EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As 2020 saw a pandemic, census, and election converge on New York City, a visionary action by the local government saved one of the city’s most powerful — and long overlooked — tools of civic engagement: its community media sector. A May 2019 executive order mandated that city agencies allocate at least 50 percent of their print and digital advertising budgets in the trusted news sources of the New Yorkers their public information campaigns most needed to reach. In its first year of implementation, the executive order far outperformed its own expectations, delivering 84 percent of the budget, nearly $10 million, to more than 220 outlets serving New Yorkers in every neighborhood in all five boroughs in 36 languages besides English.

This funding couldn’t have come at a more critical time, as community media outlets lost their primary sources of revenue and distribution systems when local businesses shuttered during the lockdowns to contain COVID-19. This initiative is the first and only time a local government has marshalled this existing resource and reinvested it in its community media, and could prove a valuable model to localities nationwide.

The Center for Community Media located at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism launched the Advertising Boost Initiative (ABI) in January 2020 to act as a liaison between community media outlets and city agencies, as well as the advertising agencies they engage. ABI Program Manager Darlie Gervais connected publishers in community media with city agency marketing directors and ad agency representatives, developed training and consultative resources to help them prepare for city advertising, and kept them apprised of upcoming city advertising campaigns. She supported city agencies by familiarizing them with the diversity and reach of the city’s community media outlets. This is ABI’s independent report on this extraordinary success story.
Here are some of our key findings:

- In fiscal year 2020, New York City agencies placed $9.9 million worth of advertising in print and digital community media outlets (print and digital make up 75 percent of the sector) out of a total budget of $11.8 million.

- This amounted to 84 percent of the city’s total print and digital advertising budget, compared to 18 percent in 2013, when the Center for Community Media conducted our first study of equity in city agency advertising.

- The city has approved 233 community media outlets to receive funding from city agencies. More than 220 outlets received funding under Executive Order 47 in fiscal year 2020. CCM maintains and updates our own directory of more than 300 community media outlets in the New York City metro area.

- Fifty outlets in CCM’s directory received advertising from the city for the first time ever.

- More than 185 outlets saw dramatic increases in their ad revenues from city agencies, and many saw jaw-dropping increases, with one increasing by 32,000 percent.

- In spring 2020, CCM conducted a survey of community media outlets and 84 percent of respondents reported losing advertising revenue from local businesses, and at least a quarter of these by more than 75 percent. City advertising largely replaced this lost revenue.

- In fiscal year 2020, 47 outlets in the city’s directory of community and ethnic media received between $10,000 and $30,000 from city agencies; 28 received between $30,000 and $50,000; 37 received between $50,000 and $100,000, and 19 received more than $100,000 from city agencies. Seventy-six received $10,000 or less.

- Compared to 2013, more funding went to more outlets, and from more city government agencies. In fiscal year 2013, four city agencies spent 50 percent of their print and digital advertising budgets on community media outlets. In fiscal year 2020, 35 agencies achieved this 50 percent threshold.

- The community media in New York are a vital source of news for communities of color and for the 3.1 million immigrant New Yorkers, almost 37 percent of the city’s population.
INTRODUCTION

About the Advertising Boost Initiative

On May 22, 2019, New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio signed Executive Order 47, mandating that city government agencies spend at least 50 percent of their print and digital advertising budgets on community media outlets. This unprecedented action was the culmination of efforts by the de Blasio administration prompted by a 2013 study by the Center for Community Media (CCM) at CUNY’s Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism (Newmark J-School), which found that just 18 percent of city advertising dollars went to the community-based outlets most likely to reach the intended audiences of public information campaigns.

In January 2020, CCM launched the Advertising Boost Initiative (ABI), a unique collaborative and consultative program designed not only to help community-based outlets access their fair share of city agencies’ advertising budgets, but to also support city agencies’ marketing staff and external advertising agencies in their efforts to reach the communities they intend to serve. The program has effectively brought a group of 110 outlets serving communities in all five boroughs into active collaboration with 51 city agencies and departments and the advertising agencies they’ve engaged. In essence, it has established a new, symbiotic public information and civic engagement ecosystem.

