



THE HEALTH OF ETHNIC MEDIA: NEEDS AND OPPORTUNITIES

MISSION DRIVEN NEWS, FROM THE GROUND UP

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A 2008 REPORT

ABOUT THE REPORT

The Health of Ethnic Media Report is a snapshot of the health and resiliency of the nation's ethnic news organizations from the point of view of their proprietors, publishers, editors, and reporters. This study also sheds light on the priorities of ethnic news media—many of which are in languages other than English—in providing relevant and accurate news and information to their respective communities. It also reveals ethnic media's needs and impediments. It is neither designed to document the extent or quantity of ethnic media operations nor the scope of their audiences; other organizations, such as New America Media and the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, have taken that initiative.

There are large and established ethnic media organizations such as *Univision*, *Telemundo* and *La Opinion*, or the globally published Chinese-language *Singtao Daily*, the Taiwanese *World Journal*, or the Dubai-based *Al Jazeera* Arab satellite television network. The majority of ethnic media, however, comprises countless medium-to-small newspapers and periodicals, as well as block-time radio and cable TV operators that buy airtime from stations to broadcast their programs, and independent Internet sites. Large and small, ethnic news media serve millions of people in expanding ethnic communities across the nation.

The mass communication industry's interest in the ethnic news media grows as outlets become more popular and vibrant. Moreover, in California and other states, philanthropic and nonprofit sectors have begun to use the ethnic media to distribute news about health issues, disaster preparedness, voting, and other important information to immigrant and minority communities. University journalism programs have begun to respond with skills courses taught in Spanish, or theory classes focused on the role of the ethnic news media in society. Recognizing the potency of ethnic media's audiences some newspapers, like the *San Antonio Express-News*, *Austin American-Statesman* and the *Houston Chronicle* all started weekly Spanish-language publications. Due to the growth of ethnic media, the Project for Excellence in Journalism has included the sector in its annual *State of the News Media Report* since 2004.

Initiated in 2007, the survey polled 300 ethnic media practitioners. The data were augmented by feedback from focus groups, a reconvening of project partners at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communications' (AEJMC) August 2008 convention in Chicago, as well as by follow-up interviews with various respondents and focus group participants.

MAIN FINDINGS

This survey confirms many observers' previous impressions derived from anecdotal information and direct experiences with ethnic media. The respondents consider their media's impact on the community as their most important measure of success. This reflects the premium ethnic media practitioners give to community service-oriented journalism. The most important goals of the ethnic media are to give voice to their communities, to strengthen cultural pride and provide cultural cohesion. This mission explains, to a large extent, why ethnic media are often perceived as activist by outside observers; respondents deconstructed this perception during the focus group conversations. This mission also explains why a large majority of the respondents have stayed with their current news organizations for many years and intend to remain with ethnic media despite sometimes discouraging working conditions.

There are indeed many challenges that the majority of ethnic media face, from the small-to-modest staff sizes loaded with multiple tasks, to the constant struggle for financial viability and sustainability, which often leads to breaches in the firewall that theoretically separates editorial and business affairs. The respondents in this survey express a hunger for professional development and enrichment, which they hope academic journalism institutions would help fill. And although they express deep concern over impediments to ethnic media's further development, they are confident about the future, aware that growing ethnic communities will need mass communications that help in securing a place in American society.

It is hoped that this report will raise awareness among journalism educators, foundations, advertisers, investors, and other news industry leaders on opportunities for collaboration and support for these pillars of mass communication in America's burgeoning ethnic communities.

This project was organized by the San Francisco State University Department of Journalism and its Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism in collaboration with the University of Texas San Marcos, Wayne State University, Hunter College, University of Georgia, Community Media Workshop at Columbia College and the University of

Massachusetts. All the collaborating institutions have working relationships with ethnic media. A grant from the McCormick Tribune Foundation made this project possible.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a combination of surveys, focus group discussions, structured interviews and additional research. The principal methods were:

1. A web-based survey of ethnic news media journalists and executives (entrepreneurs, publishers, etc.) in seven regions of the United States. This definition of the study's boundaries facilitates an in-depth analysis of a cross-section of experiences and perspectives. The criteria for target regions were: ethnic news media activity; geographic, cultural and media diversity; and the presence of a knowledgeable partner willing to participate in the project. The regions are California, Texas, Michigan, Georgia, Maryland, Illinois and Massachusetts.
2. Focus group discussions with ethnic media journalists and executives in the regions, conducted by San Francisco State University and the partners.
3. Structured interviews with key experts, observers and field leaders.

The content and protocols for the surveys, focus groups, and structured interviews were developed with the help of the partners, technical advisors and representatives of community groups, training institutes and donors. Planning meetings were held in San Francisco and Chicago for this purpose. The partners also helped with the outreach for the surveys, conducting the focus group discussions and reviewing drafts of the final report.

Respondents

Of the 125 respondents (as of 7/15/08), 90% are working, paid or unpaid, for news organizations that are community based, locally owned and intended for a specific culturally/racially defined audience. The rest are with national or international operations.

Half of the media (50%) are weeklies, 29% publish or deliver news once a month or with less frequency, and 21% deliver news daily. More than half (59%) of the represented media deliver the news in English, while 42% are in languages other than English.

Only 42% have online versions of periodicals or broadcasts. Of this grouping, 47% update their sites episodically, while 40% update daily. Twelve percent (12%) are online-only operations, 3% of which update their sites daily, while 9% update theirs with less frequency.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Ethnic media are not a new phenomenon in the United States. From the first black, Spanish-language, and Native American newspapers of the 19th century along the East Coast and in the Southwest, to in-language periodicals published during the waves of European immigration during the early 20th century, ethnic media has existed in the U.S. throughout much of its history. The current explosion, however, comes as a result of the immense growth of immigrant communities in the last 40 years. Today's ethnic media are a function of the contemporary formation and rapid expansion of ethnic-American constituencies.

