

# Collaboration in California's diverse journalism ecosystem

Challenges, lessons, and promising practices in supporting partnerships between "ethnic" and "mainstream" media

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# Introduction

Over the past several years, collaboration has become increasingly common in the news industry. In a context where newsrooms are struggling to survive a steep loss in revenue sources, collaboration offers one way for news outlets to provide their audiences with important stories that they might otherwise be unable to cover. A collaborative approach also has the potential to deepen the quality of reporting by bringing to bear the different strengths, perspectives, and resources of multiple newsrooms.

In California, the journalism ecosystem is highly diverse. It includes large and small legacy print publications, local affiliates of major television networks, public radio and public television stations, and myriad digital-native news outlets and platforms. And embedded within this landscape are at least 300 media outlets produced by and for immigrants, racial, ethnic, and language minorities, and indigenous populations – often referred to as “ethnic media.”<sup>1</sup> This could present a ripe opportunity for collaboration among newsrooms to deepen the breadth and depth of reporting on the experiences and perspectives of California’s diverse population.

## REPORT PREVIEW

- Value-add of collaboration
- Relationships
- Resources and capacity constraints
- Collaborative muscle
- Implications for funders

The California Health Care Foundation (CHCF) commissioned this research report to explore examples of collaboration between ethnic media and mainstream media in California. This reflects the foundation’s interest in collaboration with ethnic media as a potential strategy for increasing the reach of high-quality health journalism and supporting a culturally competent, diverse journalism workforce. The goal of this research is to gather insights into good practices that support mutually beneficial collaboration, key challenges and inhibiting factors, and lessons for how to support effective and equitable collaboration. The findings will inform CHCF’s evaluation of opportunities to support partnerships between ethnic media and mainstream media. The findings are also intended to be useful to the broader field of journalism philanthropy.

## USING THE TERMS “ETHNIC” AND “MAINSTREAM” MEDIA

In this report, we use the term “**ethnic media**” to refer to media primarily produced by and for immigrants, racial, ethnic, and language minorities, and indigenous populations. These outlets may be distinguished from media produced primarily by and for the “mainstream” of society (the definition of which is itself contested and evolving). This reflects our understanding of how these terms are widely used in the news industry, including by outlets that are distinguishing themselves from “mainstream” media. Adopting these common but problematic terms helps us communicate lessons about how different outlets perceive and experience collaboration.

But we have reservations about these terms. The word “ethnic” carries negative connotations of “otherness” that are laden with problematic assumptions and power dynamics. What is considered “mainstream” varies across time and place. Outlets labeled “ethnic media” are highly diverse, ranging from very small print publications to podcasts and online radio programs to international broadcasters that rival or surpass the reach of “mainstream” outlets. We recognize that the industry’s language will continue to evolve after this report’s writing, perhaps resulting in widespread adoption of better terminology.

## Scope and Methods

This report draws on interviews of 24 individuals with experience in partnerships between ethnic and mainstream media in California. Our interviews encompassed journalists, editors, and newsroom leadership at a diverse set of news outlets: Spanish-language television and print media, bilingual print and radio outlets, Black media, legacy print and digital-native mainstream media, and public radio stations. We also interviewed individuals with experience facilitating and supporting newsroom collaborations. All interviews were conducted on a not-for-attribution basis to encourage candor.

Our interviewees described varying examples of collaboration, ranging in scope, formality, and funding. In some cases, the collaboration was launched by an outside organization (i.e., a nonprofit or university) that drew together multiple newsrooms in its network to form a collaborative. In other cases, a mainstream outlet approached one or more partners with the idea of collaborating. Still other collaborations were the product of a mutual decision between ethnic and mainstream outlets that had an existing relationship. While our interviewees offered rich insights, we recognize that their experiences represent only a small slice of California's ecosystem of news outlets and journalists.

Although some of our findings are applicable to news collaboratives more generally, we focus on insights that are particularly salient in partnerships between ethnic and mainstream media. For excellent research reports, practical tools, and guidance for establishing and implementing news collaborations, we recommend the compilation of resources offered by the [Center for Cooperative Media](#) at Montclair State University.

## CONTEXT

### A PARTICULAR MOMENT IN TIME

#### The context in which this research took place

This research was conducted against the backdrop of two major breaking stories: the coronavirus outbreak in early 2020 and massive national protests sparked by George Floyd's killing by Minneapolis police in May 2020. These stories have deep implications for public health, the economy, and social justice in the U.S. that are continuing to unfold as of this report's writing. In the context of this research, we note that these stories have impacted the news industry in ways that may shape prospects for collaboration with ethnic media.

The coronavirus pandemic deepened the economic hardships already faced by many news outlets, triggering widespread layoffs, furloughs, pay cuts, and closures. The shutdown of all non-essential business severely hurt ethnic media, many of whom rely on small business advertising for revenue and on local businesses and faith-based institutions as distribution hubs. Shoring up these outlets so that their doors can remain open is a precondition for any collaborative initiatives.

Sustained and widespread protests have confronted the U.S. with its history of systemic racism and violence against communities of color. For the news industry, this has created a moment of heightened attention to the mainstream media's lack of diversity and how that affects its coverage of communities of color – and its relationships with ethnic media.

This context informed our interviewees' responses – and will have important implications for whether and how ethnic and mainstream newsrooms are able to collaborate.

# Value-add

## What is gained when ethnic and mainstream media collaborate

Collaboration requires time, resources, and commitment. Newsrooms need to feel it will enable them to accomplish objectives that might otherwise be out of reach. That is, there needs to be value-add. Interviewees described several ways in which collaborations between ethnic and mainstream media have yielded value-add for newsrooms and their audiences – and for the journalism ecosystem as a whole.