ABI has proven a valuable partner to the city in realizing the sweeping vision of EO 47, which, in its first year has seen nearly $10 million channeled to outlets facing an existential threat amid the COVID-19 pandemic. This cash infusion surely benefited these outlets, but it also delivered to city agencies a powerful tool for reaching the people it most needed to reach during a devastating public health crisis, a fraught census season, and a profoundly consequential election.
The most trusted news sources for marginalized and vulnerable New Yorkers have long remained underutilized by city agencies. CCM’s ABI played a central role in familiarizing city agency staffers with the outlets serving the very communities and neighborhoods they needed to reach, and in giving those outlets the tools and contacts they needed to receive city ads.

Our independent analysis, based on city government data and individual interviews with publishers, shows that this first year of EO 47’s implementation has been a resounding success: in the current fiscal year, city agencies placed a total of $9.9 million worth of advertising in community media outlets, amounting to nearly 84 percent of their total print and digital ad buys. More than 220 community media outlets received advertising revenue from city agencies.

Outlets in the CCM directory account for the bulk of EO 47’s beneficiaries, with 50 receiving advertising from city agencies for the first time. More than 185 outlets saw an increase in advertising dollars from city agencies, compared to fiscal year 2019. In the majority of cases, ad revenues from city agencies doubled, tripled, quadrupled, or more. One outlet went from receiving some $200 worth of advertising from city agencies in 2019, to receiving more than $70,000 in 2020, enabling it to not just stay afloat, but to invest in the staffing and equipment it needed to provide critical coverage for its audience.

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84%
Percent of city print and digital ad budget spent on community media in fiscal year 2020.
This robust and significant influx of New York City government advertising dollars could not have come at a more critical time: as the city went into lockdown, many local businesses could no longer advertise in or distribute community publications. In an early assessment after the pandemic hit we found that the loss in commercial advertising was as high as 75 to 100 percent for a great number of outlets. Community media outlets were forced to furlough or lay off employees and journalists, suspend printing, and many contemplated closing altogether.

“In March, we all thought we were going out of business,” says Garry Pierre-Pierre, publisher of the Brooklyn-based The Haitian Times which serves Haitian American communities across the Greater New York City region.

At the same time, digital outlets and websites for print publications saw drastic spikes in traffic as the worst-hit communities turned to their most trusted sources of information. City advertising revenue has been the lifeline that kept many of these outlets open — and in turn has equipped thousands of New Yorkers unreached by mainstream, commercial outlets with the information they needed to navigate the crisis.
Across the board, publishers who participated in ABI say that the influx of city advertising revenue they saw in this first year since EO 47 not only kept them in business during lockdown, it helped them respond to the growing demand and need for reliable information and reporting relevant to their communities.

In the first month of the pandemic, Brooklyn’s largest local news site, BKLYNER, lost 100 percent of its advertising revenue from local businesses, just as its daily site visits doubled. “Those [city ads] were the only ads we had when everything else shut down and all local business ads disappeared,” says Liena Zagare, its editor and publisher. She used 95 percent of the revenue from city ads to pay for the kind of reporting that brought so many readers to her site: intimate, specific stories informed by granular knowledge of Brooklyn’s many and varied neighborhoods – and the needs of the people who live there. “All the numbers almost exactly doubled in March – visitors, pageviews, engagement. We had a record number of almost 600,000 visitors,” Zagare says.

