

report

Local Voices Network

To: Reynolds Journalism Institute
From: Max Resnik and Linda Miller
Date: Nov. 11, 2020
Re: Conversations on Inclusive Economies and Media Ecosystems

Summary

Building Inclusive Economies and Media is a cross-sector collaboration between [Local Voices Network](#) and [Reynolds Journalism Institute](#) aimed at helping communities strengthen local economies and local media amid a public health pandemic, calls to address systemic racism, and a news ecosystem buckling under pressures from both. The goal is to produce a toolkit for creating community dialogue that sparks new thinking and actions for making local media and local economies more inclusive, resilient, and community-centered.

The first phase of the project took place in Madison, Wisc., July-August 2020 and involved creating online spaces where local residents, journalists, business owners and economic development experts could find common ground around issues of economic inclusion. The small group conversations were recorded and uploaded to the Local Voices Network platform, where reporters, community partners and participants are able to search the transcripts and highlight stories and themes that they think deserve more attention.

The event produced five takeaways that will guide future conversations:

- 1) **Find the right partners.** While news organizations may have the clout to host a gathering about the local economy, allowing a third party to convene conversations allows journalists and news leaders to step outside the more comfortable role of interviewer and facilitator and participate as stakeholders.
- 2) **Set clear expectations for participation.** Let partners and participants know that their presence is requested in a process that may involve a series of meetings or other follow-up activities. Not everyone will be able or interested in participating over time, but the folks who are invested (from city government, Black or Latinx chambers of commerce and the newsrooms) will understand that they are being asked to join in partnership over the course of several meetings and months.
- 3) **Compensate participants.** Providing a modest stipend demonstrates that people's insights and lived experiences are valued. We provided participants with \$25 gift cards to local businesses and restaurants. Feedback we received showed that participants appreciated that the convenings were not only positive for connecting community members and reporters around a shared goal, but supported the local economy in the process.
- 4) **Create clear deliverables and multiple entry points for participation.** With news organizations and small businesses struggling to survive, making time to participate in a process without a clear goal or deliverable requires some trust from community members. We weren't sure what the result of the conversations would be before starting and that hindered our ability to recruit participants.
- 5) **Trust building and idea generation take time.** Don't expect that one meeting will suffice to rebuild broken lines of communication and result in new product ideas rooted in trust and equity.

This report explains the context out of which the Inclusive Economies and Media conversations emerged, our process for creating inclusive conversations, insights gleaned from the conversations, and lessons for the future.

With Crisis Comes Opportunity

When COVID-19 shuttered businesses and devastated the economy, more than 30 states deemed journalism as an essential public service in disaster orders, putting local news outlets on par with hospitals and grocery stores.

Yet there are troubling ironies to this moment. The pandemic and the ensuing economic shock have [greatly accelerated the loss of local news](#) that has been occurring over the past two decades, even as local media have emerged as [critical sources of information](#) for people trying to navigate the growing public health and economic crisis. While local news is considered critical to the health, economic and civic success of a community, [local news organizations are an afterthought](#) in economic development conversations.

The sustainability of local journalism is tied to the strength of local business and both have been rocked by a deadly pandemic and roused by nationwide rallies for racial equity. In creating blueprints for a post-pandemic recovery, communities across the country are increasingly looking to implement inclusive growth strategies that dismantle institutional racism, reverse the disparities caused by it, and create an economy that benefits all Americans. An economy that systematically excludes entire communities, neighborhoods, and populations from opportunity is simply not sustainable, and failure to confront that fundamental truth threatens the ability of people and places to thrive, and the vitality of the country as a whole. Local media, too, are reckoning with a lack of diversity in those who create and inform the news, and their failure to reflect the realities and experiences of non-rich people in narratives about the economy.

The post-pandemic economic planning processes now underway in communities across the country provide a critical opportunity to address the role of local media in documenting the recovery and creating a more accurate and inclusive narrative of economic prosperity overall -- but also to examine the community's obligation to support and sustain a robust and resilient local media ecosystem capable of contributing to a vibrant and inclusive economy.

To that end, RJI teamed up with LVN and [Downtown Madison Inc](#) to invite local business owners and journalists in Madison and Dane County to join in conversation about reimagining the local economy and the role of local media in that economy. The conversations are part of a larger RJI project [exploring the links](#) between rebuilding local economies and futureproofing local media, including how to incentivize local conversations and experiments that help newsrooms build deep, reciprocal relationships that generate community-led solutions, revenue streams and business models to ensure their survival.

The timing and theme of the Madison conversations were informed by the concurrent events of the COVID-19 pandemic and the racial justice rallies following the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis. Both events have magnified the prevalence and painful reality of structural racism in America, the deep-seeded disparities caused by it, and the news media's complicity in perpetuating those systems.