The traditional or “mainstream” national news industry is visibly floundering. The turbulence now buffeting it has been brought about by a confluence of powerful forces, the intensity of business pressures, major shifts in demographics, cultural dynamics, and shifting media consumption habits fostered by technologically revolutionary mass communications platforms. Traditional daily newspapers, network television news and other news outlets based essentially on a “one-size-fits-all” approach are struggling to retain audiences, maintain high journalistic standards, and guarantee survival. Meanwhile, many readers, viewers and listeners are increasingly relying on or switching to niche-oriented media that cater more specifically to their interests and tastes. Most noticeable in this niche sector is the proliferation of ethnic news media, young and old, large and small. Ethnic media have arguably become the fastest growing news sector.

Besides Spanish-language and Chinese-language news outlets, other examples abound: Vietnamese-language newspapers like *Nguoi Viet* in the San Francisco Bay Area; stations like *Radio Saigon Houston*; the Internet's *Blackplanet.com* and the *Wave Newspaper Group* in California; the *Polish Super Express* newspaper in New York; the French/Kreyol *Haiti en Marche* newspaper in Miami. Some ethnic media besides African American news outlets are in English, notably the largest Native American publication *Indian Country Today*, the nationally distributed *Filipinas Magazine* and the New York-New Jersey *Filipino Express*, California-based *India West* and *India Currents*, *India New England*, and the English/Hindi *SBC-TV* in Chicago.

With some exceptions (such as National Newspaper Publishers Association, which represents the established black press) the ethnic news media have yet to organize themselves into effective trade groups and professional associations. This is partly because the current boom is so recent and so diverse. One standout effort, *New America Media*, spearheaded by San Francisco-based *Pacific News Service*, remains a loosely

organized group with neither formal membership nor governance. New America Media produced a multicultural directory listing more than 2,000 ethnic news outlets nationwide, which, it acknowledged, was immediately out of date upon publication due to the rapidity of ethnic media's proliferation.

Despite the current boom, many fear that ethnic news media outlets face an uncertain future. Knowledgeable observers, leaders who are active in the field, and the journalists and entrepreneurs themselves point to numerous problems, barriers and deficiencies. Some of the most common observations include:

- Many of these news outlets are “mom-and-pop” operations with poorly trained news and business staffs;
- Standards and practices vary and are influenced by cultural traditions;
- Advertising contracts and investment capital can be difficult to attract;
- Government agencies and other important news sources can be indifferent to ethnic news journalists and their communities;
- The journalism “establishment”—schools, professional associations, etc.—has yet to take ethnic media journalists seriously.

ETHNIC MEDIA'S VIABILITY

A 2002 survey by New America Media and Bendixen & Associates measured the impact of ethnic periodicals and radio and television programs on various communities in California, which has the largest concentration of ethnic media in the country. The survey of 2,000 Latino, African American and Asian state residents showed the following:

- Ethnic radio, television and newspapers reached 84% of self-identified ethnic Californians;
- Spanish-language media reached 89% of the state's Latinos; African American media reached 79 of African Americans; Asian American media reached 75% of Asian Americans;
- 43% of ethnic Californians preferred their ethnic radio stations to their English-language or general market counterparts;
- 36% of ethnic Californians preferred television networks, stations and programs to their general market counterparts;

- Ethnic newspapers are followed by 34% of Asians; 23% of Latinos; 10% of African Americans;
- 40% of the respondents said they paid more attention to advertising done in their native languages than to English-language ads.

FINDINGS

Following are findings based on 125 completed survey responses and focus group sessions and interviews, not necessarily with the same respondents.

I. MISSION

Despite many of their vulnerabilities, ethnic media undoubtedly play an influential role in the daily lives of the country's minorities, from the older Native American and African American communities to the newer, fast-growing immigrant populations. All share these following functions, gathered from this study's survey and focus groups, though not exclusive of other sources and not necessarily in the order of importance:

- Providing a voice for the community;
- Promoting collective cultural identity, cohesion and pride;
- Chronicling a community life that is distinct from that of the majority population;
- Safeguarding and advocating for perceived communal interests;
- Facilitating assimilation into American life;
- Sustaining vibrant ties with countries and cultures of origin;
- Facilitating commerce in niche markets defined by culturally specific tastes and demands;
- Ethnic media in non-English proficient communities have the added function of linguistically interpreting international and domestic events.

Providing a voice for the community and helping it celebrate its cultural values, heritage, and pride rank almost equally as the most important mission for ethnic media.

Providing a voice is ranked "extremely important" by 68.4%. Celebrating and preserving a community's original culture and important values, even as it acculturates and tries to assimilate into American life, is ranked as extremely important by 67.5%. Both "providing a voice in the larger society" and "helping the community celebrate its heritage" are valued

as extremely important by the majority, regardless of the size of the organization (from 1 to 5 staff members to 40 or more) or the type of ownership (from a small group of investors to family-owned or corporate).

Ethnic news organizations see themselves as a means of projecting a community's position on key issues, its collective image, cultural uniqueness, and assertion to being an equal member of the larger society. Providing this voice includes correcting mainstream media's mistakes and misinterpretations regarding various ethnic communities, according to many focus group discussions. "I have a responsibility to correct stereotypes and distortions about my community," states Tayyibah Taylor, founder-publisher and editor-in-chief of Atlanta's *Azizah Magazine*, a publication for Muslim women.

Ethnic media practitioners also generally see their work as a corrective measure to mainstream media's inability to adequately reflect the presence of minority communities and their interests. "I founded this network as my response to the lack of programming on cable or regular TV [for people] in the African communities," says Abiodun Shobowale, executive producer of Global Africa Independent Network (GAIN-TV) headquartered in Allston, Massachusetts.

Most ethnic media journalists and entrepreneurs tend to give priority to the above mentioned parts of their mission, and tend not to view their media as a business first. Success as a business ranks only as the third (53%) most important part of their mission, even though the focus groups revealed much concern over financial instability. Han Hoa says she and her husband had jobs, but they founded *Atlanta Viet Bao* because "we needed something to connect us with our (Vietnamese) community."

Helping the community succeed in American society (50%), the fourth most important part of ethnic media's mission, means serving as a tool—roadmap or guide—for understanding and navigating American ways, mores, business and work ethics, etc. Part of this responsibility is providing practical information, from finding jobs and dealing with licenses to using social services and acquiring credit.