During the spring, Haitian American communities saw among the highest rates of infection and death from COVID-19, even as they also contributed a large segment of the city’s front-line and essential workforce. City advertising revenue replaced The Haitian Times’ lost income, allowing the outlet to invest in sorely needed technologies and hire new reporters. “There has been a huge uptick in advertising, mainly from the census and COVID-19 related campaigns,” says Pierre-Pierre, its publisher. In fiscal year 2019, The Haitian Times received barely $200 in city advertising, but received more than $73,000 in 2020, under EO 47.
This income allowed The Haitian Times to respond in creative and meaningful ways to the COVID-19 crisis with original reporting on a community rarely covered in mainstream, commercial local media, and also enabled it to respond to the summer’s national Black Lives Matter protests, highlighting the perspective of Black immigrants, overlooked in national race coverage, and serving as an information hub for an affiliated movement for Haitian women and girls.

“We were able to hire freelancers to beef up our coverage, to increase the hours of our social media director and to bring on a managing editor as well as a copy editor,” Pierre-Pierre says. “We hired three reporters; one full time, in addition to funding our part of the Report for America fellow who is on staff,” he added.

He was also able to invest in equipment and software to facilitate and streamline communications and workflow in the now-remote context. “It is our hope that we continue to get advertising from the city regularly next fiscal year,” Pierre-Pierre says. “The Haitian Times hopes to develop our video capacity as a means to boost advertising revenue.”

Maria del Carmen Amado publishes three newspapers serving Spanish-speaking and Latinx communities in all five boroughs of New York City and in New Jersey: New York Hispano, Westchester Hispano and New Jersey Hispano. Amado is no stranger to financial struggles that come with managing any business with very little money.

When the New York Hispano newspaper was launched in January 2019, Amado focused on editorial and news coverage and did not emphasize generating revenue for the publication. “Although advertising sales have fallen in our media, we have been able to create other forms of income, to cover our operating expenses and continue with the newspapers,” she says. Then, just as things were looking up, COVID-19 struck, decimating the outlets’ advertising revenues.

Amado launched a web and graphic design business from her newspaper offices to support their journalism, but struggled to run two small businesses during a recession. She feared she’d have to suspend print and lay off staff, but EO 47 delivered additional income; New York Hispano received for the first time $10,350 in city advertising for fiscal year 2020.

“The advertising orders we have received, despite the fact that it has only been from the COVID-19 program, has helped us to continue publishing without stopping. It has been used to pay our staff, and part of the printing costs of the newspaper.”

– Maria del Carmen Amado, New York Hispano
The advertising orders we have received, despite the fact that it has only been from the COVID-19 program, has helped us to continue publishing without stopping," says Amado. "It has been used to pay our staff, and part of the printing costs of the newspaper."

Since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, the New York City-based South Asian Times lost much of the commercial advertising revenue it relied on, but its staff wanted to keep printing the newspapers. "The revenue from New York City agencies was like a lifeline for our newspaper," says publisher Kamlesh C. Mehta. "It helped us tremendously, especially when other advertising revenues declined by over 90 percent. Because of it, we continuously produced, printed and distributed the newspaper during the toughest time in lockdown. We remained open and functional." The South Asian Times is a weekly print and online publication that serves Indian and South Asian communities in the greater New York region and worldwide. It is published by Forsythe Media Group LLC.

Michael Babwar, publisher of Caribbean Times News, a family-owned newspaper serving Caribbean American communities in Flatbush, Brooklyn, credits revenue from EO 47 with keeping his family's newspaper in business. In fiscal year 2020, Caribbean Times Newspaper received more than $25,000 in advertising from the city's census office and health department. "The health and the census ads helped me to stay in business," he says.
Through EO 47, the city has marshalled an existing and readily available pool of resources toward building up one of its most under resourced: its community media sector. While many advocate for new sources of government funding to save local media, what this initiative did was to identify and redistribute a sizable line item in the city’s budget to help the city align its spending with its governance goals.

Overlooked and disenfranchised by traditional local news organizations, New York City’s many immigrants and communities of color have long turned to their own outlets for more in-depth and comprehensive coverage of their communities, and often in languages besides English. The Directory of Community and Ethnic Media and the Mayor’s Office of Operations use a list of 233 community media outlets publishing online or in print, which serves to guide all city agencies as they seek to place advertising consistent with the goals of EO 47.

