in the community. They know exactly who to call to make certain things happen.”

Reframing the work of ethnic media as a community institution highlights dimensions of impact that metrics such as circulation numbers, web traffic, and social media engagement cannot capture. The outlets' connections with the community are an integral part of their work, fostering a relationship of trust that is as indispensable as accessible, relevant content.

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REVENUES AND IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Across the board, ethnic media surveyed reported both growth and financial strains in the last year. Audience growth was reported by 42.5% of the outlets, and especially since the pandemic began, as people tune into information sources that are most grounded and relevant. However, as will be discussed later, advertising revenue does not always match audience growth.

As a reflection of the financial precarity, 28% of the outlets surveyed were operating at a loss in the last year, before the pandemic hit. In fact, several prominent outlets have closed permanently in the last five years, including six newspapers published by the Eastern Publishing Group, the oldest chain of Hispanic-owned bilingual newspapers in the country²⁶, and LA Channel 18's Asian languages programming, a staple of the community for more than 30 years²⁷.

Rafu Shimpo, the century-old Japanese newspaper, also announced in 2016 that it had been accruing a deficit for a few years and faced impending closure. It managed to survive after its campaign for online subscription garnered strong support from the community²⁸. Others, like El Mensajero, a Spanish-language weekly with 30 years of history in San Francisco, shuttered its local bureau in 2014 and now is edited out of Chicago²⁹. A few other outlets closed temporarily or permanently in the early part of this year, including Bhutan News Service and African Connections, both outlets serving small diasporic communities.

The pandemic has exacerbated the financial viability of many outlets, with a quarter of the outlets reporting revenue losses of more than 70% due to COVID-19 at the time of the survey, in mid-April to mid-May. Overall, the pandemic has wiped out half of the sector's revenue.

The fallout from COVID-19 could mean underserved communities are facing a loss of critical information: 16% of outlets may resort to reduction in local coverage, and 28% would reduce the overall volume of publication, as cost-saving measures. Because many ethnic media already are barebones operations, only 27% of the outlets have laid off staff since the pandemic, and there may not be much room to reduce costs.

In addition, 14% of the outlets are at risk of shutting down before the end of the year. For communities with a limited number of local ethnic media, the demise of an outlet could result in a news desert. "We would be left without a voice," The editor of a Latino outlet said.

For many of the outlets in the study, the pandemic only accelerated their efforts to diversify revenue streams and innovate that they began before the crisis hit. Advertising revenue remains the lifeline for outlets in California, mirroring ethnic media elsewhere in the nation³⁰. Of the outlets surveyed, 69% named advertising as their primary source of revenue. But a stark opportunity gap exists in the availability of advertising contracts. The next section of the report discusses at length advertising by government agencies; here, we focus on the challenge of getting ad dollars from large, mainstream corporations.

A small percentage of ethnic media outlets — 38% of the survey sample — have had advertising from mainstream businesses and institutions, such as AT&T and hospitals, in the last year. This advertising can be highly situational and tokenistic, such as during Asian Pacific American Heritage Month, or, as often is the case with Black media, when there is a major incident of discrimination.

In some ways, ethnic media face the same challenges all small-market media outlets confront in attracting advertisers³¹. But ethnic media face additional barriers to audience size. Even as some minority audiences have become valued consumer segments for their purchasing power, advertisers continue to dismiss them and their ethnic media as less important.

The editor of a Black newspaper recounted how Toyota, faced with a product recall crisis, consistently contacted the outlet with press releases, but brushed off the possibility of advertising in the outlet. “We are always good enough for press releases,” he said. They always think of us for free messaging, but we are never on their list when it comes to advertising.” Nationally, according to a 2019 report by the Association of National Advertisers, only 5.2% of the total advertising and marketing spending targets particular ethnic or racial groups, and of that small slice, more than 30% was spent on mainstream media³².

About a quarter of the ethnic media outlets surveyed named donations and grants as an alternative revenue source. In our sample, 48% had applied to the Facebook COVID-19 relief fund, and among the 26 grantees from California, 10 were ethnic media³³. On one hand, it is a reflection of the increasing recognition of ethnic media by philanthropy. On the other hand, the 10 outlets awarded the Facebook grant comprised a small share of the almost 300 ethnic media outlets statewide.