The fifth and sixth most important parts of their mission, respectively, are helping the community understand government, businesses, and schools (46%), and providing analyses and interpretation of complex problems (43%). Both are essentially aspects of helping the community succeed in American society. Information along those lines is given priority over providing entertainment and relaxation, which only ranks 12th in the list of priorities.

Providing news and maintaining ties with the homeland are together considered only the seventh most important part of their mission by 37%. This shows that ethnic media tend to be more oriented toward community concerns in the United States, even though most

carry homeland news prominently, even heavily.

Perhaps due to their emphasis on promoting community identity and cultural pride, ethnic media tend to be seen as practitioners of advocacy journalism by critics from traditional news media. However, most respondents view community activism as only as the eighth (35%) most important part of their mission. This is despite the fact that focus group participants agreed that “activism” was the common denominator among them. Twenty-seven percent (27%) remain “neutral” while 9% think it is not important at all.

In focus group conversations, the subject of advocacy was one of the most discussed issues. Many of the journalists admitted that the choices they make regarding coverage, angles and framing amounted to a kind of advocacy. However, they rejected the notion that they serve up “propaganda.” The discussions revealed a pronounced aspiration for balance and fairness in reporting, which is also reflected in the high ranking respondents gave to professional training in the survey’s needs assessment.

“See, at all times, no matter what you do the ethics has to be there, so you really cannot be doing propaganda,” says Sarwat Husain, editor of the San Antonio, Texas-based *Al-Ittihaad “Unity” Monthly*. She adds that being balanced is important for credibility.

From the discussions, activism and advocacy can be boiled down to “looking out” for the community’s interest by being “educators.” It is a role that ethnic media journalists believe becomes heightened when calamities, such as Hurricane Katrina, befall their communities (or homelands), or when political developments, such as the immigration controversy and the 9/11 backlash, threaten their collective wellbeing.

“Speaking for my community, because it is largely composed of undocumented immigrants, they are not as informed as the rest of the nation. So that’s where our newspaper comes in, trying to educate them,” says Marcela Garcia, managing editor of *El Planeta*, which covers the Hispanic community in Massachusetts.

“What makes you an activist is not the story you’re doing but the way you pick up the story,” explains Dereje Desta, editor-in-chief/publisher of Zethiopia, a multimedia company based in Washington, DC. “What’s your priority if there are four or five events out there? You know you have to prioritize the story based on your activist feelings.”

In other words, the respondents do not equate advocacy or “being community activists” with day-to-day muckraking or challenging established authorities or playing an adversarial role. In fact, discussing government policy while it is still being developed, investigating government claims and statements, and acting as skeptical adversaries of public officials and businesses rank only 10th (23%) 11th (18%) and 13th (12%) in priority respectively. When it comes to assertive journalism, some in focus groups would

include fearlessness in criticizing personages and institutions in their own communities, regardless of the negative publicity that may result.

Delivering breaking news to the community quickly is ninth in priority (30%), which is understandable given that 79% of the respondents are weeklies or published once a month or less frequently.

It should be noted that all the abovementioned ranked aspects of ethnic media's mission fall within the "Extremely Important" and "Very Important" range. The only responsibility not within that range of importance is "avoiding stories that offend advertisers or subscribers," which 28% deem "Not Important At All" (perhaps because the majority of respondents have editorial or reporting, as opposed to business, responsibilities) and 31% choose to be neutral in opinion. Focus group discussions, however, indicate that some editorial staff members feel some pressure not to offend subscribers. Indeed, 19% of respondents rank this task "Very Important" and 13% consider it "Extremely Important."

In focus groups, ethnic journalism's practitioners express deep passion for their community-oriented mission, which many describe as the source of personal reward and satisfaction. "I am a people's man," exclaims Ravi Ponangi, Atlanta editor of *India Tribune*, which was founded in Chicago and also has a New York edition. Ponangi says he enjoys going around his community, connecting with people and getting their stories.

Many prefer the comfort of reporting on their own community and in their own language. "One reason for me is it's better to write in my own language, which is Spanish," states Eduardo Stanley, editor of *El Sol* newspaper in California's San Joaquin Valley.

"I know how the American system works and I was in Kenya for 20 years," says Edwin Okong'o, editor of *Mshale* an African community newspaper based in Minneapolis, "so I know both things on both sides. Mainstream media have people who only know one culture."

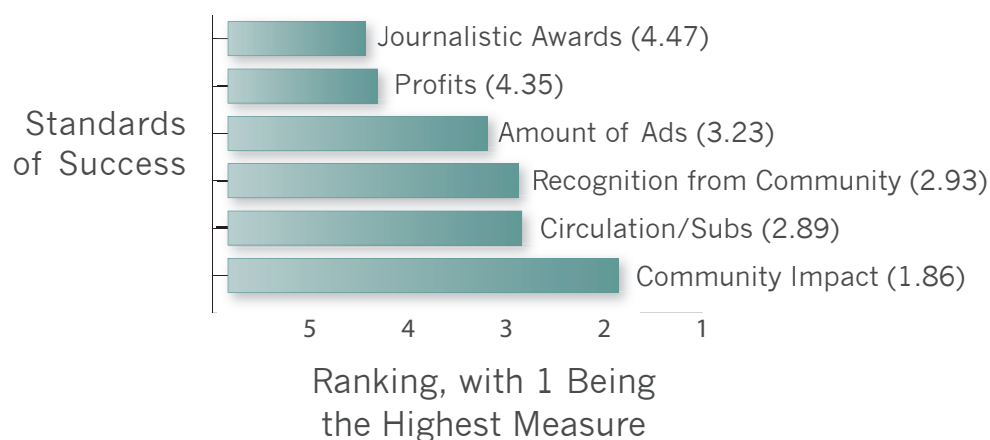
Many ethnic media journalists also believe their community-oriented mission is their media's source of staying power and advantage over the currently floundering mainstream news business. Stanley says immigrant communities' "tremendous need for information" keeps ethnic media alive. "Our role is big," says Ju Y Kang, who recently started working for *Boston Korea* newspaper. "We get phone calls like [we're] a personal secretary; we have to figure out with the cable company if someone has problems—anything."