This list is maintained by Jose Bayona, the Mayor’s Director of Community and Ethnic Media, a role created in 2014 as part of the city’s efforts to reach all New Yorkers and to improve accessibility to city resources. “The main role that this position plays, working in coordination with the Mayor’s Office of Operations, is to make sure that City agencies are aware of the diversity of our community and ethnic media citywide, all the different options these outlets offer to disseminate the administration’s message, and offering continuous guidance to city agencies on planning their campaigns and spending their resources, which because of this pandemic are more limited these days,” says Bayona.
CCM publishes its own directory of New York City community media outlets, called Many Voices, One City. While there is significant overlap between the city’s community media list and ours, we do regularly update our directory to reflect a constantly evolving community media landscape. Our most recent directory was published November 30, 2020, a searchable database of more than 300 outlets serving every neighborhood in all five boroughs, publishing in 37 languages. We are working closely with the city to consolidate our lists into a single, comprehensive, citywide community media directory.

In New York City, local and community media are crucial news sources for communities that remain largely untouched by a traditional, commercial news media that rarely covers their communities with sensitivity, intimacy, or meaningful context, and may not offer information in a language besides English. Community media have loyal and growing audiences within the city and beyond, yet publishers in this news sector have struggled to keep up with the rising demand for their journalism. Since CCM was founded in 2012, we have heard from publishers in New York City community media that the continued migration of advertising dollars to online platforms has made it more and more difficult to sustain their news operations.

In March 2013, the Center for Community Media published a report titled “Getting The Word Out: How and Where New York City Advertises,” written by professor Sarah Barlett, who has served as dean of Newmark J-School since 2014. The report sought to shine a light on the process by which city government agencies disseminated their messages through advertising in the more than 270 community media outlets CCM had identified, that served the communities and neighborhoods it wanted to reach. The report found that just 18 percent of New York City agency advertising budgets were spent on advertising campaigns in this media sector. The remaining 82 percent of city agency advertising dollars were earmarked for mainstream publications.

CCM’s 2013 report offered an alternative approach to the city’s advertising policies, recommending the creation of a diversified advertising program, in which a percentage of the city’s advertising budget would be dedicated to community publications. For the first time, this report offered the data to prove the inequitable — and ultimately counterproductive — distribution of city advertising dollars, as well as concrete policy guidance to ensure that city advertising campaigns not only reached their intended audience, but that an essential segment of the city’s media landscape would receive the income it sorely needed in order to keep those very audiences informed.
**A MORE EQUITABLE DISTRIBUTION OF AD DOLLARS**

EO 47 went even further than the recommendation laid out in CCM’s 2013 report, mandating that at least 50 percent of the print and digital advertising budgets of city agencies, as well as the Departments of Education and Housing, and NYC Health + Hospitals, be allocated to qualified community media outlets. In its first year, city agencies easily eclipsed the 2013 levels of placing just 19 percent of their collective advertising budget in community media, and surpassed even the 50-percent target established in the executive order, according to city data that was not independently verified by CCM.

“Before becoming Mayor of New York City, de Blasio worked extensively with community and ethnic media as a [city] council member [in Brooklyn] and public advocate, and also during his mayoral campaign, and he understands the importance of these outlets for the communities and how they play a key role in disseminating the administration’s messages,” says Bayona.

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**Digital and Print Ad Spending on Community Media**

The percentage of the city’s print and digital budget spent on community media has increased from 19% in fiscal year 2013 to 84% in fiscal year 2020.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
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<tr>
<td>2019</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2020</td>
<td>84%</td>
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</tbody>
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*Notes: Year over year analysis is based only on data collected from the City-certified vendors.

Source: Mayor’s Office of Operations
By the time Mayor de Blasio issued EO 47, government agencies had already started shifting their advertising toward community media. In fiscal year 2013, the city data show, it spent $850,000 on advertising in community media outlets. That number increased to $2.74 million by fiscal year 2018. That year, the city spent 49 percent of its total advertising budget on community and ethnic media, which grew to 66 percent in 2019.