### Coverage

**Collaboration contributes to higher quality stories and a higher volume of stories than might otherwise be possible.**

Interviewees emphasized that collaboration allowed newsrooms to **produce and distribute more and better coverage** than would otherwise be possible due to resource constraints. This includes local coverage of important issues that would otherwise receive less in-depth attention, such as stories about how different communities are impacted by a disease, housing policy, or climate change. It might also include longer, more investigative stories that require more staff time or resources than are typically available at a daily paper focused on breaking news or at a very small outlet with only a few staff members. By cross-posting one another's stories, partnering outlets can multiply the amount of coverage they are able to provide to their respective audiences.

Coverage produced through a collaborative approach can leverage reporting from different parts of a region or the state, telling a story from multiple angles and through the lens of multiple communities. Newsrooms are able to pool their strengths, drawing on the diverse sources, connections, and areas of expertise of reporters in different newsrooms. This is a particular strength of collaborations with ethnic media. As multiple interviewees observed, ethnic media often have close connections to communities of color that mainstream outlets lack. As a result, ethnic media journalists are well positioned to gather the perspectives of hard-to-reach or vulnerable communities and to bring valuable cultural fluency to their reporting. Pooling these strengths with those of mainstream media can be a powerful combination.

### Audience

**Collaboration enables important content to reach audiences that it otherwise would not.**

Cross-posting does more than boost the overall amount of coverage that resource-constrained outlets have to fill the news hole. Interviewees noted that it also **enables important stories to reach audiences who might otherwise not be exposed**. For example, by posting stories produced by an ethnic media partner, a mainstream outlet may elevate key issues, experiences, and perspectives of a community for a broader or different audience. This can "illuminate" a community that may not routinely be covered by the mainstream outlet. Another example: by posting translated stories produced by an English-language partner, a Spanish-language outlet can ensure its audience members are exposed to additional stories that have important implications for their community's wellbeing. In

this way, outlets are leveraging the trust and reputation that they have built among their respective audiences in order to bring them relevant content produced by their partner.

In some cases, collaboration between ethnic and mainstream media provides an opportunity to **cultivate new audience members**. For example, one interviewee described a bilingual radio program produced through a six-year partnership between Vietnamese journalists at a large mainstream print outlet and a Vietnamese radio station. The print outlet hoped to increase readership among younger generations of the Vietnamese immigrant community who may not rely as heavily on in-language media as first-generation immigrants. The radio station got exclusive rights to air a popular and lively show publicized in the print outlet.

In other cases, a critical mass of partnering outlets coordinating their coverage of an issue can help **widen the audience overall**. As interviewees pointed out, a story published by a small local outlet or by a non-English language outlet may not garner the attention it deserves. But multiple outlets in a region coordinating to publish a combined set of stories can give the coverage “momentum,” attracting the attention of community leaders, other news outlets, and public officials.

## Impact

### **Collaboration deepens the impact of news coverage.**

When a collaborative enables more and better news content to reach audiences who otherwise may not have been exposed, it has the potential to generate greater impact. The impact of collaborative coverage was a common theme in our interviews.

Raising the salience of an issue among decision makers and informing new government policies and practices can generate system-level impact. Or impact can be on a more individual level, raising awareness of issues important to people's lives and the wellbeing of their communities – for example, addressing harmful misconceptions about a disease or providing guidance about the Census. Such individual-level impacts speak to a critical “service” function that ethnic media fulfill in immigrant communities who look to trusted outlets for information that helps them navigate the systems of their adopted country. As one ethnic media interviewee explained, his participation in a collaboration enabled him to cover stories that help “the most vulnerable people, those who have the least voice.” He saw the stories he produced for the collaboration having a direct impact on people's lives: “That is the impact we make on people; it is to change their lives. If it hadn't been for that collaboration, it wouldn't have been possible.”

Reflecting their strong desire to have a meaningful and positive impact, newsroom interviewees underscored the importance of covering topics that directly affect their community. Indeed, this is a primary deciding factor for engaging in a collaboration, especially for small outlets whose capacity for adding collaborative work is limited: *Is the topic important and relevant to my community?*

## Funding

### **Newsrooms receive funding for collaboration – in some cases.**

Funding can be a “value-add” of collaboration. As one interviewee observed, small newsrooms may choose to participate in a foundation-supported collaboration in part because it brings in much-needed grant money. In some instances, collaboration may even come with funding to cover a reporter's salary at partner newsrooms. But many collaborations do not have specific funding; partnering newsrooms draw on existing resources. In subsequent sections of this report, we discuss the ways in which funding can support collaboration – and potentially contribute to challenges.

## Additional long-term value

### Collaboration offers additional forms of value with longer-term payoffs.

Beyond the more immediate value-adds of collaboration, newsrooms can gain other kinds of benefits whose value is realized over the longer run.

- **Professional development for journalists.** Several journalists commented on how their participation in a collaboration contributed to their professional development. For example, they developed new sources, reached different audiences, and learned new skills. In cases where the news collaborative had built-in editorial support, journalists emphasized how access to this additional editorial expertise improved the quality of their reporting. Interviewees also mentioned the value of gatherings that bring together journalists and key leaders in sectors relevant to an issue area (e.g., community leaders, researchers, government officials, foundation staff) to deepen the journalists' understanding of the issue and support collaborative thinking about how to cover the issue. This kind of gathering may be organized by an organization that supports and facilitates news collaboratives.
- **Collaborative muscle.** Collaboration provides an opportunity for newsrooms to build "collaborative muscle" – that is, the internal infrastructure and logistical processes that make it possible for newsrooms to work together. Newsrooms gain an understanding of one another's platforms and different ways of working, become familiar with the points of contact for different aspects of cooperation, and set up processes for coordinating stories, reporters, and editors. Interviewees observed that, once this muscle has been built through an initial collaboration, subsequent collaboration goes more smoothly.
- **Long-lasting relationships.** Collaboration can foster long-term connections and even friendships that last beyond specific collaborative projects. Such long-lasting relationships create opportunities for further collaboration, and foster conditions for generating new ideas for how to work together.