Without discounting their passion for their mission, some focus group participants admit to practical motives for persisting in their job, including personal prestige, using it as a career way station, and maintaining it as the basis for their legal H1B immigration status. "Many are complaining about the salary, hard work, high stress, but the reason they are

sticking to the media is status—they want to get H1B visa then permanent green card, like me,” explains Tae Soo Jeong, editor-in-chief of *Korea Times* in San Francisco. (H1B visas are usually granted to foreigners who are sponsored by an employer for jobs requiring special skills that cannot be filled by U.S. citizens.)

What practitioners use as the measure of their media’s success closely reflects the priorities defined by their mission. **The majority of respondents (See Chart 1) consider their media’s impact on the community as the most important measure of success, reflecting the premium given community service-oriented journalism.**

Chart 1 — Measure of Success



Audience size—circulation, subscriptions—is the next most important measure, which is also reflective of impact on the community. Recognition from the community of the news organization and its staff is ranked as the third most important measure of success. The amount of advertising ranks fourth, profits rank fifth, while journalism awards are the least important measure of success.

II. STAFFING

Ethnic journalists’ commitment to their work is further evidenced by their willingness to function in news operations that are small, with very tight budgets and where staff members perform multiple functions. Pay is typically low-to-modest, and there are barely any employment-related benefits. Yet, this study shows that ethnic journalists tend to stay in their profession and with their employers for many years.

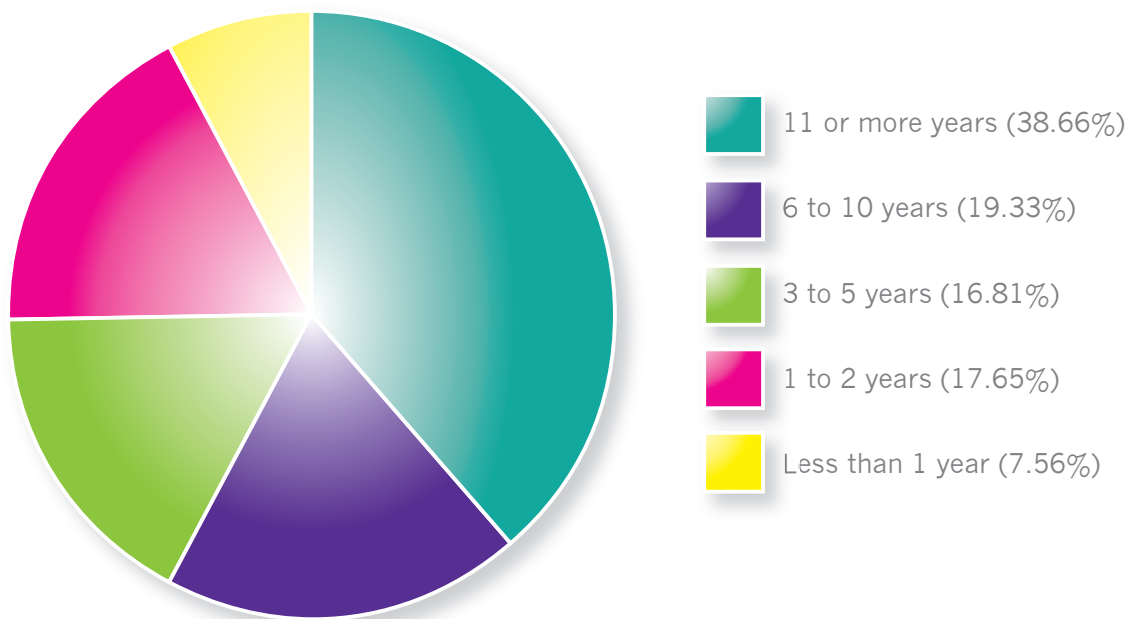
Most ethnic media personnel work in either very small operations—1 to 5 staff members (39%)—or in relatively medium-size operations of 10 to 29 people (22%).

Only 15% are in organizations with six to nine employees. Significantly, 17% reported working for relatively larger operations of more than 40 members. Most respondents are paid full-time staff members (68%); only 6% are part-time paid employees. There are as many contractual/freelance staffers as unpaid volunteers (10% each), indicating a sizable “informal” segment of the work force.

Up to 29% of ethnic journalists earn less than \$25,000 a year and half (50%) have no health or other benefits. Slightly more than half (51%) state earning \$25,000-\$49,999 a year, regardless of news organization size or type of ownership, but the survey responses do not specify how many fall closer to the lower or higher end of this range. **Possession of health insurance benefits, however, becomes more prevalent the larger the organization (75% of those belonging to staff of 30-39; 95% of those 40 or more).**

Despite relatively poor pay and benefits, ethnic media journalists tend to stay in their occupation and employers for a long time: 39% have been with their current news organization 11 or more years; 19% six to 10 years; 17% three to five years. A sizable number (18%) are new in their current employment (1 to 2 years). (See Chart 2 below.) Lengthy tenures characterize employment across all organization sizes or types of ownership.

Chart 2 – Length of Stay with Current Employer



To the survey question on job responsibilities, the 125 respondents gave a total of 409 responses, indicating multiple duties. This is typical of small, understaffed news organizations. Forty-three percent (43%) of the 409 responses indicate news gathering/reporting and editing as main work responsibilities.

Photography, graphics, design, and production received 19% of the responses. Multimedia/digital/website duties drew 8%, with management reportedly becoming increasingly interested in bolstering the latter duties, according to some focus group discussions. Management and administration comprised 16% of total responses. Advertising, marketing, and other business duties received 12%.

Traditional, mainstream news outlets in the United States have attempted to keep editorial and business operations separate. This study shows that the firewall between these duties is often breached in ethnic media. Respondents who indicated both editorial and advertising work among their main responsibilities constituted nearly a quarter (24%) of the cohort. However, overlapping editorial and business responsibilities seem to occur most frequently at the top—80% of the respondents who indicated an overlap were owner-publishers or owner-editors.

Small staffs, which are common among ethnic news operations, may partly explain this practice. Of this subgroup that indicated an overlap in editorial and advertising duties, 47% have only one to five staff members (71% of these operations are family- or self-owned; 29% are owned by corporations or a small group of investors.)