The other popular relief grant, offered by the Google News Initiative, required a newsroom of at least two full-time reporters³⁴, making at least 22% of the outlets in our sample ineligible to apply. These funding opportunities are also relatively new to ethnic media. According to a report by the Shorenstein Center at Harvard University, from 2010 to 2015, local ethnic media outlets only received 2.1% of the foundation funding³⁵. The publisher of a Black newspaper suggested that ethnic media often are left out of networking opportunities and small convenings with funders that are critical for obtaining grants.

Other ethnic media outlets support themselves by being entrepreneurial. Several outlets supplement their operation with income from other businesses. The owner of Khmer TV, for example, runs an IT and telecommunications business. Others have expanded their businesses to areas such as strategic communication, language lessons, and guided tours. Some ethnic media outlets are family businesses, so it is also not uncommon for outlets to use personal resources to keep themselves afloat. It was clear from the interviews that many remain in the business, despite the harsh economic conditions, because of their sense of obligation to keep the community informed. Said the executive secretary of a Chinese outlet, speaking about having to tap into her family’s own emergency funds: “We are adamant about not giving up, because we truly believe in the mission of providing a bridge of information for the Chinese-speaking community.”

“We are adamant about not giving up, because we truly believe in the mission of providing a bridge of information for the Chinese-speaking community.”

“We know how to tell our stories,” said the editor of a Black publication. “We do a good job of meeting the needs of our community. The only thing that’s causing us to not be able to be more fluid and more responsive to the community’s needs is the lack of adequate funding.”

That commitment to serving their community has meant that ethnic media outlets are busier than ever, working on the frontlines to cover local resources, policies, and stories indispensable to the pandemic as well as to the civic and political process. As resource-strapped operations, ethnic media outlets are used to being lean and nimble, and, as one interviewee said, “doing more with less.” Small injections of resources could go a long way toward

boosting their work and maximizing their reach and impact. “We know how to tell our stories,” said the editor of a Black publication. “We do a good job of meeting the needs of our community. The only thing that’s causing us to not be able to be more fluid and more responsive to the community’s needs is the lack of adequate funding.”

GOVERNMENT ENGAGEMENT & INVESTMENT: GAPS & OPPORTUNITIES

Findings from this study revealed a consistent neglect of, and underinvestment in, ethnic media by government entities. Not counting the 2020 census, which has a strong emphasis on ethnic media, only 44% of the outlets have had any advertising from local government agencies. This percentage also is likely inflated, as our sample potentially over-represented media outlets that are more heavily networked with industry associations and therefore better positioned to obtain government ads.

In addition, the number of government agencies taking out these ads is small. Among all of California's local, regional, and state-level departments, only 53 agencies were named by outlets surveyed as having advertised with ethnic media. While these self-reported data from ethnic media outlets do not represent a complete audit, the number provides a telling picture of gaps. The agencies most frequently named as having advertised with ethnic media are transportation and utilities departments, such as LA Metro, San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency, and Sacramento Municipal Utilities Department, which have an obvious commercial incentive to advertise to their customers.

Even with the current pandemic, interviewees suggested that ad outreach to different communities has been lacking, particularly from regional and local governments. The editor of a Filipino newspaper said, "There is a disconnect between what government departments and officials are saying, and what's trickling down to our communities ... We [ethnic media outlets] have to do it ourselves." In crisis situations like this pandemic, engaging with ethnic media would be particularly important in ensuring that accurate messages about critical programs like testing and contact tracing reach all communities.

"I look at the outreach budget of government agencies — health organizations, mental health organizations, police — [and] they have a hefty budget," said the editor of a Native American outlet, expressing her frustration with the lack of engagement. "I don't see anything coming through our paper, then their outreach is ineffective. Here's a weekly newspaper that passes everyone's hands basically. Why are they not using it?"

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This sense that ethnic media outlets are invisible is a recurring theme in our interviews. On the most basic level, the outlets can be completely unknown to government agencies. Directories and databases exist but are incomplete and scattered. Ad agencies contracted for advertising buys often lack the grassroots connections and grounded knowledge, and "do not do their homework," as one interviewee said.

“If we don’t scream and holler, we are not even considered.”

At the more fundamental level, however, the invisibility of ethnic media stems from a failure to recognize their value and to commit to distributing public funds equitably. Ethnic media outlets are constantly trying to get the attention of government agencies, calling, emailing, attending conferences, registering with government databases, and applying for minority business certificates, but usually with limited effect. Reflecting on the uphill battle in getting government advertising, one interviewee said, “If we don’t scream and holler, we are not even considered.”