Each of these forms of value is important to the journalism ecosystem in California. Inter-newsroom relationships and collaborative muscle can serve as useful pieces of infrastructure helping to buttress the industry's ability to produce and distribute high quality coverage. Professional development of journalists bolsters a core capacity of the industry. At a time when the beat system is eroding, newsrooms are shedding jobs, and turnover is high, the ecosystem benefits from opportunities to deepen journalists' reporting skills.

Although collaboration is recognized as a valuable approach for all the reasons above, **collaboration between ethnic and mainstream media is relatively rare.**

The following sections describe key factors and practices that support – or undermine – collaboration between the two sectors.

# Relationships

## The foundation for collaboration

Relationships are an essential ingredient in collaborations. This was a universal theme in our interviews. Relationships form the basis for getting people to join a collaborative effort. They facilitate mutual understanding, trust, communication, and respect. And they support longer-term partnerships that continue to yield value over time. A key reason why there have been relatively few collaborations between ethnic media and mainstream media: a lack of relationships.

## Challenges

### What undermines relationship building?

There is a **history of distrust** between ethnic media and mainstream media. As several interviewees observed, mainstream media have historically under-valued, distrusted, and disrespected ethnic media. Careful to note that this does not apply to *all* mainstream outlets, interviewees characterized some outlets as “looking down” on ethnic media, with a “condescending” mindset that mainstream media are the “experts” and that ethnic media need to learn how to be more like them in order to “make the grade.”

Many ethnic media outlets are very small, with much more limited reporting capacity and resources compared to larger mainstream outlets; this can contribute to the mindset that the quality of ethnic media reporting is lower. In addition, mainstream journalists tend to distrust the advocacy role that many ethnic media play for their respective communities.<sup>2</sup> In their facilitated discussions with ethnic media journalists in the Los Angeles area, Matthew Matsaganis and Vikki Katz found that participants were sensitive to how the “advocate” label, juxtaposed against mainstream journalism’s standard of “objective reporting,” can reinforce the perception that they are “less professional” than mainstream journalists.<sup>3</sup> As noted at the beginning of our report, the national protests following George Floyd’s killing in May 2020 have focused attention on how mainstream media cover race and communities of color. In this context, journalists of color have highlighted how the profession’s standard of “objectivity” has been defined by and for white people.<sup>4</sup>

Mutual distrust is also driven by the mainstream media’s use of ethnic media as “fixers” who are asked to share their sources or “get the word out” to their communities. As one interviewee commented: “Sometimes we are just translating what somebody thinks about what we thought – not what we really thought about this issue and how we handle this issue.” Language barriers may compound reservations about working together. One interviewee observed that those with more limited English language skills may decide against participating in a collaboration due to concerns they may not be able to communicate effectively with an English-language partner: “if they can’t easily understand one another, how can they provide content ideas?”

Distrust also stems from a **lack of diversity, equity, and inclusion in mainstream media**. Journalists of color remain under-represented in newsrooms.<sup>5</sup> And as one interviewee observed, journalists of color who do work at mainstream outlets can find it difficult to bring their whole selves to work for fear of being marginalized. Lack of diversity in mainstream outlets affects how reporters and editors understand, relate to, and cover the diverse communities in which they are situated. Rong Xiaoqing, a reporter for Sing Tao, observed in an article for the Poynter Institute: “journalists in the mainstream

media work hard to produce reports from diverse communities but often lack the ability to get the full story because of language or cultural gaps. Their misunderstandings and lack of sensibilities about ethnic cultures are noticeable, from mixed last and first names of the interviewees to bias and stereotypes that can tarnish the stories.”<sup>6</sup> Our interviewees noted that mainstream reporting that is perceived as attacking or insulting a community, and that lacks a real understanding of that community, fuels distrust between the mainstream outlet and the community – and between the mainstream outlet and the ethnic media who serve that community.<sup>7</sup> More broadly, tensions between mainstream media and ethnic media can reflect racial divides in communities.

A related factor undermining trusting relationships: **a shift in newsroom ownership**. As one interviewee observed, owners of ethnic papers are often community civic leaders. In the past, local mainstream dailies were owned by families who were similarly part of community leadership. That common grounding in the community created opportunities for newsroom owners to work together in different capacities. As ownership of local dailies has shifted to hedge funds and private equity, they lost the community connection and understanding that helped to foster relationships with ethnic media. Ownership can also affect collaborations between ethnic and mainstream media due to differences in priorities and vision. Commenting on one collaborative involving multiple newsrooms, an interviewee observed: “Some [newspapers] don't have a heart in the fight because of the way they're structured. Some of these newspapers are run by hedge funds and they just want to meet deliverables and crank out coverage.” They lack a shared commitment to a bigger vision of what the collaboration aims to achieve.

## Promising practices

### Building relationships to enable collaboration

Relationships take time and commitment to build, particularly when there are deep-seated biases or a history of distrust. Drawing on interviewees' observations, we distilled three key practices that help support relationship building between ethnic and mainstream media.