“Being in a small newspaper that’s struggling with revenues and with advertisers, I also get pressure to write about certain advertisers and for editorial support,” confides Garcia of *El Planeta* newspaper. “I’m always struggling. I’m always protesting.”

However, a larger staff does not seem to reduce the rate of the editorial/advertising overlap. Up to 37% of the subgroup have 10 or more staff members (64% of these operations are corporations or groups of investors; 36% are family- or self-owned).

Staff members with advertising and business responsibilities tend to earn more than their colleagues in editorial work due to commissions, according to some focus group discussions. Xiaqing Rong, a reporter for the Chinese-language newspaper *Sing Tao Daily*, says editorial staffers have the option to move to advertising sales where they would earn “much, much, more.” “But everyone, really, they love journalism. None of us want to transfer. We’re just stuck here, and we’re addicted.”

Despite relatively modest pay, lack of health and other benefits, and multiple job responsibilities within small organizations, the great majority of ethnic journalists, 89%, intend to stay in ethnic media, with only 2% wanting to move to mainstream news organizations. Three percent (3%) want to change careers while 8% are undecided.

Garcia of *El Planeta* is among the undecided. “I came here from Mexico to study journalism and to write in English, but I was presented this great opportunity to run a Hispanic newspaper, which has a great value to our community,” she explains. “But at

the same time I still would like to work in the mainstream media where there is a lack of ethnic voices. So, I'm torn by where I'd be most useful."

Journalism Skills/Practice:

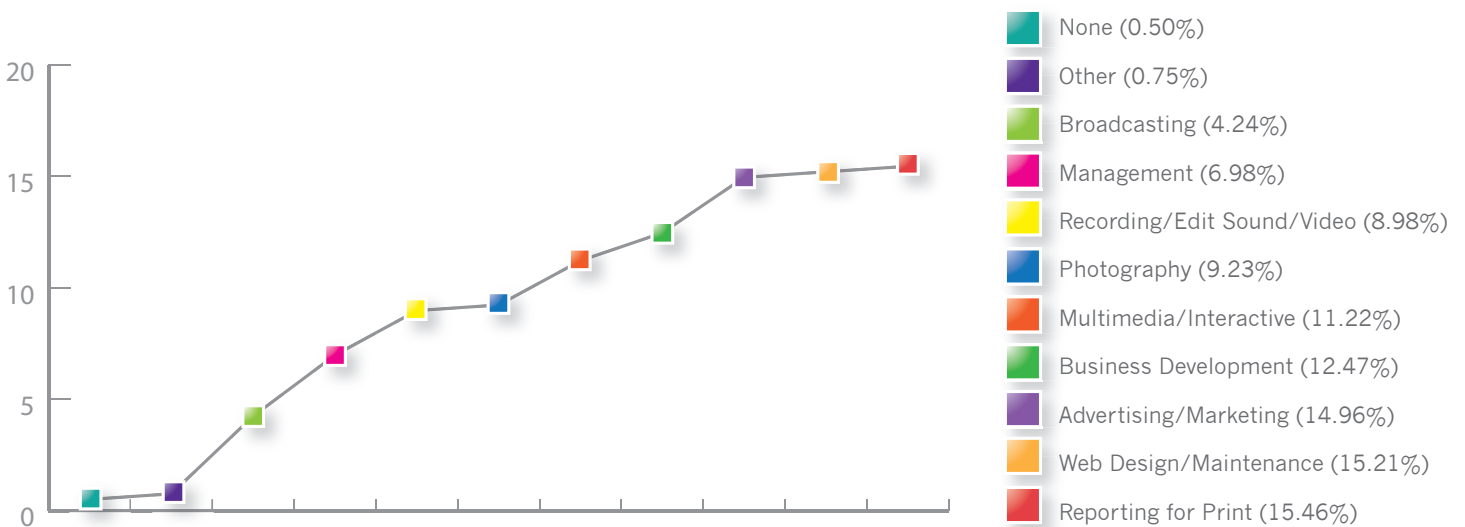
Self-taught journalists are the mainstays of ethnic news gathering and reporting and opinion-making today. A very small portion of the respondents originally had their sights on a journalism career. **Half (51%) of the ethnic journalists surveyed were self-taught and/or learned "on-the-job," including being apprentices, freelancers, and stringers.** Only 20% learned their basic skills in journalism school while 22% gained experience in student media. (See Chart 3 below.)

One-third of respondents believe their news organization has a very strong understanding of journalistic practices. Nevertheless, 16% of 401 multiple responses, indicate that training in reporting and writing for print would be most beneficial to the news organization.

Acquiring knowhow in Internet technology is an emerging goal with 15% expressing belief that training in website design and maintenance would bring most benefit; 11% believe multimedia training would. "This is becoming more important for us because I believe up to 80 percent of African Americans have gone online, and that's our target market," explains Lester A. Smalls, publisher and CEO of *The Informer* newspaper in Aiken, South Carolina.

Fifteen percent (15%) of 401 multiple responses denote training in advertising sales and marketing would be most beneficial; 13% denote business development would be.

Chart 3 – Training That Would Be Most Beneficial To Respondents



Desired Training (with percentage share of 401 choices made by 125 respondents)

There is a pronounced hunger for access to professional development resources. Of 653 answers by the 125 respondents, more than half (51%) express the desire for professional development opportunities: 15% denote the wish for journalism schools and professional organizations to provide ethnic media continuing education opportunities now available mostly to mainstream journalists. Scholarships and fellowships to bring reporters to conferences and workshops are desired by 15%, while 13% call for new training opportunities designed expressly for ethnic media and 9% for an annual professional development conference for ethnic media.

This desire for professional improvement is combined with the wish, indicated by 47% of 653 responses, for institutions to play a major role in ending the perceived marginalization of ethnic media: 14% want to see ethnic media incorporated in journalism school curricula, the use of more adjunct faculty and guest speakers from ethnic news organizations, and students being assigned to write or produce news for these media. Eleven percent (11%) call for ethnic media internships for journalism students; 11% for the creation of new journalism school courses and the recruitment of ethnic faculty members; 11% for mentorship for ethnic media practitioners.