Even *La Opinion*, the largest daily Spanish-language newspaper in Southern California, feels it is not accorded the same importance as comparable mainstream newspapers such as the *Long Beach Press Telegram* and the *San Gabriel Valley Tribune*, despite *La Opinion* having higher circulation numbers³⁶. “We get cents on the dollar compared to mainstream outlets. It’s been a constant battle for the last few decades,” said a representative of *ImpreMedia*, the publisher of *La Opinion*. Ethnic media are, in the words of one interviewee, simply not on the “preferred vendor list” of government procurement departments.

Ethnic media are, however, “preferred” choices for free coverage. Many ethnic media outlets interviewed suggest they are routinely tapped to receive press releases, sometimes getting 30 emails a day from government agencies, which they then have to translate. But that has not converted into a commensurate distribution of public funds for advertising.

“Everybody wants a press release in our paper, because it works,” said the editor of a Latino outlet. On some level, government departments do seem to understand the efficacy of these outlets, but that understanding falls short of investing real value into their work. Without a serious commitment to inclusion and equity, relationships with ethnic media tend to be opportunistic and superficial.

“I am not going to another event where you check off the box that says you reached out to a Latina owned publication, and you send me away,” said the editor at another Latino newspaper. “If you want some coverage in my paper, that costs money.”

Outlets felt the inequity in advertising spending keenly. They would like to see a distribution of funds that more clearly reflects the state’s diverse constituents. Ultimately, advertising in ethnic media has downstream consequences in terms of equitable economic, social, and political opportunities. The editor of a Black newspaper provided a telling example of the marginality of ethnic media and their audiences. Government agencies, he pointed out, only advertise with his publication when there is a very specific connection with the community, such as contracts for projects in the Crenshaw area, where the reverse is not true.

“They’re not shy about reaching out to everyone when it comes to work that is in our community. But they don’t reach out to us with that same wide net when it comes to work outside our community,” he said. He added that this practice not only reduces his newspaper’s advertising revenue, it also limits economic opportunities for community members the outlet serves. “We need to be part of that workforce, we need to have access to those jobs and contracts.”

In addition to the commitment to equity, working with ethnic media also presents real opportunities to strengthen the work of government agencies. The publisher of a Black newspaper said that forging strong relationships with ethnic media is a “two-way conversation” in which government agencies can “learn more about effective messaging to the bulk of their constituents.” Interviewees highlighted the value they bring in translation and in-language production, and knowledge of the nuances in language and culture, which are highly specific and often in flux. For example, according to a Vietnamese TV producer, the Vietnamese spoken by the diasporic community has subtle differences from what is spoken in Vietnam. Intercultural communication is ripe with the possibility of misunderstandings, and with so many cultures represented in the state, ethnic media can help ensure the effective translation of messaging, linguistically as well as culturally.

Ethnic media’s deep ties with their community also means they understand their needs and can work with government departments to envision solutions. Interviewees suggested they can act as middlemen to facilitate dialogue with the government. This is especially crucial for communities where fear, distrust, or detachment define their relationship with government. A Latino outlet serving Central Americans suggested their partnership with the local city council was helpful in breaking down community members’ mental barrier, which “regards the government as a distant figure, that is always asking for something, but not giving back.” Because they advocate for the community, ethnic media not only serve a watchdog function, but ultimately are interested in fixing problems. For example, in addition to looking critically at the local police department, Black Voice Media also works with it to improve its recruiting practices and increase the share of Black sheriffs.

Some promising examples of engagement by government actors already exist in California. The 2020 census, for example, set aside \$30 million for ethnic media in the state as a result of advocacy efforts³⁷. Among outlets surveyed, 82% have run ads for the census. For many, this is the first and only time the government has advertised with them. The impact of this investment on the business cannot be understated. Multiple outlets acknowledged that census ads essentially have been a “lifesaver” in the current circumstances. “It is pretty much the reason why we are still around,” said the vice president of a Vietnamese outlet.

The executive secretary at a Chinese outlet, affirming the critical importance of census ads to its business, compared government advertising as the base of a cake — a consistent, strong foundation, with advertising from small businesses as the topping.

