

McCormick Ethnic Media Conference

McCormick Foundation

McCormick Ethnic Media Conference: Strategies for Growing the Sector

June 20-21, 2008



“McCormick Ethnic Media Conference: Strategies for Growing the Sector” Conference Report

Introduction By Clark Bell

These are good days for ethnic media.

However, like the weather in Chicago, it's hard to predict what lies ahead.

The McCormick Foundation, which has built a broad portfolio of ethnic media grantees, recently convened a group of leaders, educators and media analysts in Chicago to examine strategies for growing the sector.

Ethnic media is one of the few bright spots in American journalism. Print, broadcast and digital outlets serving ethnic communities are growing in audience and advertising revenues. Nearly 50 million U.S. residents are said to depend on the ethnic media as a primary or secondary source of information.

In March 2007, the McCormick Foundation's Journalism Program completed a six-month Media Market Pulse to identify emerging issues and strategies to guide us in our grant-making process. Ethnic media emerged as a sector with significant movement and momentum, yet scant philanthropic attention.

A year later, we were funding 15 initiatives designed to compile, convene, organize, train and learn from ethnic media leaders. We believe that these and other worthy ethnic media organizations can help their audiences become better informed and more engaged in our democratic society.

The Project for Excellence in Journalism's "State of the News Media in 2007" study outlines "the maturation and interest" in ethnic media, but warns of a more complicated future. A meteorologist might say the long-range outlook is for mostly sunny skies with a few patches of ominous clouds.

It was against that backdrop that the 30 conference participants shared their challenges, frustrations, strategies and lessons learned. The group also focused on ways to improve the information ethnic communities receive about public health, emergency preparedness, personal finance and a host of other relevant issues.

Some of the participants have worked in ethnic media for 20 years. Others are newcomers. But all share a commitment and passion to bolster this special brand of journalism. And they agreed

on the need to enhance the online presence and quality of journalism produced by the ethnic media.

We asked veteran Chicago scribe Lloyd Sachs to cover and report on the event. While Sachs has earned laurels for his Chicago Sun-Times editorials, magazine jazz reviews, news reporting and stylistic feature writing, he had limited knowledge about ethnic media. We purposely wanted this report written by a sophisticated outsider. After digesting the ground covered at the conference, Lloyd crafted the crisp, analytic examination of the sector. Thanks for a job well done.

I'd also like to thank my staff for handling the logistics, content and flow of the conference. Aaron Smith did his usual solid job of coordinating the travel, hotel and catering arrangements. Sara Melillo, who oversees our digital media initiative, created a wiki for the conference. And particular thanks to Mark Hallett, who laid the groundwork and provided the leadership for our ethnic media expansion. I am honored to work with these dedicated professionals.

We look forward to your comments on the conference report, as well as the video snippets that we've posted on YouTube.

Sincerely,

Clark Bell
Journalism Program Director

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**“McCormick Ethnic Media Conference: Strategies for Growing the Sector”
Conference Highlights**

**By Lloyd Sachs
July 2008**

This is a watershed moment for ethnic newspapers, magazines and broadcast outlets serving communities across the United States.

Five years after the McCormick Foundation awarded its first grant in ethnic journalism to the Bay Area-based Pacific News Service, the wide array of Hispanic, Polish, Jewish, Japanese, Arabic and other ethnic media has become a primary source of news for fully a quarter of American adults.

The growing strength of the ethnic media sector comes at a time of struggle for the mainstream media. Advertising revenues for daily newspapers, for example, are predicted to nosedive 15 percent this year. Most daily papers have responded with sizable staff reductions.

Meanwhile, ethnic media have grown dramatically in circulation and revenues. According to data gathered by the Latino Print Network, Hispanic print ad revenues rose above the \$1 billion mark for the first time in 2006, up 13 percent from a year earlier. In addition, The State of the News Media 2008 report, produced by the Project for Excellence in Journalism, said Spanish-language broadcast also experienced a strong 2006, with Univision breaking a company record for net income at \$349 million, an increase of 86 percent from a year earlier.