The sense of marginalization is most evident in ethnic journalists' alienation from the mainstream news media. Focus group discussions showed resentment that mainstream journalists neglect their communities or cover only the big events, give shallow coverage or tend to reinforce stereotypes, or do not consider ethnic media credible. "I think a lot of times there are misunderstandings," says *Singtao Daily's* Rong. "I don't think it's ill-intentioned, or they're just biased against us. It's really more like misunderstanding" [our community.]

Some ethnic media journalists criticize mainstream media for "stealing" leads developed by ethnic reporters without giving them credit. This was expressed in some focus groups. On the positive side, some ethnic media journalists report of mainstream media's openness to collaboration, story exchanges, and coverage of ethnic communities in their locality. "Day by day they are more interested in (covering) the Hispanic community," states Rodrigo Paris, editor of *Rumbo* newspapers in Houston, Texas. "Many important newspapers—*Dallas Morning News*, *The Houston Chronicle*, *The San Antonio Express-News*—try to have special editions in Spanish."

Ethnic media journalists feel isolated from traditional, mainstream journalism. While 37% express "no difficulty at all" in contacting counterparts in the mainstream media, 18% say it is "very difficult to extremely difficult" to contact mainstream colleagues. By comparison, for 47%, it is "not difficult at all" to contact colleagues in other ethnic media; it is only "somewhat difficult" for 17%, denoting a higher degree of collegiality compared with mainstream counterparts.

Contacting sources of information outside the community is not very difficult for 63% of the respondents. A similar relative ease of access (with “some difficulty to no difficulty at all”) to government officials, local and state, is denoted by 59%. Still, 23% reporting great difficulty to extreme difficulty contacting outside sources.

It is not difficult to contact sources of emergency information, e.g., police, fire, homeland security, business sources, government officials, institutions, and local or state agencies, according to 58%, while 23% report great to extreme difficulty. Business contacts are not difficult to reach, according to 62%. Sources from within the community are the easiest to contact, report 82% of the respondents.

III. BUSINESS / SUSTAINABILITY

Family ownership most commonly characterizes ethnic news organizations, with 31% operating under such proprietorship. Corporations own 24%, followed by a small group of investors, 17%. Corporations are not defined by size and can be large, medium, or small. For example, cross-tabulated results show that the proportions of incorporated and family-owned small-news organizations employing one to five people are nearly the same—20% and 22% respectively. Eight percent (8%) are tax-exempt nonprofits; 20% did not specify ownership in answering the questionnaire.

This study’s findings confirm that ensuring financial sustainability is a central challenge, although it is not the only concern, preoccupying ethnic media’s entrepreneurs, journalists, and supporters.

Despite their viability and indispensable role in their respective communities, ethnic media are struggling to sustain their operations. Most rely on revenues from small-business advertising directed at communities’ mostly local markets, as well as from circulation/subscriptions.

“People are worried” [about the upcoming recession], relates a contributor to a newspaper group in the Boston area. “Marketing and advertising people are slashing their budgets. Those who bought \$5,000 worth of advertising last year are now cutting it to \$2,500.”

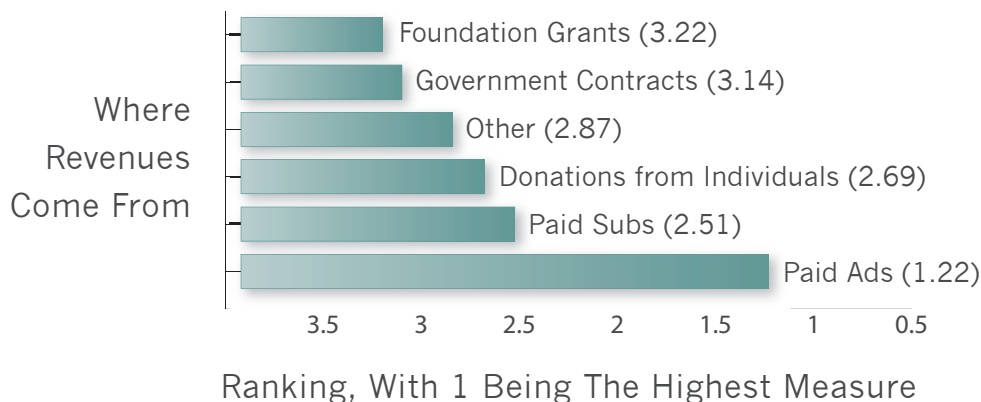
Placements from national, big, corporate advertisers, a more lucrative revenue source, remain intermittent and elusive. For example, even when big advertisers buy media time in ethnic radio programs, the latter are often forced to price ads at 30 percent lower than mainstream radio charges advertisers (*When Being No. 1 Is Not Enough*, a report by the Federal Communications Commission, 1999).

To uphold the commercial viability of their audiences, radio companies in the African American and Latino markets are currently challenging the accuracy of Arbitron’s new system of measuring listenership via a small, portable “people-meter.” (Arbitron is the radio equivalent of TV’s Nielsen; both rating systems are key in determining advertising rates media companies can charge.) The radio companies argue that ethnic or racial minority audiences, especially the young, are systematically under-represented in Arbitron’s people-meter surveys. The resulting underestimation of their stations’ listeners, they charge, will lead to a huge loss of advertising dollars for stations that have large minority audiences.

While corporate ignorance or outright discrimination may also play a role in the commercial marginalization of ethnic media, from the corporate perspective, certain factors do place ethnic media at a marketing disadvantage. It is true that the ethnic population is booming--Texas, Hawaii, New Mexico and California are now “minority-majority” states, along with the District of Columbia (U.S. Census). It is also a fact that ethnic purchasing power has grown accordingly--by 2008, Asian-American buying power will reach \$526 billion; Hispanic buying power (\$778 billion) would have exceeded even that of African Americans (\$773 billion) by 2005 (Simon S. Selig Jr. Center for Economic Growth, University of Georgia). This ethnic population, however, does not comprise a single market; it is fragmented into smaller, distinct cultural communities. This fragmentation makes selling to specific ethnic communities more costly, requiring a higher cost per thousand (CPM) on the part of the corporate advertisers, who may not consider niche marketing in this case cost-effective.