What EO 47 did, rather, was create the imperative to not only increase community media’s share of city advertising, but to ensure that advertising was distributed equitably and effectively within the sector.

In partnership with CCM’s ABI, advertisers within the city government were able to reach out to a wider range of outlets and the communities they served. This first year of EO 47’s implementation saw a larger share of the city’s advertising budget go to the community media sector as a whole, and also channeled that larger total budget toward a far greater number of outlets.

Bushwick Daily, an arts, culture, and community news outlet that has been serving the Brooklyn neighborhood of Bushwick since 2009, was only able to continue to publish through the pandemic because of the advertising from city government agencies, says its publisher Alec Meeker. Bushwick Daily received about $30,000 in government advertising in FY 2020, up from about $1,000 the previous year. “The funds kept the publication alive because I was able to pay for some freelance writers,” says Meeker.

Bushwick is one of Brooklyn’s largest neighborhoods, home to many diverse communities that have historically been undercounted in the census, underrepresented in the electorate, and untouched by many city resources even as parts of it undergo rapid gentrification. The neighborhood also remains largely underserved by traditional, commercial media.

Weekly Dunya International publishes in both English and Urdu and serves Pakistani Americans in all five boroughs and in the Greater New York City region. A once thriving community, New York City’s Pakistani population declined drastically amid the post-9/11 immigration crackdowns, which also sowed seeds of distrust in government and mainstream news sources.
Today, the Pakistani population is growing once again across Brooklyn and Queens, and in an effort to serve this community better, the city government began offering services in Urdu in 2017. As of this year, under EO 47, city advertising has a greater chance of reaching Urdu-speaking New Yorkers through Weekly Dunya International.

Manzoor Hussain, the outlet’s executive director, says that the outlet received significantly more city agency advertising in 2020 compared to 2019. “City government agencies advertising money helped us in a big way to open our outlet during the pandemic,” said Hussain.

Weekly Bornomala International serves New York City’s Bangladeshi Americans, a rapidly growing and increasingly politically engaged community.

Many Bangladeshis are concentrated in and around the Queens neighborhoods of Jackson Heights and Elmhurst, the epicenter of the city’s spring 2020 COVID-19 outbreak. This year, at least eight Bangladeshi New Yorkers ran or are running for political office at the city, state, and national levels. Weekly Bornomala is a well-loved outlet in a vibrant Bangla news system, featuring several print and digital outlets, television channels, newsletters, WhatsApp channels, podcasts, and more, serving a multi-generational and mixed-status community with many front-line and essential workers during the pandemic.

Despite the appetite for Bangla-language news, the need for print publications in a community with many members on the other side of the digital divide, and the growing demand for Weekly Bornomala’s services, the outlet ceased printing in February 2020, becoming a digital-only news portal offering news in both Bangla and English. Mahfuzur Rahman, its publisher, says, “At the time of the pandemic most of the community business could not spend money with us. The city agencies advertisements helped us very much during the crucial time of April until July.” Weekly Bornomala received $34,400 in city advertising in fiscal year 2020, compared to approximately $5,400 in 2019.
City Agencies Spending 50% or More on Community Media

Number of agencies that spent 50% or more of their annual print and digital ad budgets on community media by fiscal year.

Queens Latino has served Latinx communities in the borough since 2010, including those in Jackson Heights where they comprise 56 percent of the population. A diverse community hailing from more than 19 countries and Puerto Rico, Latinx New Yorkers were disproportionately represented in both the essential workforce and the city’s COVID-19 death toll. Javier Castaño, the outlet’s director, told us he received more Department of Health advertising campaigns in fiscal year 2020, and that this influx of revenue helped keep his business running. “I have paid reporters, photographers, I was able to keep the website running,” Castaño says. Queens Latino continued its print publication through the pandemic.