- 1. Leverage existing relationships.** Look for ways in which existing relationships can be built on to facilitate deeper or broader collaborative relationships. As one interviewee put it, “it makes it easier to say yes right away to a collaboration when you know your partner.” For example, existing distribution partnerships between newsrooms can be used as a foundation for establishing communication, rapport, trust, mutual understanding, and personal relationships – potentially paving the way for deeper collaboration.

Another example: an organization or individual who has existing relationships with people in both mainstream and ethnic media outlets can serve as a “bridge” between the two sectors. This might be someone whose leadership roles and relationships within different outlets provide a basis of trust for bringing together representatives of both sectors. Or it could be an outside organization (e.g., a university-based or nonprofit-based journalism initiative, or a community foundation) with a strong network of newsroom relationships, who can serve as a neutral convener and provide the “glue” for initiating a collaborative effort.

Journalists of color working at mainstream outlets can also play a bridging role. Returning to the earlier example of a partnership between a Vietnamese radio station and a mainstream paper: because the two mainstream reporters involved in the collaboration were Vietnamese, they spoke the language and understood the Vietnamese culture and community, enabling them to “hit the ground running” in collaborating with the Vietnamese outlet.



- 2. Communicate consistently and respectfully.** Relationships require thoughtful and continuous communication. As one interviewee put it: “It’s constant gardening and nurturing.” Observed another interviewee, in some cases “it’s taken 15 phone calls to get the conversation started.” Once that connection is established, the relationship must then be cultivated and strengthened over time through multiple subsequent conversations. Turnover can throw a wrench in this process, as relationships can be disrupted when a key point of contact leaves a newsroom. Media outlets with more resources have greater capacity to do this kind of outreach and relationship building.

Interviewees further emphasized that, when initiating new relationships, trust needs to be built by communicating in ways that respect partners as peers – in terms of the value they bring, their internal needs, and their views on how to potentially collaborate. Surfacing how partners can be of mutual benefit and value to one another is key.

- 3. Create opportunities for staff at ethnic and mainstream media outlets to develop relationships.** Mainstream and ethnic media journalists often do not know one another, even when they work in the same geographic area. Organizing **a gathering of journalists** is a valuable way to begin establishing relationships. This could be a convening designed to surface ideas for potential collaborations. Or it could be a convening for journalists whose newsrooms have formally agreed to participate in a specific collaboration. Such gatherings give journalists an opportunity to meet in person, share their interests and perspectives, and identify commonalities and differences across the experiences of communities they serve.

More **informal opportunities to interact** are equally valuable. For example, conversations over lunch can deepen relationships and spark ideas for collaboration. Attending a community event together can provide opportunities for reporters to get to know one another. Potential partners can also get to know each other by visiting one another’s newsroom for an informal tour, giving them a chance to learn one another’s history and mission and meet colleagues in person for later follow-up. Personal friendships between individuals at two newsrooms can facilitate more formal partnerships between their respective organizations.

# Resources

## The implications of capacity constraints for collaborations

### Challenges

#### Resource limitations and inequities

Resource constraints can significantly affect a newsroom’s ability to collaborate. With reporters and editors already spread thin, collaborative work can strain a newsroom’s bandwidth. Reporters can find it difficult to juggle their daily story load on top of their added responsibilities for the collaborative. Editorial staff may not have time to serve as key points of contact for coordinating across newsrooms. Collaboration also creates new administrative work, including communication around newsroom coordination and setting up Memorandums of Understanding (MOUs) and funding agreements. These challenges are particularly acute for small outlets whose staff must wear multiple hats, with little time to spare for additional responsibilities. As one ethnic media interviewee explained: “the editor who’s been there the longest is all of a sudden the COO, the CMO, the publisher, and everything else.”

Interviewees pointed out resource inequities across newsrooms. For example, small ethnic media outlets typically lack the resources that larger mainstream outlets have, including copy editors, fact checkers, travel budgets, and legal protection. More generally, smaller outlets – whether they are ethnic or mainstream newsrooms – can find that resource constraints make it difficult to partner with larger outlets. Even if funding is provided to support collaboration, taking on a special project requiring editorial support can be “a stressor” in a small news organization.

Smaller outlets also typically have weaker fundraising capacity than larger operations. One interviewee described how large news organizations are quick to respond to a Request for Proposals, while small outlets lack the capacity to apply for grants. Such fundraising inequities, this interviewee further noted, can be compounded in newsroom partnerships when larger outlets receive a greater allocation of funding to support the collaborative work compared to smaller outlets. In a blog post about the 2019 Collaborative Journalism Summit, journalist Angilee Shah drew attention to the racial dimension of funding allocation in many news collaborations:

*...even when there was representation in many of the collaborations, the budgets and overhead costs were largely concentrated in news organizations with white founders or leaders or in older media companies that have histories of neglect or malign coverage of non-white communities, that have only recently begun to improve their hiring practices to be inclusive. The smaller media partners that brought the most important audiences — the people who are actually the subjects of the journalism — were not often the recipients of the big grants.<sup>8</sup>*

Disparities in the size and resources of partnering newsrooms can contribute to problematic power dynamics. Interviewees noted that smaller outlets can feel like they get “dragged around” or exploited by bigger outlets. In large-scale collaborations with bigger outlets, smaller outlets can become submerged, their contribution less visible. Even if this is an unintentional outcome of the collaboration, it can reinforce power dynamics around which voices and contributions are valued.