Most ethnic news organizations rely on paid advertising as their primary source of revenue (See Chart 4). Paid subscriptions are the next largest revenue source, followed by donations from individuals followed by unspecified “Other” sources of revenue. Contracts from government agencies are the fifth main source. Grants from foundations are the smallest source of revenue.

Chart 4 – Sources of Revenue



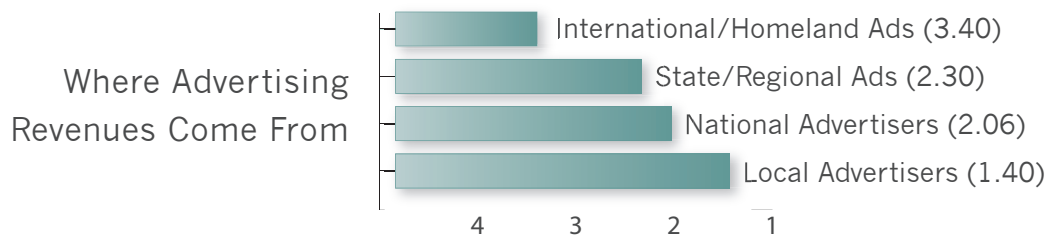
Of sources of advertising revenue, local advertisers are the “most important” (See Chart 4A below). Reading “most important” to mean the source most relied on, this finding confirms that most ethnic media mainly target local community markets usually defined by culturally specific consumer preferences.

Larger news organizations, however, have a bigger share of national advertisers seeking a market share of the ethnic populations. An example of such larger operations is Univision, which has a national broadcasting presence. With access to a top cable TV network and several radio stations across the country and having reportedly the No. 1 Spanish-language website, Univision is the most watched channel nationwide. According to Nielsen, which now includes Spanish language channels in monitoring general market broadcasts, Univision regularly beats affiliates of the Big Three—NBC, CBS and ABC—during prime time.

“Our mainstays are big national advertisers, like banks, airlines, large real-estate agencies and the like—largely because of our nationwide reach,” confirms Univision account executive Bunnie Contreras. (Although Univision was not a survey participant, Contreras was among the few non-respondents interviewed for purposes of comparing certain experiences between small and large media operations.)

For most small-to-medium-size ethnic news organizations, national advertisers only come next as most important sources of ad revenues, followed by state or regional advertisers. International advertisers or those that are homeland-based are the least important sources of ad revenues.

Chart 4A – Sources of Advertising Revenue



Ranking, With 1 Being The Most Important Source

Although local advertisers tend to not be as lucrative a source of revenue as big-budget ad buyers, local advertisers somewhat buffer ethnic media from cutbacks in national advertising that ensue during economic slowdowns. Moreover, local advertising will continue to be a staple of ethnic media, given the tremendous growth of minority-owned businesses. According to *Minorities in Business: A Demographic Review of Minority Business Ownership*, by Ying Lowrey, senior economist with the U.S. Office of Small Business

Advocacy's economic research unit, the share of minority-owned firms rose from 6.8 percent in 1982 to 17.1 percent in 2002. This trend mirrors the steady growth of the overall minority population.

Most ethnic media personnel consider other ethnic media operating in the same cultural/language community/market as their primary business competitors (67%). However, a significant number, 26%, view mainstream or general-market media as their main competitors. Focus group discussions reveal this view to be prevalent among ethnic media operating in local communities/markets not situated in regions with a high degree of cultural diversity. In these less culturally diverse regions, ethnic media find themselves competing directly with larger news establishments, instead of other ethnic media, within a local advertising market.

Ethnic journalists and media entrepreneurs are quite optimistic about the prospects for their news organizations' audiences and revenues. Seventy percent (70%) expect their circulation/audience to grow in the next three to five years; 13% expect it to remain the same; 13% say they do not know. Only 4% expect their audience to shrink. Data show that the optimism cuts across all sizes or organizations and all ownership types.

Nearly the same proportions apply to expectations of revenue growth for all organization sizes and ownership types—67% expect their revenue to grow in the next three to five years, 11% expect it to stay the same and 16% say they do not know. Only 6% expect revenues to shrink.

Forty-eight percent (48%) expect their news organization to hire more reporters, but perhaps aware of their employers' need to cut costs, 26% expect staff size to remain the same; 19% say they do not know. Only 7% expect reporters to be laid off.

Forty-seven (47%) expect more business staff to be hired; 31% think the business staff will stay the same and 19% do not know. Only 3% expect business staff layoffs.

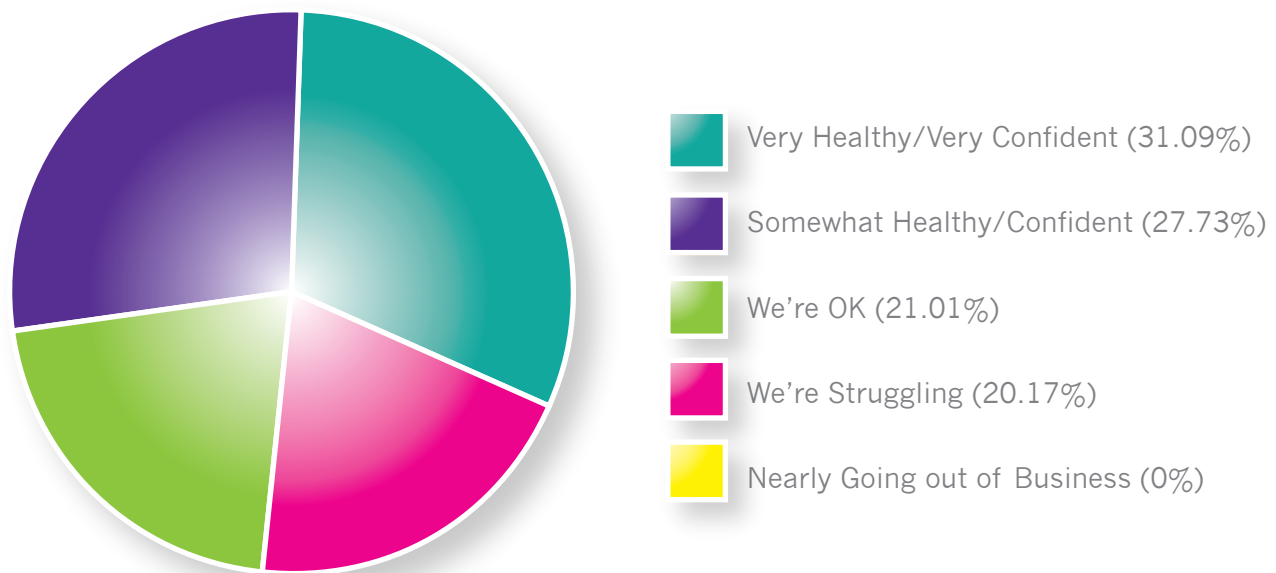
Respondents were asked to assess their news organization's **overall economic viability** by indicating which of the following best describes its situation: "Very healthy/I'm very confident"; "Somewhat healthy/I'm confident"; "We're OK"; "We're struggling"; "We're one event from going out of business."