This first year of EO 47 has seen an increase in both the total percentage of advertising campaign budgets as well as in the number of agencies that have met the 50 percent threshold. In 2013, just four city agencies spent 50 percent of their advertising budgets in community media, according to city data. In 2017, the number of agencies rose to 12 and then to 15 in 2019. In fiscal year 2020, 35 city agencies spent more than 50 percent of their advertising in community media.

All in all, 40 agencies spent money on ads in community media in fiscal year 2020, but certain agencies spent significantly more than others. Ten agencies, including DOHMH, Health + Hospitals and the Mayor’s Office of Immigrant Affairs – account for $8.7 million of the $9.9 million total.

Community Media Advertising 2020 by Agency

A city breakdown of 40 agencies shows a range of spending from $3.8 million by the DOHMH to $77 by NYCHA. Here are the agencies that spent more than $100,000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Agency</th>
<th>Amount (in $)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Department of Health and Mental Hygiene</td>
<td>9,797,413</td>
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<tr>
<td>Census</td>
<td>1,877,407</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and Hospitals</td>
<td>982,011</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mayor's Office of Immigrant Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Social Services</td>
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<td>Department of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department for the Aging</td>
<td>257,771</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office of Emergency Management</td>
<td>211,841</td>
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<tr>
<td>Public Engagement Unit</td>
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<tr>
<td>Democracy NYC</td>
<td>158,989</td>
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<tr>
<td>Administration for Children's Services</td>
<td>135,153</td>
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<tr>
<td>Department of Transportation</td>
<td>124,566</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications</td>
<td>100,812</td>
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</table>

Charts Source: Mayor’s Office of Operations
Since its launch in January, ABI has worked with 110 New York City-based and community media outlets to make sure they are well positioned to get their fair share of city ad dollars. These outlets opted in to the ABI by filling out a survey. CCM works with the entire community media sector and though those publishers who filled out the survey have received our individual support and assistance, ABI has advocated for all the sectors in our communications with city officials developing ad campaigns and deciding their placement.

Throughout fiscal year 2020, ABI has worked to help prepare participating community media outlets to successfully win and place city government advertising with training, coaching, and professional consultation, directly assisting 25 outlets in receiving city ad money for the first time. ABI has paired community-based newsroom leaders and publishers with coaches, who work with them individually to help them create professional and effective media kits, which many lacked before. It has created a unique guideline for outlets that includes critical information and best practices.

ABI participants tell us that the program has not only coincided with increases in ad revenues — many outlets have seen their revenues from city advertising increase exponentially — but they have also increased the number of advertising campaigns, and from a greater number of city agencies. This increase in type and quantity of city ads has not just increased the news outlets’ revenue — it has helped them engage and grow their audiences.

“The biggest challenge for small publications is that usually, one person does it all. Having more revenue allows more flexibility and the possibility to create better and more content,” says Issou Diouf Campbell, the publisher of Africa in Harlem, a first-time city government advertising recipient. The publication received $26,000 in city advertising money. Africa in Harlem, formerly Afrikanspot, is a multilingual community news site documenting and celebrating the African immigrant and African Diaspora’s culture, experience and contribution in Harlem and beyond.
A cultural capital of Black America, Harlem is also home to many large and growing immigrant communities from across Africa and the Caribbean. The neighborhood’s thriving Little Senegal saw major losses in its restaurants, shops, and beauty salons that employ not just Senegalese immigrants, but immigrants — including refugees and asylum seekers — from Gambia, Ethiopia, Cameroon, Liberia, Sierra Leone, Cote d’Ivoire, Guinea, and more. Community outlets like Africa in Harlem are a source of joy and hope for communities navigating the multiple pressures of COVID-19, harsh immigration and asylum policies, and systemic racism — and under EO 47, they also found useful city resources there.

Campbell was able to hire a part-time reporter to help with covering events. She said part of the money will also be used to pay for more help a few hours here and there, whether it is an editor, a social media assistant or a photographer.

