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The Media Consortium 2008: Project Successes and Lessons

The Media Consortium has experienced extraordinary growth in 2008. We launched four dynamic projects, shored up organizational infrastructure, and began articulating a vigorous future for independent media. In 2007, The Media Consortium had two part-time staff and had started two projects. Today, we have two full-time and four part-time, project-based contractors, and 50 organizational members. We have also developed and fine-tuned the purpose, mission and ultimate strategy of The Media Consortium as a movement-building and sector-strengthening organization.

The Media Consortium is now the space for progressive media and allies to strategize, collaborate, and launch projects that are transforming the independent media sector. The Media Consortium has several projects that have launched or are in development, nearly all of them generated during Consortium-facilitated discussions and meetings among member organizations. Each of our strategic projects is tied to one of The Media Consortium's three basic target areas in 2008: **Building Connections, Infrastructure, and Voice.**

Building Connections

Member Meetings

On May 5 and 6, more than 65 members, friends, and allies converged in Denver, Colorado for The Media Consortium's eighth membership meeting. The two-day meeting focused on action.

We debuted several key projects including **“Live From Main Street,” “The MediaWires”** project and the **Online Advertising Network** (all described below) during the Denver meeting. In the form of member-organized "Media Labs," small groups were formed to provide in-depth peer-to-peer assistance sessions focused on Web 2.0, advertising and marketing ideas and questions. Last but not least, Tracy Van Slyke, Media Consortium Project Director, and strategic consultant Tony Deifell, president of Next Consulting, led two large-scale brainstorming sessions focused on surfacing key questions around the progressive media landscape. Four small-groups emerged:

- Strategic Collaborations/Multi-purposing Content
- The Big Game Changer
- Ad Revenue Opportunities
- Threats and Opportunities of New Demographics

On both the first and second days, the break out groups focused on creating a central question of inquiry around each issue, outlining the top three reasons that it was a priority, and identifying the key questions around this issue. These central inquiry questions and sub-questions have been integrated into the organization's strategic process throughout 2008.

Denver was selected as the meeting site in advance of the Democratic National Convention. This created a unique opportunity to learn more about the changing dynamics of the region and its larger impact on the national landscape. Local media and organization representatives discussed how the region acts as a microcosm for issues including immigration, environmentalism, and progressive organizing, and also discussed the role of progressive and mainstream media. In another session, local organizers and activists were brought in to discuss Media Consortium members' coverage, organizing and logistics as they prepared for the DNC.

The MC List Serv

When the Media Consortium was first taking shape, there were few places for progressive media leaders to interact, build deep professional relationships, and address larger structural issues. The connectivity tools launched at the founding of The Media Consortium have borne fruit. The listserv is used to solicit ideas and convey updates

on Media Consortium activities, projects, and events. It is also a place for members to share ideas and information with each other. In the latter part of 2008, the listserv has served as a key resource to facilitate action, dialogue, and collaboration around Media Consortium projects.

Members and allies are also sharing information that has led to non-consortium collaborations. Based on a thread from our listserv, MoveOn.org turned the Department of Health and Human Services attempts to re-brand contraception as abortion into an email-based action.

"The MC has played a central role in this collaboration," wrote Amy Newman, Managing Editor of RH Reality Check "[By] working with Move On, Public News Service, [RH Reality Check] and others, MoveOn was able to gather 325,000 signatures for this action, and RH Reality Check saw our largest number of readers in one week and one of our most successful series of feature stories/articles in the history of our site."

The listserv continues to be a hotbed of discussion and up to date reports. Members and allies used the listserv to inform and organize during the arrests of journalists (including Media Consortium members Democracy Now, The Real News, Public News Service, and The Uptake) throughout the Republican National Convention.

Infrastructure

Creating Progressive Media "Game Changers"

The very core of The Media Consortium is to advance and strengthen the progressive, independent media sector. Our members agree that now is the moment to think and act big. Thanks to this energy, Media Consortium Project Director Tracy Van Slyke and members of the Coordinating Committee have worked closely with consultants Tony Deifell and Nicole Boyer to craft the direction of our strategic research and development project which has centered on the creation and implementation of "game changer" projects. We define game changers as:

Developments (projects, initiatives, strategies, new models, innovations) that "change the game" for independent media by increasing its impact and influence in the next five years. By definition, these aren't incremental strategies, but rather big bold moves that the TMC could develop or take advantage of in a rapidly changing media landscape.

In addition to integrating many of the questions and ideas that came out of the May meeting, Tony, Nicole and Tracy interviewed all Media Consortium Coordinating Committee members and several outside experts in the fields of media, technology, politics, and financing. These interviews provided perspective on current opportunities, challenges and uncertainties for the sector as well as new possibilities for The Media Consortium and its members to significantly impact and change the landscape. This information formed the base of a two-day strategy meeting in July for Coordinating Committee members.