## Promising practices

### Addressing resource needs to support collaboration

- 1. Provide funding to help cover staff salaries.** Lack of funding can constrain the roles that outlets play in a collaboration. Commenting on collaborations in which his news outlet had participated, an ethnic media interviewee noted that he would have liked to have his outlet’s journalists more involved in researching and developing stories in the field. This wasn’t possible due to funding constraints. Covering the cost of a reporter’s salary can help ensure that a smaller outlet is able to bring its reporting strengths to the collaboration.
- 2. Carefully weigh the equity implications of funding allocations within collaboratives.** Interviewees underscored the need to take resource inequities into account when allocating funding for a collaborative. As one person observed, a large mainstream outlet will have a larger budget, but it is also more likely to have one or more people with the relevant expertise who can be assigned to contribute to a collaborative project, whereas a small outlet may need to bring someone in for this work. Shah suggests that funders pay close attention to how their support reflects judgments about whose expertise is valued; in her blog post cited above, she recommends: “Pay people for their valuable and rare skills to report from within communities, from within their areas of expertise.”

- 3. Consider how a facilitator or “backbone” organization may help balance resource inequities.** Depending on the scale of the collaboration, it can be helpful to designate an organization to facilitate and support the collaborative effort. Interviewees valued the editorial support that this facilitating organization can provide to the collaborative. Having a “built-in” editor (or team of editors) to support the collaboration is especially helpful for resource-strapped newsrooms whose reporters may benefit from this additional editorial review and expertise. That editorial support can also contribute to securing the buy-in of outlets that would otherwise find it difficult to spare the editorial staff needed to produce content for the collaborative.

In a report on equity in journalism collaborations, published by the Center for Cooperative Media, Shah notes that a facilitator can also help address resource inequities by supporting smaller outlets’ participation – for example by keeping them updated and bringing their input back to partners when time constraints prevent them from joining the collaborative’s meetings.<sup>9</sup> This backbone role may be played by one of the newsroom partners or by an outside organization unaffiliated with the newsrooms. In the following section, we discuss other dimensions of this role – and what capabilities are needed to play the role well.

# Collaborative muscle

## Processes and infrastructure that enable collaboration

### Challenges

#### The nuts and bolts of working together

**Leadership buy-in and expectation setting.** Collaborations run into trouble when they lack leadership buy-in. Without the full commitment of newsroom leaders, a partnership can fail to get off the ground. A shift in leadership mid-collaboration can erode commitment to the shared expectations and vision established earlier. Inadequate leadership buy-in can result in reporters being given insufficient time to produce stories for the collaborative given the demands of their daily story load. In effect, this means they use uncompensated free time to complete the collaborative obligations.

**Control over the collaboration.** Partnering newsrooms can be motivated to jockey for control over a collaboration. As noted earlier, power dynamics may put smaller outlets at a disadvantage partnering with a larger outlet, making it harder for them to shape the project and their own role within it. This may be exacerbated in cases where the collaborative has a designated editor provided by one of the newsroom partners; this person may be perceived as working for the needs of that newsroom as opposed to the collaborative more broadly.

**Learning how to work together.** Newsrooms are not typically accustomed to sharing stories, resources, or reporters. There can be a learning curve early in the collaboration as editors and reporters figure out how to most efficiently and effectively work together. Reflecting on one experience with a multi-newsroom collaboration, an interviewee noted that one of the failings of this collaborative may have been the assumption that they should start with a large, high-visibility project. Starting with smaller projects yielding smaller successes could have helped the newsrooms learn to work together before taking on a larger project.

As noted in the previous section, a designated “backbone” organization can help facilitate this process of coordinating and communicating across newsrooms. But if this takes the shape of a “hub-and-spoke” model in which newsroom partners (the spokes) communicate primarily with the backbone organization (the hub) rather than with one another, there may be fewer opportunities for partners to nurture new relationships and co-develop ideas for collaboration. This can undercut the long-term value of collaboration for cultivating working relationships on which to build future collaborative work – particularly new relationships built between staff at mainstream and ethnic outlets who otherwise would not have met.

**The editing process.** Coordinating the editing process across multiple newsrooms can be complicated, particularly when reporters from different newsrooms are working together on stories. In collaborations between ethnic and mainstream media involving multiple languages, the editing process becomes even more complex. For example, a reporter’s intended meaning or nuances may get lost or altered if a story is first written and edited in Spanish, and then translated into English for further editing, before being translated back into Spanish for publication. One bilingual interviewee noted that, in such cases where the reporting will be edited in English, it is easier for her to write the story in English for editing, and then do the final translation herself so that she is able to make sure the story reads as she intended in Spanish.

The editing process can also run into problems when the editor lacks sufficient linguistic and cultural fluency to edit a story. In a four-part series on ethnic and mainstream media collaborations, published by the American Press Institute, Carlos Rodriguez and Daniela Gerson noted tensions that can arise when English-speaking editors work on stories written by and for a Spanish-language publication.<sup>10</sup> They observed that it is not just a matter of understanding the language, but also of understanding the culture and philosophy of ethnic media: “The ethnic press is the product of these groups’ need to have their own voice, and ethnic journalists are often protective of their communities.”

**Cross-posting in multilingual collaborations.** As noted earlier, cross-posting is a benefit of collaboration, enabling newsrooms to provide their audiences with additional content by disseminating stories produced by partner outlets. In multilingual collaborations, the translation requirements of cross-posting can prove challenging. A bilingual collaboration involving Spanish- and English-language outlets would, for example, require all print stories to be translated either from Spanish to English or vice versa. If there is a television partner, translated captioning might be required. If there is a radio partner, the audio or transcript may need to be translated. The translation complexities of cross-posting increase exponentially when a collaboration is trilingual. Rodriguez and Gerson observe another layer of translation that may be needed before cross-posting happens. Describing an example of collaboration between Spanish-language and English-language sister publications, they noted that a story may have a different lede or different contextual details tailored to their respective audiences.