Their responses to this general question are revealing. While on the one hand the respondents expressed optimism about their organization's future revenue, audience and staffing growth, their optimism is tempered by a strikingly ambiguous assessment of their news operations' general health or sustainability.

Nearly a third (32%) consider their news organization to be "very healthy," stating they are

“very confident” of its future. But more than a quarter (28%) say theirs is only “somewhat healthy” although they remain “confident.” Up to 21% say their organization is “okay,” but 20% say they are “struggling” (See Chart 5 below).

Chart 5 – Confidence in the Future



Ambiguity is most pronounced among journalists belonging to smaller operations.

Among those with 1 to 5 staff members, the 28% who are “very confident” of the future are matched by the 28% who say they are “struggling.” Similarly, operations with 6 to 9 personnel show 22% “very confident” to 22% “struggling.” This tension between “confidence” and a sense of “struggle” or difficulty is more pronounced in smaller news organizations with thinner cushions against financial and other operational pressures.

“It’s because on the one hand we see great opportunities and possibilities ahead for ethnic media because of increasing demand by growing communities,” says Garcia of *El Planeta*. “On the other hand the struggle to survive is constant. There are so many difficulties.”

The confidence level rises with the size of the operation. Of journalists belonging to staff of 10 to 29, up to 39% are “very confident,” while only 15% say they are “struggling.” From those with 30 to 39 personnel, 37% are “very confident,” “struggling” zero. With 40 or more personnel, 26% are “very confident,” 16% are “struggling.”

None of the news organizations surveyed consider themselves “one event from going out of business,” despite focus group discussions that revealed much trepidation over ongoing and deeper cost-cutting measures at the work place, as well as faltering advertising revenues. This question was posed to determine the extent, if any, of a sense

of catastrophic emergency among practitioners.

Much of the confidence expressed by respondents is based on perception that the demand for ethnic media will increase with the continuing growth of their target ethnic populations, and that ethnic news organizations are well positioned (better than traditional news media) to meet and benefit from this demand.

“I believe that we offer better value to our audience,” says Smalls of *The Informer*, comparing ethnic media’s prospects with that of traditional media. “We’re cheaper, we’re closer to our community which will remain with us regardless of the downturns in the mainstream media. We’re a better package.”

Margarita Wiechard, co-owner and general manager of *Georgia Latino News*, says her publication is enjoying increased advertising and doing quite well, which she ascribes to keeping a small staff and publishing “only local news.” “We leave international or news about Latin America to mainstream TV or the Internet. We focus on local community news, which is harder to get but our readers need.”

Wiechard, however, is careful not to overstate her newspaper’s business prospects. “With the economy going the way it is now, it’s going to get harder for everybody, not just for construction, housing, for everybody,” she states. “So, as for our future, I can only hope. There’s no assurance.”

This pilot survey was completed before the current national credit crisis reached its peak. “We’re certainly aware of this downturn and hopeful that it won’t really affect us as much as it has negatively impacted mainstream media,” Ragini Srinivasan, managing editor of *IndiaCurrents* magazine based in San Jose, Calif. tells CIIJ. “Right now, we’re not yet doing anything different in response to the crisis.”

Other ethnic news organizations, however, are already awakening to harder times, according to a *New America Media* news report. The mortgage meltdown has already shrunk media buys from ethnic news operations’ typically local real estate advertisers.

“The real estate section is totally gone from other newspapers,” Vivian Truong Gia, publisher of the San Jose, Calif.-based weekly *Viet Tribune* told NAM reporter Ngoc Nguyen. “I still have eight pages for that section. Before, I had twenty pages.” Truong also reported a drop in advertising from banks, restaurants and entertainment venues, which other ethnic publications confirm.

Univision has also felt a slowing down of advertising in some sectors, “like car dealerships,” account executive Bunnie Contreras says. “Ironically, we’re also seeing an uptick in advertising from consolidators and businesses that help people stay out of

foreclosure. So for us, it's still a wash.”

Due to its substantial nationwide presence and reach into the Latino market, “Univision is best positioned” to weather the advertising drought, Alan Albarran, director of North Texas University’s Center for Spanish Language Media, told National Public Radio.

Most smaller ethnic media, however, are “hunkering down” as a result of the economic downturn, reported NAM. They are lowering overhead by publishing less frequently or keeping a smaller staff. Some are either fully switching to an online venue or trying to increase their online presence.

CONCLUSION

Ethnic media’s proliferation reflects the real need of the nation’s growing ethnic constituencies for mass communication that help amplify a community’s voice, strengthen its cultural identity and facilitate its members’ transition to the larger society. This function feeds the passion of ethnic media journalists who persevere in their profession for years despite often daunting conditions. Very few ethnic media have grown into large corporate entities with bigger staffs, more advanced facilities and better earnings compared with most ethnic news organizations. The majority of small-to-medium size operations are constantly struggling for sustainability, leaning on tight budgets and small bands of multitasked personnel that are hungry for new skills and professional development opportunities. Through this study, journalism institutions and other mass communication stakeholders can determine the potentially significant role they can play in the further development of ethnic media. However, much more information about ethnic media, both statistical and experiential, needs to be gathered and analyzed, especially in light of today’s increasing economic challenges.

CIIJ strives to improve the Four Rs of the Journalism Pipeline:
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