The state’s Listos California campaign and recent Wear a Mask public awareness campaign are other examples of effective engagement with the ethnic media sector. Early on in the process, these campaigns sought out leaders in the ethnic media sector to make sure ethnic media outlets were an integral part of outreach plans. In late 2019, Governor Newsom also collaborated with ethnic media to launch a quarterly “On the Record with Gavin Newsom” column about public policy issues. This column, available in at least six languages will be published in more than 50 media outlets³⁸. Interviewees suggested that by and large, the state now is doing a better job partnering with ethnic media, but these instances of engagement need to translate into more sustained, coordinated investment in the sector by all levels of government.

BEST PRACTICES: SEATTLE & NEW YORK CITY

This report has clarified the value of recognizing and investing in the work of ethnic media. The following are two examples of robust programs that help us envision what focused, equitable investment in ethnic media by local government could look like.

SEATTLE

Seattle's Ethnic Media Program is defined by a sustained and coordinated infrastructure that supports the work of ethnic media³⁹. According to Joaquin Uy, the program's coordinator, the city's efforts to engage immigrant communities used to be uneven and duplicative from department to department—a situation that is not uncommon and certainly reflects the experiences of ethnic media outlets interviewed in this study. The Ethnic Media Program rectifies this by centralizing resources and expertise for engaging and partnering with ethnic media. Housed under the Office of Immigrant and Refugee Affairs, it serves as an in-house consultancy, connecting various departments with ethnic media, coordinating advertising buys, and facilitating the production of in-language, culturally relevant campaigns. It maintains a directory of local ethnic media for city departments with outlet information and media kits, all in one location, which simplifies and streamlines the research and outreach process.

Education and outreach to city departments are a foundation of the program. It advocates for the importance of ethnic media, and reaches out to departments to ensure ethnic media are part of an inclusive, equitable engagement strategy. Outreach to ethnic media can be difficult to implement if city departments do not understand the fine-grained differences among minority communities and their media. The program supports implementation by advising and working with city departments on how to tailor ethnic media strategies for the specific community and campaign.

Another key program strength is its relationship-building approach, which helps departments move beyond the abstraction of the database. The program organizes quarterly roundtables that bring together government representatives and ethnic media outlets, as well as candidate forums and special sessions with the mayor. Joaquin Uy, a former community organizer, has developed close relationships with the ethnic media outlets in the city, working with them to strengthen their product and sending resources in crisis situations like the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I can't just be this person that's like, here, I'm emailing you a press release," Uy said in an interview for this study. "For me, this work is personal. So I think it's important to have personal relationships with members of the media."

This is a much needed corrective to the frustration voiced by outlets in this study — that interactions with government departments tend to be superficial and fleeting.

The program tracks its impact by monitoring ethnic media outlets for coverage of City of Seattle programs and services, and for press releases that have been translated. According to Uy, in 2019, city department press releases were translated and published in 60% of the ethnic media outlets in its directory. To capture the real impact of ethnic media, Uy also makes sure to include anecdotes about tangible change and action, such as when residents showed up to citizenship workshops with a paper copy of the ethnic newspaper featuring the city's in-language ad.

NEW YORK CITY

In May 2019, Mayor Bill de Blasio issued Executive Order 47, mandating that 50% of each city agency's advertising budget be spent with ethnic and community media. The EO recognized that ethnic media is a crucial conduit of engagement with the city's diverse communities, and declared it "essential that all residents have meaningful access to City programs, services, and activities."⁴⁰

Embedded in this mayoral mandate is a recognition that the distribution of public funds should reflect the community's diverse makeup and needs. This policy change can be traced to a 2013 study by CUNY's Center for Community Media, which revealed a gross imbalance in the distribution of the city's advertising budget⁴¹. According to the study, 82% of city government agencies' advertising budget was earmarked for a few mainstream papers, while only 18% was going to ethnic media, percentages that were disproportionate with city population and circulation numbers. For example, Spanish-language publications were receiving less than 4% of ad dollars, even though New York's Hispanic population is 28% of residents.

Under the executive order, city agencies must submit a year-end data report on their annual print and digital publication advertising spending, and these data are released in the city's Open Data portal. In addition, agency representatives responsible for advertising buys are required to participate in annual trainings held by the Mayor's Office of Operations and the Office of Immigrant Affairs. The city also has developed and maintains a list of approved community and ethnic media outlets.