Outsiders were invited to the meeting to provide "outside-in" thinking, which is useful in breaking internal groupthink dynamics as well as provide additional information and perspectives. Our guests included:

- Art Kleiner, Editor-in-Chief, Strategy+Business magazine
- Mitty Owens, Senior Deputy Director, NYC Office of Financial Empowerment, former program officer at Ford Foundation
- Mike Stanton, Publisher, The Bond Buyer (leading daily newspaper of public finance)

This was the first round of game changing strategy brainstorming. The game changers strategic exploration and development process will continue through the year and will include input from all Media Consortium members and additional outside experts. The process intends for members to think outside of their everyday activities and to shift into creative brainstorming.

The end product will be three new game changing project ideas. These ideas will be laid out in a dynamic presentation coupled with short report that places the game changers within a strategy framework. We are excited to develop and produce tangible member-driven projects that will significantly shift the media landscape in the not-so-distant future.

Online Advertising Network

Over the last few years, the rise of online advertising has drastically changed business models across the entire media sector. While many independent media outlets are building out their online advertising capacity, these

changes can be costly to implement, technologically difficult, and due to the smaller web presence of some organizations, do not offer guaranteed returns on such a hefty investment. Successful web advertising strategies do have the potential to generate significant amounts of income, however the field is often difficult to parse and even harder to navigate. The solution? Build an advertising network that pools the collective inventories of Consortium members to make a highly marketable package.

In February, The Media Consortium hired the consulting firm Marketechnique to explore opportunities in building an online ad network for progressive media outlets. Marketechnique and Media Consortium staff interviewed 10 MC members around their current advertising platforms, needs, and revenue opportunities. The Media Consortium also conducted a survey of the entire network, assessing the interest and viability of forming an online advertising network. Results included:

- 26 organizations have a total of 4,549,753 unique visitors and 55,776,186 pageviews per month.
- 24 organizations have email products that go out around once a week, reaching approximately 1,002,671 names. Of those 26 respondents, 12 offer ads on their email products.
- 12 respondents currently offer ads on their websites and three to four are interested in incorporating them.

During this time, Marketechnique surveyed the larger online advertising space and evaluated both the viability of a Media Consortium ad network and what would be needed to build it. Marketechnique created a presentation and report around the current online advertising sector and implications for Media Consortium members at the May Meeting.

Armed with this information, we determined that there was a potential significant opportunity for The Media Consortium to help members move into the online advertising network space. Also noted was that certain Media Consortium members needed support in developing their online ad sales strategies. Media Consortium members AlterNet, Air America, Mother Jones and The Nation came together as the founding outlets for a progressive media ad network. MarketTechnique and Media Consortium staff continued to work with the Consortium and the ad network's founding members through July. These four Media Consortium members are now advancing the network. This is a great milestone--we are so excited to be empowering our members to take lead on projects that benefit the whole, not just one organization.

Voice

MediaWire

The Media Consortium has partnered with Common Sense New Media to launch its "MediaWire" project using Common Sense's existing NewsLadder technology and distribution tools. We have built a series of one-stop shops offering the best in "progressive, independent media" on these topics. We also are providing a reporting resource for journalists, organizations, lawmakers and their staffs, and bloggers on these specific issues.

NewsLadder.net site is the aggregation spot to find TMC member content organized by specific issue. All Media Consortium members have a special "tmc" icon next to its content to differentiate it from other content on the site. Users are also able to vote the content up and down and are also able to post their own content on the site. The Media Consortium is currently sponsoring three newsLadders:

- John McCain: <http://johnmccain.newsladder.net/>
- Immigration: <http://immigration.newsladder.net/>
- Healthcare: <http://healthcare.newsladder.net/>

TMC member content is also being filtered into: Iraq (iraq.newsladder.net); Troop/Veterans issues (ourtroops.newsladder.net), Criminal justice reform (justice.newsladder.net) and Environmental/Sustainability issues (sustain.newsladder.net).

Along with the consortium-sponsored NewsLadder sites, we have built out new ways to share and distribute the content among MC members and to new audiences. Widgets featuring MC member headlines (and links) are available for MC members and organizations to place on their own sites. In addition, these widgets have been built to integrate into the Media Consortium's Facebook page, members and organizational Facebook pages and individual profiles. The Facebook page also includes opportunities for MC members to post their own events,

videos, and other content--a meta-Facebook page for the entire progressive media sector. Facebook will be accompanied by regular Twitter feeds that will also distribute the content.

Last but not least, original weekly blogs will round up the "best of/most interesting" journalism by MC members on these three topic areas. These posts will be available to all MC members and posted throughout the blogosphere. A weekly email also goes out to newsladder e-newsletter subscribers promoting MC member content.