Al Hawadeth is a digital outlet serving Arab American communities across New York City. It was a first-time recipient of city advertising in fiscal year 2020 and received $18,000 in ad revenue. Its general manager, Rima Qasim, said the income she received gave her hope that she can continue publishing and educating her community. “The income we received helped us with our operation expenses,” she says. “It helped us with rent and we were able to improve our website by hiring a part-time website producer, which is helping us to actively report on local and regional news.” Like many community outlets, Al Hawadeth relied on advertising revenue from small businesses in the community, much of which was lost during the lockdowns to contain the COVID-19 outbreak.

Forum Daily, a 20-year-old publication, serves the more than 1.6 million Russian Americans in the New York tri-state region. It never received city advertising dollars before this year, says Advertising Director Marina Baranchuk. Under ABI it has now benefited from several city advertising campaigns for more than $30,000. “In the new COVID reality, we are experiencing an audience growth, and we also keep getting more and more requests to cover more topics,” says Baranchuk. “Nowadays, we publish 25 articles per day, minimum. This would be impossible if we were to cut our team payments because of the tremendous loss of earnings.”

Baranchuk says that, as soon as the outlet lost most of its advertisers early in the pandemic, its CPM on Google and Facebook also dropped off significantly. She credits city government advertising with her staff’s survival in the pandemic. “We were able to keep our team, to work with freelance journalists and to publish some valuable editorial content,” she says. “We made minor changes on our website to improve its visibility. Because of all of this we were able to grow our reader’s audience even during this hard time.”
COVID-19 has dealt a deadly blow to Brooklyn’s Orthodox Jewish communities. COLlive has served these communities since 2008. The outlet has received $51,500 under ABI, says its advertising director, Yossi Soffer. Soffer likens this windfall in ad revenue to divine bounty. “The NYC advertising budget was a God gift. During the shutdown, the funds helped our cash flow and helped us keep business moving and even increase our reporting effort. We expanded our budget to keep up with the COVID-19 updates and helped the community to stay connected,” he says.

“The NYC advertising budget was a God gift.”

- Yossi Soffer, COLlive

Uptown Collective, serving communities from East Harlem to the northernmost tip of Washington Heights since 2010, has also received its first ad buys from city agencies, for more than $14,000. Led Black, its publisher, says, “The city revenue has put actual dollars into the coffers.”

Part of ABI’s mission is to create transparency around the use of the city advertising budgets and the criteria they use to place advertising campaigns in community media. ABI also advocates on behalf of the community media as an accountability partner with the city government and advertising agencies that make their ad buys. In this role ABI strategically collects data and compares it with the publisher’s own account; our data, which covers 2013 to 2020, comes from the Mayor’s Office of Operations and self-reported figures from participating outlets. The initiative opened a conversation with city agencies to help them identify the media outlets serving the communities they most want to reach with their ad campaigns.

“In the past it was difficult to reach advertising agencies working on behalf of the city,” says The Haitian Times’ Pierre-Pierre. “As a result, we were unable to make a case for our publication. However, these days agency reps are more responsive and there is a dialogue going on. I would say that the advertising boost initiative is the direct reason for the change in attitude and hence the increase in our advertising.”

“I think the most effective stuff [this initiative] has done is talk to all the city agencies on our behalf and educate them about our relevance, and the mandate. It is greatly appreciated,” Zagare from BKLYNER says.
Sunil Tristar, co-publisher of eMalayalee.com, a Malayalam-language outlet serving communities originally from the southern Indian state of Kerala, did not receive advertising under EO 47. Anywhere between 50,000 and 150,000 Malayalam speakers are estimated to live in and around New York City, many of whom work as nurses or other front-line workers during the ongoing pandemic. It is yet another community within a larger community – in this case, the Indian and South Asian American community – with its own trusted news source. Tristar says he is working on a new editorial plan to keep his community abreast of the activities of the different New York City agencies. “We need some sort of support to stay afloat and continue to strive to share the news and info to the people who need it in our community,” Tristar says. The digital outlet eMalayalee, along with the IndiaLife TV, IndiaLife.US and Pravasi Channel, are part of an integrated merging cluster of outlets serving the socioeconomically, linguistically, and ideologically diverse Indian community in New York City.