Ethnic media provides focused, specialized news and information to millions of Americans. Although the sector is thriving, it remains fragile and largely splintered. Local businesses responsible for the bulk of advertising support may not sustain that level of commitment if the economy continues its downward spiral.

There are other obstacles, including a shortage of ethnic media reporters with solid training and experience in journalism. “We’re racing to keep up with their needs,” said Sandy Close, one of the most respected veterans in the campaign for ethnic media, during the “McCormick Ethnic Media Conference: Strategies for Growing the Sector.” The event – a convening of McCormick grantees working in this sector - took place in Chicago June 20-21, 2008.

As executive director of Pacific News Service, Close in 1996 launched New America Media, the first and largest network of ethnic news organizations. Her “racing to keep up” statement referred to the ethnic news organizations, journalism schools and citizen advocacy groups represented at the conference. The same is true for the McCormick Foundation, which now funds more than a dozen such projects across the country.

The McCormick conference drew 30 leading figures in the field from coast to coast and from Morgantown, W.Va., to Austin, Texas. From the start, it was clear there is no shortage of passion, energy or ideas supporting ethnic media. And there is, by all accounts, an equal hunger among ethnic news organizations for the training, resources and capacity building that can lead to improved performances and larger profiles.

Among the pressing needs Close and her fellow attendees flagged were:

- + Promoting and empowering ethnic media, which are frequently ignored or given short shrift by public agencies. That leads to lack of information and access for the communities served by the ethnic media.
- + Bolstering the sector’s visibility by creating ties among ethnic news outlets and strengthening their connections with mainstream media organizations.
- + Training and developing ethnic journalists, whose organizations frequently lack staff development resources.
- + The crucial task of assisting more ethnic media with their online capabilities. An estimated 70 percent of community newspapers do not yet have a Web presence, and many lack the technology to go online.

While the challenges are formidable, the ethnic media can be proud of its role in informing audiences about the immigration policies and proposals that continue to disrupt lives and divide the nation. It is these news organizations that speak directly to communities deeply impacted by the immigration debate. The number of U.S. residents who speak a language other than English at home rose from 23 million in 1980 to 55 million in 2006. That’s nearly 20 percent of the nation’s overall population.

These Americans appreciate the kind of steadfast, ongoing, detailed coverage of stories of great importance to their communities. While the mainstream media covers the political debate and breaking news about immigration, most lack the manpower or interest to cover stories about labor abuses and housing inequities.

In the communities where ethnic journalism thrives, staff reporters and citizen reporters are seen not only as more committed to the news that concerns their constituents, but also as more objective than the mainstream media in covering it.

“Community reporters have great credibility because they operate in a fishbowl,” said Cristina Azocar, director of the Center for Integration and Improvement of Journalism at San Francisco State University, one of the panelists addressing “The State of Ethnic Media.” “They couldn’t get away with inaccurate reporting. They would be called on it.”

Ethnic media are hardly new kids on the block. The Latino press in America is marking its 200th anniversary this year – *El Misisipi*, the first Spanish-language newspaper in the U.S., was published in New Orleans in 1808. *The Chicago Defender*, which serves the African-American community (which sometimes gets overlooked in discussions of ethnic media) was founded in 1905.

But the recent growth of this sector, both in terms of dollars and importance, is remarkable. The Community Media Workshop at Columbia College Chicago offered one striking example of that growth: Ten years ago, Teleguia de Chicago, whose properties include the Spanish-language newspaper *El Imparcial*, earned \$500,000. Today, its annual revenue is nearly \$2 million.

El Imparcial is one of 66 Spanish-language publications in Illinois that command a combined circulation of nearly 1.7 million, according to the Latino Print Network. And 17 other ethnic news organizations in Illinois are involved in publishing or broadcasting. “I think this is going to be an endless growth,” Teleguia de Chicago owner and publisher Zeke Montes told *Illinois Issues*, a publication of the Center for State Policy and Leadership at the University of Illinois at Springfield.

Whether or not Montes’ forecast proves accurate, there can be little doubt that as the ethnic population in this country surpasses 65 million, ethnic media will be an imposing force. How imposing and how influential, though, will be determined by the ability of community publications and broadcasters to gain similar levels of recognition and respect that the mainstream media receives.