Live From Main Street

Live from Main Street (www.livefrommainstreet.org) is a tour of the U.S. in Election Year 2008, hosted by GRITtv's Laura Flanders and produced by The Media Consortium. In five months, Live from Main Street (www.livefrommainstreet.org) will feature five town halls, each focusing on a key national issue through a local lens. The town halls are broadcast on multiple radio and television channels and written about in print and online outlets. While Live from Main Street had a separate budget, The Media Consortium allocated \$60,000 and significant staff time on strategic development, fundraising, and management. Live from Main Street's goals are to:

- Strengthen progressive, independent media infrastructure through innovative partnerships
- Engage new and existing audiences with quality, independent news and information
- Inspire political participation
- Change the tenor and scope of election coverage
- Highlight important local/national issues

To date, Live from Main Street has had three tremendously successful town hall events in Minneapolis, Miami and Denver. Each provided unique opportunities for local and national partnership, collaboration, and movement strategizing from both inside and outside of The Media Consortium. Clips from all the Live From Main Street town halls can be found at livefrommainstreet.org or youtube.com/livefrommainstreet.

Materials from the town halls are available for open source distribution among Media Consortium members, allies and partners to virally disseminate around the Internet for maximum impact. Members of The Media Consortium are also producing original content connected to the issues of each town hall. Our members have also participated in "Housing Investigation Week" in advance of Live from Main Street Miami—and we're looking forward to the results from the investigation week focused on Voting Rights and Election Protection for our fourth town hall.

Live from Main Street has partnered with national outlets and groups including MoveOn.org, Free Press, FireDogLake, and many others to publicize and disseminate this content. Local groups and partnerships range from Progress Ohio to the Miami Worker's Center. We have heard from many local community members and attendees who are excited that independent media is paying attention to the issues and people that the mainstream media has ignored. Live from Main Streets town halls have been covered in local radio interviews, newspaper articles and blogs. We're successfully propelling vital issues to new levels of media and public awareness.

"At 'Live from Main Street Miami,' local citizens had a chance to voice their concerns – speaking directly to those responsible for elements of the crisis through a representative from Countrywide Mortgage who was on a LFMS panel-and offering innovative solutions for how to deal with the economic crisis," said Live from Main Street Producer Tracy Fleischman. "In addition, Live from Main Street Denver' served as a unique kick-off event for the DNC, giving local and national progressive leaders a chance to put forth a real agenda for change for the DNC. It was streamed live on a dozen Media Consortium member web sites and blogs. Over 500 people attended the event. LFMS Denver truly gave a platform to the voices of everyday Americans."

We'll wrap the project up in October with "Live from Main Street Seattle: Women on Real National Security," which will take a much-needed look at what real national security means to women. What makes American women feel secure-is it our military or our social policies? At the conclusion of Live from Main Street, we will do an analysis of how this project succeeded and lessons learned that will help inform future Media Consortium projects.

Syndicated Reporting Project

After many consortium members noted that they did not have the resources to cover specific beats on an ongoing basis, The Media Consortium launched a syndicated reporting service that has become an innovative model of open-source journalism creation and distribution. In July 2007, The Media Consortium hired reporter Brian

Beutler as its Washington Correspondent to cover Congressional Oversight and National Security. In early 2008, we hired Adele Stan as Executive Editor of this project.

There was a lot of excitement about this project within the first six months of its launch. Thanks to RSS and hyperlink technology, as well as to Brian's reputation within Washington D.C.'s progressive blogging community, the articles have moved from members' sites to the larger public. Beutler's and Stan's stories have been published by seven Consortium member organizations, including AlterNet, *ColorLines*, *In These Times*, *Mother Jones*, *The American Prospect*, *The Progressive*, and the Women's Media Center. In addition, Beutler's and Stan's reporting has been linked and quoted by a number of blogs and websites including Slate, The Atlantic Online, Care 2, Common Dreams, Huffington Post and Talking Points Memo.

While this was an exciting for the initial launch phase of the project, over time we did not see a rise in the number of Media Consortium members picking up the content. The structural barriers included internal resources and policies along with differing needs (reporting, analysis, issue beat, audio, video) of member organizations.

Based on the output of the strategic retreat in New York, the Syndicated Reporting project will be temporarily closing shop at the end of September as we develop new opportunities to support and strengthen independent reporting. In addition, due to health reasons, Brian Beutler has stepped down from his position.

But this is not the final end of this initiative and goal. Through our "game changing" review process, we are looking at how the project can go through an evolution that supports more Media Consortium members directly and scales up the influence and impact of progressive reporting overall.

What's In Store for 2009

The Media Consortium continues on a positive and proactive trajectory. 2008 is a tremendous growth year for the organization and has provided valuable lessons to hone our strategic goals and projects. We are taking these lessons and applying them to projects that are currently in development for 2009. Also in our planning for next year, we are providing the space and flexibility to integrate ideas and strategies generated from our game changing planning process that will be complete in November. We believe that we have a unique opportunity to reshape the playing field for the progressive, independent media because Media Consortium members now have a strong history of collaboration and partnership.

For more information about The Media Consortium's strategy and projects in 2009, please contact Tracy Van Slyke at tracy@themediaconsortium.com.