Even those outlets that saw sizable increases in advertising in 2020 have expressed concern that this revenue stream may not prove reliable or sustainable. Hussain of Weekly Dunya International says he believes the increase in ad revenues resulted from an urgent need to reach out to different communities during the COVID-19 crisis and the census. He fears that this record-breaking income will not continue. “For a weekly like us, we only get some advertising boost during the pandemic but not on a regular basis when we compare with the previous years,” he says.
CONCLUSION

As New York City became the global epicenter of the COVID-19 pandemic, public health agencies used local and community media to share information and guidance to ensure that it reached as many communities and neighborhoods throughout the city as possible. The convergence of the health crisis and the financial crisis unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic on the community media sector has exposed the deep fissures that have undermined their financial stability for years. It has also drawn attention to the vital importance of accurate and timely information about health, education, work benefits, voter registration and voting, and other public services to every community and neighborhood across all five of the city’s boroughs.

“I expect that city officials recognize that trusted local journalism is a requirement for a functioning democracy,” says Bushwick Daily’s Meeker. “Local city officials should be aware of and learn about the local publications in NYC and their depth of reach, and they should make it clear what they plan to do to support the local independent news sources in NYC,” he added.

Weekly Bornomala’s Rahman expresses the concern that the government agencies may overlook small local news organizations like his in the future because of their difficulty in demonstrating a large audience. “My community is a small community, but when they try to measure my outlet with a standard online portal, it is a great problem for me to get regular advertisements. As a small community, visitors are not like other big communities.”

Campbell underscores that the city should plan for a long-term effort to build lines of communication — and trust — through the trusted news sources in communities across the city. “Even if the audience gets the message, they might not react the way the City expects them to because there is no trust.”
Without a permanent, reliable stream of funding, this media sector will continue to struggle to attain the strong financial footing necessary to experiment with and develop new business models that will allow them to adequately address the local news deficit in their community.

“I hope that based on this Executive Order of Mayor Bill de Blasio, the print and digital media that serve the five boroughs of NYC, we can continue to receive advertising, to continue offering the information services that our communities need so much in the city from New York,” said Amado.

The government agencies’ pioneering efforts to advertise in community outlets and build lines of communication hold promise, but the challenge is finding a way to keep their efforts in years to come. There is a critical need for more public funding of local and community news outlets.

The Center for Community Media, based at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York (CUNY) serves as a hub of information, resources and training aimed at increasing the sustainability of the local and community media sector.

*CMM used to be called Center for Community and Ethnic Media until the summer of 2019 when we dropped the term “ethnic” because many publishers felt it was marginalizing.

**Community and Ethnic Media is the term used by the city to identify local and community media outlets. Executive Order 47 defines them “community and ethnic media” as “any print or digital publication that is created for communities of people based on native language, race, color, gender, national origin, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, disability or immigrant status; targets a discrete neighborhood, or a geographic region, or a population that may or may not typically receive information from mainstream publications because of their exclusive use of foreign language.”

***CPM or cost per mille refers to the price advertisers pay on every 1,000 impressions. Impression refers to when someone sees a campaign on a digital platform.

Analyses in this report were made using data provided by the Mayor’s Office of Operations. The data covers city agency ad spending on community media from fiscal years 2013 to 2020. Some of the report calculations were derived using the city’s directory of qualified print and digital media, others were calculated using CCM’s directory and a third set was done using a list of ABI participants. We also used data from publisher interviews which did not always coincide exactly with city data.
ABOUT

The Advertising Boost Initiative is a project of the Center for Community Media at CUNY’s Newmark J-School. Launched in January 2020, its project manager is Darlie Gervais. CCM’s executive director is Graciela Mochkofsky.

This report was written by Darlie Gervais and Christine Mckenna, and edited by Kavitha Rajagopalan. The website was developed and designed by Christine Mckenna.

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