A 2007 survey by the Independent Press Association found that government agencies, notably the Department of Homeland Security and the Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services, were frequently slow to return phone calls or provide information to members of the ethnic media.

Federal and local authorities have made little attempt to work with the ethnic media to dispense information in emergencies such as earthquakes and floods and health threats such as outbreaks of *E. coli*. It took the 1989 earthquake in California for that state to enact the long-discussed proposal requiring emergency communications to be multilingual. Conference participants agreed that pressure from ethnic media is a useful tool in getting government agencies to communicate with non-English-speaking citizens in such situations. A study by Texas State University is examining how well prepared Texas and Illinois cities are to communicate with non-English speaking citizens during emergencies.

Unification efforts by ethnic media leaders have led to regional hubs and a developing national AP-type network that wasn’t conceivable a few years ago. The networking has helped the ethnic media gain political clout and the ear of public officials. For example, New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg appointed a staff member to meet with members of the New York Community Media Alliance. Juana Ponce de Leon, director of the alliance, also heads the National Grassroots Media Project.

Identifying and energizing ethnic media’s many and varied members is critical in developing such important connections. As it is, many small ethnic newspapers are known only by readers they serve in their respective communities. According to Close, only in the aftermath of

Hurricane Katrina did members of the African-American, Hispanic and Asian-American media in the New Orleans area begin group discussions.

The good news, as related in the panel discussion, “Building the Sector Through Directories, Networks and Online Portals,” is that in many states, real progress is being made in building Web sites and databases listing the ethnic media. Some of the projects represented at the conference included:

- + EthnicNewz (operated by the Center on Media and Society at the University of Massachusetts at Boston), which samples ethnic media in New England;
- + The Twin Cities Daily Planet (managed by the Twin Cities Media Alliance), which features work by community-based reporters in the Minneapolis-St. Paul area; and
- + The annual Chicago area media guide (which includes a directory of ethnic media contacts), published by the Community Media Workshop.

Hayg Oshagan, a communications professor at Wayne State University in Detroit, said more than 150 ethnic media organizations operate in Michigan. In 2006, he brought together leading editors from Michigan’s biggest Arabic, Korean, Latino, Jewish and African-American newspapers. They formed a board to promote ethnic media via public affairs programs and a proposed major conference on ethnic media this fall in the Motor City.

One of the complications of network-building is that the individual media groups, which routinely take very different editorial stances, can be antagonistic toward each other. And that isn’t only the case with, say, Arabic and Jewish publications divided by their outlook on Israel and Palestine. In Michigan, Oshagan said, the 14 Arab media don’t get along. But recognizing their ability to command more attention and exert more clout as a group, they are working hard to overcome their differences.

The lack of an online presence is a more difficult problem. In many communities, radio coverage may be the best that ethnic media can currently do technologically. Online shortcomings limit the ethnic media’s use of blogging and video postings that could spotlight the issues and cultural practices of communities.

Victor Merina, a former *Los Angeles Times* investigative reporter, who serves as special projects editor for Reznet News, showcased the potency of digital coverage. This online news source for Native Americans is administered by the University of Montana and staffed by Native American students. Merina guided conference participants through a compelling feature on the site about the Houma tribe of southeastern Louisiana.

He said the mainstream media paid scant attention to the devastating impact of Hurricane Katrina and Hurricane Rita on Native Americans. Before the violent storms, 40 percent of the Houma lived below the poverty line. Reznet coverage detailed the tribe’s post-storm struggles in the most touching human terms by opening windows to their culture.

To build a Web presence is to build bridges among ethnic media and to the “mainland” of mainstream media. Without a Web presence, ethnic media organizations also lack the ability to attract potentially lucrative Internet advertising.

Improved coverage also is a key ingredient for success. While conference attendees saluted the ethnic media for bulldog coverage of unfolding issues such as immigration, they also confronted the sector’s reputation of being amateurish and lacking in objectivity.

“Standards can be so low, their credibility is in danger,” said Luis Botello, senior program director at the Washington, D.C.-based International Center for Journalists. He was on the panel,

“J-Schools and Ethnic Media--Discovering a New Role in the Community,” which focused on the strengthening of ethnic media through partnering with journalism schools.