Translation involves costs. As one mainstream media interviewee emphasized, translation costs must be built into the collaborative’s budget, as opposed to being something that ethnic media partners are expected to cover. This interviewee further noted the need to clearly determine potential liability costs of translation. When a story is translated incorrectly, who is liable? This is not simply a question of legal liability, but also a question of what happens when a community perceives an outlet “getting something wrong.” This could bring potential costs in community trust.

## Promising practices

### Helping newsrooms build collaborative muscle

1. **Mutually shape the collaborative's focus to create long-lasting buy-in.** Ideally, newsroom partners are involved at the inception stage, co-developing the overarching issue focus or theme of the collaborative. This kind of mutual approach helps ensure that the collaborative's focus reflects a topic of immediate relevance to the audience that each partner serves. Interviewees emphasized that this is critical to cultivating buy-in and maintaining commitment to keep it going: belief in the importance of the issue to the outlet's audience fuels a sense of mission and investment in the collaborative. In this way, a mutual approach helps ensure the collaborative reflects the needs of communities whom ethnic media serve – and who may not typically be part of the mainstream media's audience. This is important for mitigating power dynamics in which larger news organizations may be in a position to tilt the collaboration towards the needs of their audiences.
2. **Establish a backbone that supports equitable collaboration.** As noted earlier, a backbone organization can help balance resource inequities by supporting communication and coordination and providing dedicated editorial support for the collaborative. For longer-term initiatives, this organization can also sustain the collaborative through turnover in partner newsrooms, maintaining the institutional knowledge needed to read new reporters and editors into the project.

In playing these backbone roles, it is important for the organization to support equitable collaboration. As one interviewee emphasized, the backbone organization can't "bigfoot" newsroom partners; it needs to listen, be flexible, and value the true understanding that newsrooms have of their respective communities. This will foster the strong relationships and trust needed to sustain effective collaboration. Another interviewee observed that whomever plays the backbone role – whether it is one of the newsrooms or an outside organization – they must have the trust of all partners and be able to establish a sense that "everybody's on the same level." In partnerships where there is a risk of partners jockeying over control, it can help if the backbone is an entity perceived as neutral, such as an organization unaffiliated with the partnering newsrooms. This can help establish more of an equal partnership among newsrooms, as opposed to one outlet "driving the show."

## BACKBONE ORGANIZATIONS

### What's needed to be an effective backbone for newsroom collaboration?

A backbone organization can play a valuable supportive role in multi-newsroom partnerships. To effectively support equitable collaboration, backbones need to have certain capacities and qualities, including:

- Trusting relationships with diverse newsroom partners.
- Capacity to carry out administrative responsibilities, coordinate partners, and provide editorial support.
- A collaborative orientation that promotes respectful communication, mutual understanding, flexibility, humility about the limits of one's own expertise, recognition of partners' expertise and understanding of their respective audiences, and mutual benefit for all partners.
- A commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (e.g., staff/leadership diversity, institutional policies and culture, community relationships) and ability to mitigate potential power dynamics among partners.
- Interest in nurturing new relationships between newsrooms that result in lasting connections and future collaborative possibilities.

- 3. Involve partners in collaborative planning.** Partner outlets should be involved early in the planning process to discuss how they might leverage their different platforms to effectively collaborate. This gives ethnic and mainstream outlets an opportunity to brainstorm creatively about how they might co-create stories or elevate one another's work (e.g., by having a print outlet's journalist appear on a broadcast partner's program). Early discussions should also ensure that there is a shared understanding among reporters, editors, and leadership regarding who is expected to do what and how much time reporters will be given to complete stories for the collaborative. As the collaborative work unfolds over time, regularly scheduled meetings can be a helpful mechanism for partners to coordinate coverage and exchange ideas.
- 4. Leverage local knowledge and local angles.** Allow story ideas to be shaped by local reporters and editors who know their own communities. They will have a keen sense of what is most relevant to their community and what stories need to be told. Having a local perspective is important for ensuring that stories resonate with an outlet's audience. Although this may mean that some stories feel less relevant to partners who are in different parts of the state or who have different audiences, interviewees noted the value of layering in data or complementary perspectives help to situate a local story in a broader context relevant across different communities.
- 5. Use partnership agreements to set expectations and hold partners accountable.** State expectations explicitly about who is contributing what to a collaboration. This provides a reference point for holding partners accountable for their contributions. It also can give reporters leverage in assuring that their newsroom gives them sufficient time to carry out their obligations to the collaboration. Agreements should also clarify who has influence over what decisions, and how disagreements will be resolved. The Center for Cooperative Journalism offers a useful set of [sample MOUs](#) for different kinds of collaborations.
- 6. Think ahead about how to best address the complexities of multilingual collaboration.** As noted, multilingual collaborations introduce translation challenges that need to be anticipated and planned for. Rodriguez and Gerson recommend having clear policies on linguistic and cultural translation. For example, they note that the Latino population encompasses diverse regional dialects. These linguistic differences matter. Recalling a time when a video was translated into Spanish for a Mexican American audience, an interviewee described the feedback they received: "Somebody from South America did this translation." The interviewee observed that overlooking this kind of nuance in translation "can be enough to cause [the intended audience] to disengage." Another interviewee emphasized the value of recruiting bilingual reporters, who not only possess the necessary linguistic skills but also have the cultural fluency to access and interview relevant sources. This interviewee suggested that collaborative projects prioritize newsrooms that have bilingual reporters on staff, as opposed to less diverse newsrooms that would need to send an interpreter with the reporter to conduct interviews with relevant community sources. Another good practice: factor in enough lead time for translations. As one interviewee observed, if the translator has experience collaborating with a specific newsroom and has built a trusting relationship, the work will go more quickly with less second-guessing of the translation.