When the local business community is unwelcoming, discriminatory or lacking in diversity, the economy suffers. Racist policies and discriminatory practices against Black Americans alone have cost the country \$16 trillion over the last 20 years, according to [research by Citigroup](#) economists. Inequity, lack of competition and exclusion also results in fewer underwriters, advertisers and event sponsors supporting local journalism. Likewise, a lack of diversity and systemic bias in the news businesses corrupt the mission of journalism, reinforce systems of oppression, and produce narratives that are inaccurate, incomplete and injurious to a more equitable economic recovery.

When the default economic narrative is written by, for and about White people, it can't help but contribute to public ignorance about the true extent of racial economic inequality. And that ignorance has important consequences for public policy.

With this project, LVN and RJI aims to show how community dialogue and convenings that allow the space for local media, local businesses and economic development planners to find common ground around issues of economic inclusion can spark new thinking and actions that help the community and local media to thrive.

Changing Narratives

The LVN and RJJ teams chose Madison for Inclusive Economy and Media Ecosystems conversations for several reasons.

First, the city in south-central Wisconsin is home to a number of local news outlets, from nonprofit digital startups like [Madison 365](#) and [Wisconsin Watch](#), to legacy print newspapers like the [Cap Times](#) and [The Isthmus](#) – all of which are in desperate need of a more sustainable business model. The latter, a beloved alt-weekly, nearly went out of business in March due to the loss of ad sales, and reporters at the Cap Times were cycling in and out of furlough seven months into the pandemic.

Second, Local Voices Network has an established presence there, having spent the past 18 months building a volunteer network of facilitators capable of hosting community conversations among community members and local journalists.

Third, the popular narrative of Madison fits a well-worn pattern in that it mostly reflects the experiences and perspectives of its white-majority population. The city consistently [ranks among the best places](#) to live in the U.S. despite being a place where:

- Unemployment among Black residents is twice that of whites;
- People of color represent approximately 27% of the population but only 3-9% of business owners;
- 90% of black owned businesses were either ineligible or denied loans under the CARES Act.

Right before the city shut down in March, the Cap Times highlighted how [racial disparities have only gotten worse](#) ‘despite decades of reports, task forces and funded programs.’

But telling a more inclusive story of the economy requires more than pointing out racial disparities. Journalists need to interrogate the systemic segregationist policies and practices that create and sustain the conditions for those disparities to exist and persist, and also give more attention to what is working and why.

Likewise, creating an inclusive economy involves more than making existing policies and practices less racist and more equitable. It requires investments that increase productivity and prioritize [wealth creation](#) among the nation’s most vulnerable populations and establishing community conditions that are favorable for them to compete in an [innovation economy](#). Only then can they own an equitable share of the American dream of prosperity and contribute to the overall [economic competitiveness](#) of the country.

Designing Inclusive Conversations

A true economic recovery, say researchers at the Brookings Institution, “demands a more integrated, community-led, place- and people-centered approach that builds on community strengths and dismantles structural inequity.” That same philosophy is also driving some of the most impactful [new models for journalism](#) – models rooted in community needs, human-centered design and deep listening.

These concepts are core to the work of [Cortico](#), a non-profit founded in 2017 to build systems that bring under-heard community voices, perspectives and stories to the center of a healthier public dialogue. In 2019, Cortico launched the Local Voices Network in Madison at the height of a contentious mayoral race, bringing together small groups of four to eight people for facilitated discussions about what matters most to them in their communities and the nation. LVN trains community members, journalists and local civic participants to convene and facilitate conversations grounded in the local, lived experience of conversation participants. The conversations are recorded, transcribed and made available to political candidates, policy makers, the news media and others seeking to hear and understand the perspectives and experiences of community members.

Conversations might focus broadly on hopes and concerns, or be more topically focused; but the common qualities are surfacing the values driving individual participation, sharing personal experiences that inform thoughts and feelings about their communities, and engaging in meaning-making through reflection.

In designing the Inclusive Economy and Media Ecosystems conversations, it was important to use a strengths-based, community-led and solutions-oriented approach. We acknowledged early on that any experiments aimed at creating more inclusive economies that sustain inclusive media and vice versa needed to arise from the community. We were not looking to convince the unready and unwilling, instead the aim was to meet people who were interested in this conversation and to lay the groundwork for locally focused next steps.

Downtown Madison Inc. was the perfect coordinating partner for our launch conversation. For more than 40 years, DMI, a nonprofit advocacy and membership organization, has worked to support a thriving downtown in Madison. DMI serves more than 450 members and [prioritizes inclusivity](#) in that work. DMI hosts regular membership lunches and meetings and allowed RJJ and LVN to tap into their infrastructure to recruit and convene community business and economic development leaders in conversation.

We sent a general invite to DMI's membership for an Aug. 17 lunchtime conversation via zoom about creating a more inclusive economy in Madison. We also sent personal invites to all of the news organizations LVN has worked with in town (print, digital, radio and television).

In all, 30 Madisonians RSVPed for the launch event and 17 people participated. They represented small business owners, finance and credit unions, local ministry, the Madison Public Library, City of Madison economic development staff and reporters from public radio, the legacy print paper and a digital startup.