Some of the universities represented at the conference were:

- + University of Missouri-based Investigative Reporters and Editors, which conducts workshops on investigative reporting techniques for ethnic media journalists.
- + West Virginia University, which is teaming new media-savvy students with weekly newspaper editors in Appalachian communities.
- + University of Miami, which is studying news outlets reaching Haitian enclaves in South Florida.

These efforts give students opportunities to learn the craft by shadowing professionals and, as with Reznet, to become familiar with cultures they wouldn't otherwise be exposed to. That makes for better reporting in all communities.

Beyond nuts and bolts journalism, ethnic media are gaining skills in accessing and acquiring information from city, county and state agencies. That's where such groups as the Citizen Advocacy Center, based in the Chicago suburb of Elmhurst, and the California First Amendment Coalition, based in San Rafael, Calif., come in. They are schooling community journalists in the use of tools such as Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests and the legal methods of monitoring government activities.

In the end, the success of ethnic news organizations will depend on their abilities to acquire and pass on information that has crucial bearing on the audiences they serve. Equally profound is how ethnic audiences react and give voice to the information. Citizens need to assert themselves as free Americans, change false perceptions of who they are, and connect to the world through what Sandy Close called “a global local lens.”

Ethnic media have arrived at a moment of tremendous potential. Focus groups report great enthusiasm among community media organizations for lessons in staffing, mission development and technological upgrading. The McCormick Foundation's Mark Hallett prescribed “philanthropic acupuncture” for what he calls “a movement in motion.” If the Ethnic Media Conference is any indication, that movement is marked by boundless pride, energy and determination.

SIDEBAR: What is the “Ethnic Media”?

For some, it's pretty much a case of ‘you know it when you see it.’ With titles like *Filipino Express*, *Polish Daily News* and *Noticiero Colombiano* – you're talking ethnic media.

Others have delved deeper to craft a working definition.

Sandy Close, executive director of New America Media, who describes Southern California as a “Hispanic ocean, where other ethnic groups are little islands,” says the definition for her comes down to audience and function. If the audience is defined by race, ethnicity, origin – then the news organization is part of ethnic media. (“Of course youth media explodes all those lines!” she adds.)

In terms of function, there are three key questions, she says.

- 1) Is the media the premier public voice of the community?
- 2) Does the news outlet mirror the everyday concerns of the community (as opposed to promoting a brand, for example)?

3) Does the ethnic media organization help community members navigate the bigger culture? (“Is it an umbilical cord to the larger culture?”)

Jon Funabiki, a journalism professor at San Francisco State University, asks a similar set of questions:

- Who or what is the producer (a newspaper company, Yahoo!, Univision)? Is it a for-profit, nonprofit, religious group, a hybrid?
- Is the journalistic product the main product of this company, or a sideline?
- Is the journalistic product produced for a specific, definable ethnic, immigrant, cultural community? And is the journalistic product produced by those living in that community?
- How does the producer define the product or mission (journalism, advocacy, etc.)?
- And how does the producer define its relationship to the community?

Usually, he says, each answer is not a concrete yes or no, but rather points along a continuum.

Most experts working with ethnic media seem to lean toward a more inclusive definition. The black press is always included, for example. And, for some, the LGBT media can be a strong presence. (Close describes the gay press in Northern California as “another large island of its own.”)

Publication frequency is an issue, with Funabiki adding that some regular pace of publication or distribution has to take place that separates the media from reports, pamphlets and other communication platforms.

In terms of political perspective, the ethnic sector in America represents a wide variety of political leanings - from firebrand Zapatistas to conservative Vietnamese media.

Independent ownership is not a defining issue for Close. “If you use that yard stick, 75 percent of the Hispanic media is not independent.”

More important, she says, is gaining more respect from the “Big Four”: Government, Big Business, Philanthropy and the Academy.

That admirable challenge is why she so enjoys working with this sector: “The ethnic media are hungry, they’re not cynical. They want to be visible and they want to develop partnerships.’

- Mark Hallett