# Implications for funders

## Key considerations for supporting collaborations between ethnic and mainstream media

The findings described above can help the California Health Care Foundation and its media partners anticipate and overcome some of the challenges that have surfaced in – or in some cases prevented – collaborations between ethnic and mainstream media. In this final section, we summarize interviewees' suggestions for key considerations that funders should keep in mind when evaluating opportunities to support collaboration between ethnic and mainstream media.



### What is the goal of the collaboration?

The starting point should be to clearly **identify the goal** or intended outcome. Then consider whether and why collaboration is needed to achieve it. Given inherent challenges and costs, collaboration should not be done for the sake of collaboration. Is this a goal that can be better met when newsrooms collaborate?

If the answer is “yes,” then **determine which outlets are needed to achieve that goal**. This may (or may not) include both ethnic and mainstream outlets. That is, do not assume *a priori* outlets from both sectors are needed to achieve the goal. As one interviewee put it: “Form follows function.” Which audiences need to be engaged to accomplish the goal? How many and which outlets are best positioned to reach those audiences? Do you need to bring together different platforms or mediums? What forms of expertise and source connections are needed to report the stories?

**Consider who gets to decide the goal.** Are partners deriving comparable value from working towards this goal, or is the value gained lopsided? Is there room to challenge assumptions about which outlets are best positioned to achieve the goal? As one ethnic media interviewee commented: “I hope that with collaboration with other media, we can start to open the dialogue about which is the best way to serve these communities. And we can benefit both [media] institutions.”

In addition, weigh the level of input a funder should have in setting the goal – or the issue(s) that the collaborative will focus on. A funder's need to align grantmaking with its priorities has to be balanced against the need for newsrooms to cover stories that are most urgently relevant to their communities. As noted earlier, a driving factor in a newsroom's buy-in and commitment to a collaborative is a strong belief in the relevance of a story to their audience. A collaborative whose funding is earmarked for a narrowly defined issue area can constrain reporters' ability to develop stories and make it difficult for newsrooms to allocate time for covering stories that are relevant to their communities.

In defining the goal of the collaboration, **remember to look at the long game**. One-off collaborations can yield high quality reporting. But as one interviewee emphasized, partnerships should not be treated as a “transactional quid pro quo,” with mainstream and ethnic newsrooms collaborating on a specific task “because money is on the table or somebody has brought them together.” As noted

earlier, collaboration is an opportunity to nurture long-lasting relationships that fuel subsequent collaborative possibilities and opportunities to mutually strengthen partners' coverage. Funding for media partnerships can reflect this **longer-term orientation**, supporting collaborative efforts that foster the kind of strong relationships that continue to yield significant value for all partners over time.



## What relationships, resources, and capacities are needed?

There is **no single “best” model for collaborations** between ethnic and mainstream media. We recommend the [typology of collaborative models](#) compiled by the Center for Cooperative Media. It offers a useful reference point for considering different approaches, varying in the depth of content collaboration and resource sharing between newsrooms, and whether the collaboration revolves around completing a specific reporting project or is more ongoing.

Deciding which model to use depends in part on the goal, as well as which news outlets (and how many) are involved. The decision may also be informed by an assessment of what needs to be in place for a given collaboration model to work well. For example, are there preexisting relationships between newsroom partners? Is there prior experience with collaboration – that is, some existing collaborative muscle? How many languages will be involved, and what translation infrastructure is needed? Is a backbone organization needed to facilitate and coordinate collaboration? Is there enough staff and operational capacity at partner outlets for them to make the expected contributions to the collaborative?



## Are inequities in the journalism ecosystem being replicated?

Funders should carefully weigh the equity implications of decisions about **who receives funding to do what**, taking existing resource inequities into account. As noted earlier, smaller outlets generally have weaker capacity to respond to Requests for Proposals, relative to their larger newsroom counterparts. Funders should consider how grant proposal requirements and practices for evaluating applications may reinforce inequities in the journalism ecosystem, skewing grant awards towards larger operations with strong fundraising capacity. Funders should also be mindful of how a partnership's budget is allocated. In her report on equity in journalism collaborations, Shah suggests that the budget can be distributed equally among partners or by need or size. She further notes the need for budgets to include indirect costs, the funds necessary to “keep the lights on.”

There are also equity considerations in decisions about **who will play the backbone role** in collaborations where this is needed. This role comes with time-consuming and sometimes tedious administrative and coordinating duties. For this reason, one interviewee pointed out, the backbone role may not be coveted. Another interviewee strongly emphasized: there has to be adequate funding to cover the costs of serving as the backbone. Funders can involve newsrooms in the process of selecting the backbone, inviting them to self-nominate if they are interested in taking on this role.

It's important to recognize that the backbone role can also confer power, giving the organization considerable influence over how the collaboration is run and who is asked (or told) to do what. A



default may be to select an organization with strong capacity and valuable prior experience in this kind of coordinating role. That may make sense in some cases, but it can also favor larger newsrooms, reinforcing existing inequities within the journalism ecosystem. One interviewee suggested: rather than directing backbone funding to a larger outlet with existing capacity but perhaps weaker connections to the communities intended to benefit from the collaborative's work, consider supporting a smaller outlet that has a strong record of serving those communities, investing money to build that outlet's capacity to play the backbone role. This could involve providing support to hire one or more staff to take on coordination and editorial responsibilities for collaborative work (or free up existing staff to assume these roles). It may also involve engaging a consultant who can assist the outlet in developing internal processes and systems needed to manage a multi-newsroom collaboration – a form of organizational capacity that the outlet would then bring to similar backbone roles in the future as well.