For the discussions, the LVN team generated a conversation guide designed to surface the experiences of participants relating to inclusivity and business ownership in Madison during the pandemic. The guide also prompted participants to reflect on how their community and local economy were reflected in local news.

The event lasted 105 minutes -- 75 minutes of small group conversation with an additional 30 minutes for introductions and wrap-up. The conversations were uploaded to the Local Voices Network platform, where reporters, community partners and participants are able to search the transcripts and highlight stories and themes that they think deserve more attention.

In setting the stage for the small group conversations, the LVN team shared statistics about contraction in the media industry and data about BIPOC business ownership in the community and closures during the pandemic. Then, participants were split into three breakout groups of 5-6 people for more community-focused and facilitated conversations.

The discussions evolved around the following prompts:

- a) Please share a bit of background information about yourself, a value you hold dear, and how that value relates to what brought you here today?
- b) Think of a time in your life when you felt seen, heard, and understood, and your perspective was valued. What was the impact of that moment for you?
- c) What strengths has COVID-19 revealed or uncovered about the Downtown Madison business community - including local media - in regards to equity and inclusion? Share a story or example from your experience that will help us understand a little better.
- d) What challenges or needs has COVID-19 revealed or uncovered about equity & inclusion in the Downtown Madison business community? Share a story from your experience to help us understand this a little better.

Facilitators then played one of the following recordings from previous LVN conversations and invited participants to share any insights, reactions or memories that came to mind:

- July from Voces de la Frontera in Milwaukee shares her concern for her family's health as essential workers
<https://app.lvn.org/highlight/245373>
- Yair from Madison reflecting on losing most of his income due to COVID
<https://app.lvn.org/highlight/153938>
- Shirley tells a story of experiencing racism at a restaurant in Madison, WI - <https://app.lvn.org/highlight/454850>
- Monica is hopeful because of the support for black owned businesses in Madison, WI -
<https://app.lvn.org/highlight/454845>

Following the breakout sessions, participants returned to the main room to reflect on their conversations, discuss their vision for an equitable and inclusive downtown Madison economy, and offer thoughts about what might we need to build or change to achieve this vision?

Mining for Insights

Each conversation raised unique and overlapping issues faced by local businesses and local reporters, but three important barriers to inclusivity surfaced in all groups:

1. Access to Capital: PPP Loans were inaccessible to many minority business owners in Madison. Baltazar works with immigrant business owners and [shared how CARES Act loans were widely inaccessible](#) to members of Madison's immigrant community. Carrie, who works in finance, [shared similar experiences](#).
2. Access to Transportation: Lack of transit, [according to Martin](#) a librarian at the Central branch of the Madison Public Library, prevents poor residents of Dane County from feeling able and welcome to patronize downtown public spaces. Access to transportation [is inequitable across Dane County](#).
3. Unjust policing: Across several conversations, participants highlighted the importance of rethinking the role of local law enforcement. [Experiences like Rodrigo's](#) are common and result in [de-facto segregation downtown](#).

Another important theme, across all the conversations, was the role of local media in documenting challenges like the three above themes and, as the city and county begin to reopen, in connecting the dots between equity and inclusion and the future of the local economy. The role of local media in documenting and contextualizing the impacts of the pandemic and the Movement for Black Lives was noted by participants in all of the breakout groups. They [expressed appreciation](#) for sites like Madison365 that [center voices and stories of people of color](#) and general gratitude for the variety of news options available. Reporters who participated in the conversations expressed gratitude to join members of the business community in dialogue.

Next Steps:

We see these conversations as a critical step in a larger process of building trust, creating a shared set of goals, and designing and testing solutions that are rooted in principles of inclusive competitiveness and geared toward building sustaining inclusive local news and information ecosystems. Such solutions need to generate locally, but we believe that with the help of national partners, RJI and LVN can scale these efforts and create a community of practice that shares knowledge and contributes to best practices.

That culture is one where local reporters and publishers, in conversation with members of the business and economic development community:

- Honestly address their role and strengthen their value in the local economy;
- Learn to interrogate the narratives they produce and the impact of those narratives on people's lives and on economic policy;
- Create new narratives that are more accurate, equitable and community-centered.

Ideally this process should begin with a 'community health report' assessing the health of both the local economy and the local information landscape. The local news partner(s) would have an opportunity to assess their ability to report on the local economy and the challenges they face in sustaining their business. We would then gather the community members who would most likely be affected by changes in reporting, in this case BIPOC business owners and entrepreneurs.

In Madison, we're inviting a select group of participants from the August conversations to reconvene with the intent of surfacing solutions and piloting ideas related to inclusive competitiveness. We'll also develop a second conversation guide focused on idea generation around the themes raised in the previous conversations.

Finally, the Local Voices Network and RJI project team will create a guide for local newsrooms to produce a community economic and information health report and to convene conversations that build trust and surface opportunities for collaboration. These conversations will lead to a more focused group dialogue designed to elevate pilot ideas that address the local business and media ecosystem. A third and 'final' project gathering will assess the efficacy of the pilots generated and feed into subsequent reports, convenings and product cycles.