As in Seattle, relationship-building is a critical component of New York's approach to working with ethnic media. Even before the executive order, there were significant efforts to bring ethnic media and government agencies into the same room through press conferences, panels, and special "speed dating" events⁴². The Director of Ethnic and Community Media position is dedicated to managing these relationships. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, that director, in conjunction with the Office of Immigrant Affairs, has held nine roundtables with ethnic media outlets on issues such as testing, workplace safety, small business support, and funeral services⁴³. Each roundtable brings together ethnic media outlets and city department representatives, which provides a direct channel of accurate information and also fortifies relationships.

In January 2020, the Center for Community Media at CUNY launched an Advertising Boost Initiative to serve as a bridge between ethnic media outlets and the city, and to ensure accountability⁴⁴. It trains ethnic media in areas such as professionalizing media kits and preparing bids to prepare the outlets for receiving the city's advertising budget. As an organization that has a long, trusted relationship with the city's media outlets, the Center's involvement provides further support and oversight to successfully implementing the executive order.

RECOMMENDATIONS

As minority communities continue to grow in size and diversity, the time has passed for recognizing that ethnic media is not a niche, but an integral part of the communication infrastructure with a broad impact on the fabric of our multicultural democracy. Especially today, at a time of pronounced economic hardship and systematic injustice, there is an urgent need to raise the profile of ethnic media and inject much-belated investment into the sector. To strengthen the work of ethnic media and ensure their vitality, this report offers the following recommendations.

WORK TOWARD MORE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF STATE, REGIONAL, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT ADVERTISING SPENDING.

State, regional, and local government should make diversified, equitable advertising programs a priority. Modeling the example set by New York City, the government can earmark a percentage of the advertising budget for ethnic media in a way that more accurately reflects demographic composition. This a first and crucial step in closing the historic resource gap faced by ethnic media.

DEVELOP A CENTRALIZED, COORDINATED PROCESS AT THE LOCAL LEVEL FOR GOVERNMENT AGENCIES TO ENGAGE AND ADVERTISE WITH ETHNIC MEDIA.

A centralized database of ethnic media, complete with their media kits, would greatly facilitate direct contact between government agencies and ethnic media. A good starting point is the directory hosted by Ethnic Media Services, the most complete directory to date, that will be updated quarterly to keep up with the changes in the sector.

At the city or county level, a designated liaison who is knowledgeable about different ethnic media and communities can efficiently manage the process for all departments. This would provide a clear point of contact for ethnic media outlets and government departments, reducing the duplication of efforts.

EDUCATE AND TRAIN GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS.

Government departments cannot just be told that ethnic media is important; they need to understand the value of ethnic media in concrete terms. Education is necessary to change the conversations about working with ethnic media and the mindsets of those who work with them. It also is essential for departments to understand the diversity and specificity within the ethnic media sector and the communities they serve. For example, indigenous media have unique challenges in operating independently from tribal governments⁴⁵, while Chinese-speaking communities have ever-more media choices that nevertheless can be fraught with misinformation⁴⁶. Education and training will be critical to help departments understand the different profiles and needs of ethnic media and the communities they serve, so that partnerships with ethnic media can be grounded and intentional.

CULTIVATE MEANINGFUL, LASTING RELATIONSHIPS WITH ETHNIC MEDIA.

Engagement with ethnic media needs to go beyond opportunistic and superficial exchanges. Roundtables, “speed dates,” and panels that bring government representatives and ethnic media outlets into the same (virtual) rooms need to be sustained efforts with meaningful premises and takeaways for both ethnic media and government entities. It also helps to identify and engage partners from community organizations or academic institutions who can support and facilitate these relationships.

INVEST IN THE ECONOMIC VIABILITY, VISIBILITY, AND IMPACT OF ETHNIC MEDIA.

Beyond the government, foundations, nonprofits, and academic institutions all are well-positioned to elevate the work of ethnic media. Many actions can be taken to provide support to the sector:

- Invest a portion of the communications budget in advertising with ethnic media.
- Intentionally invite ethnic media, as equal and valuable players, into the local news ecosystem, and into spaces and opportunities open to mainstream media, such as conferences, collaborations, and grants.
- Re-conceptualize and recognize the multidimensional nature of ethnic media’s impact.
- Inject resources into the most critical areas of needs, such as content production, translation, web development, and social media strategies.
- Highlight the work of ethnic media in journalism conferences, industry publications, and classrooms.
- Support research about ethnic media, especially about the gaps and opportunities in resources and funding, needs assessment, and audience behavior.

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