More broadly, interviewees urged funders to **think beyond the lens of “ethnic and mainstream media collaborations.”** As one interviewee pointed out, framing these collaborations as “mainstream versus ethnic” introduces a power dynamic and “makes a lot of assumptions about what various outlets are capable of, and who and how many people they reach.” Instead, collaboratives can be framed in terms of the communities that they aim to serve or impact – and then identify which outlets can meaningfully report on those communities. Another interviewee suggested that funders should support collaboratives comprised of and led by ethnic media, not just collaborations between mainstream and ethnic media.



## How does collaboration connect to the broader strategy for supporting the journalism ecosystem?

The California Health Care Foundation applies an ecosystem-level lens to its [journalism grantmaking](#), focusing on the capacities, infrastructure, and partnerships needed to support a robust health journalism ecosystem in California. As the foundation, as well as other journalism funders, evaluate opportunities to support collaboration, this ecosystem-level lens usefully draws attention to the broader context that shapes what newsrooms are able (or unable) to do.

As we noted at the beginning of this report, the news industry is struggling, beset by bankruptcies, buyouts, layoffs, and furloughs that have only intensified with the coronavirus outbreak. The situation is particularly dire among ethnic media, many of whom are on the verge of closing. They need general operating support to survive. This **basic level of stability is a precondition for collaboration** – something that the foundation has recognized and acted upon through its recent grants supporting ethnic media.

But beyond this moment of crisis, funders have an opportunity to think strategically about how to structure **long-term support for ethnic media** in ways that build their capacity to engage in collaboration. One interviewee mentioned a funder who had covered the salary of a full-time reporter at a Spanish-language outlet, describing this example as “the most effective investment in capacity building I know of.” As noted earlier, supporting a full-time reporter can give a newsroom the bandwidth needed to engage more fully in a collaborative initiative, enabling the reporter to be on the ground contributing stories to the collaboration. Another interviewee recommended that funders focus on providing general operating support to ethnic media, giving these outlets the freedom to

decide when to collaborate and how. As this interviewee pointed out, a small outlet that receives grant money earmarked for collaboration with a larger outlet may find itself covering stories that align with its partner's interests, rather than the needs of its own audience. Providing general operating support, as opposed to short-term project-based grants, also gives outlets the financial stability and flexibility needed to hire staff and invest in their reporting and editorial capacity. Supporting the long-term sustainability of ethnic media strengthens the collaborative potential of the journalism ecosystem.

## Conclusion

In commissioning this report, the foundation sought to deepen its understanding of the challenges involved in collaborations between ethnic and mainstream media, as well as some of the promising practices and opportunities for supporting equitable and effective partnerships. This learning orientation towards supporting journalism is particularly important at a time when newsrooms are striving to survive new challenges – and develop new solutions in response. As newsrooms adapt and innovate over time, funders should continue to draw on emerging lessons from the field to inform their understanding of how best to support the journalism ecosystem in California.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This estimate of the “ethnic media” sector in California is based on a [directory](#) compiled by Ethnic Media Services. As we discuss in the report, we understand the term “ethnic media” to be widely used in the news industry, and yet it is a problematic term. The definition of “ethnic media” we use in this report reflects our understanding of how media scholars and practitioners define this term (and its limitations). See, for example, the useful discussion and definition offered by Matsaganis, M.D., Katz, V.S., & Ball-Rokeach, S.J. (2011). *Understanding Ethnic Media: Producers, Consumers, and Societies*. Sage Publications.

<sup>2</sup> Gerson, D., and Rodriguez, C. (2017). [How can collaborations between ethnic and mainstream outlets serve communities in the digital age?](#) American Press Institute.

<sup>3</sup> Matsaganis, M.D. & Katz, V.S. (2014). [How ethnic media producers constitute their communities of practice: An ecological approach](#). *Journalism*, 15(7), 926-44.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Lowery, W. [A Reckoning Over Objectivity, Led by Black Journalists](#). New York Times, June 23, 2020; Adams, C. [Where Do Black Journalists Go From Here?](#) *The New Republic*, June 19, 2020; D. Truong. (2020). [Dear newsroom managers, journalists of color can't do all the work](#). The Poynter Institute.

<sup>5</sup> According to the [U.S. Census Bureau](#), approximately 40% of Americans are part of a minority group nationwide. According to the American Society of News Editors [2019 Newsroom Diversity Survey](#) of daily print and online-only news publications, people of color make up 21.9% of the salaried workforce and 18.8% of newsroom managers among outlets that opted to respond to the survey (N=428). Research published in 2019 by the [Radio Television Digital News Association](#) shows an overall increase in diversity among the local TV and radio news workforce over the past two decades, but people of color remain under-represented in newsrooms relative to the U.S. population.

<sup>6</sup> Xiaoqing, R. (2015). [The benefits of collaborating with ethnic media](#). The Poynter Institute.

<sup>7</sup> A recent study of ethnic and community media in New Jersey revealed similar patterns: ethnic media interviewees observed that mainstream media lack an understanding of their communities and tend to report on their communities “only when something bad happens.” Stonbely, S., & A. Advincula. (2019). [The state of ethnic and community media serving New Jersey](#). Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University.

<sup>8</sup> Shah, A. (2019). [In collaborations, who gets paid?](#)

<sup>9</sup> Shah, A. (2019). [Building Equity in Journalism Collaborations](#). Center for Cooperative Media, Montclair State University.

<sup>10</sup> Rodriguez, C., & D. Gerson. (2017). [Family Ties: What sister publications can teach us about collaborations between ethnic and mainstream media](#). American Press Institute.