

**2009 Activities and Progress Report**

**The Media Consortium, a project of the Foundation for National Progress**

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In 2009, The Media Consortium (TMC) implemented important initiatives that deepened our members connections among each other and with outside allies, expanded our members’ audience and impact on the political debate and set the stage for identifying new journalism and business models that will lead to long-term sustainability.

It’s been a tough year for journalism. The economic crisis has severely hurt many independent media outlets, impacting their budgets and ongoing work. Through it all, these our members have maintained focus on providing high-quality journalism and critical progressive analysis. The Media Consortium has worked to support and deepen its members’ goals and opportunities during this time.

The Media Consortium "...echoes the low-cost, high-reward forms of online organizing that liberal groups excelled at in the 2008 election," wrote Harvard University's Neiman Journalism Lab in a July 2009 article about the network.

In August, The Media Consortium’s Coordinating Committee approved incremental changes to TMC’s mission statement and an added a new strategic principle. The updated mission and strategic principles read as:

 *The Media Consortium is a network of the country’s leading, progressive, independent media outlets. Our mission is to amplify independent media’s voice, increase our collective clout, leverage our current audience and reach new ones. We believe it is possible and necessary to seize the current moment and change the debate in this country. We will accomplish this mission by fulfilling our five strategic principles.*

* *Foster Collaboration and Coordination*
* *Build and Diversify Media Leadership*
* *Focus on Audience Development*
* *Bring Money and Attention into the Sector*
* *NEW: Support Innovation in Journalism and Business Models*

The Media Consortium is leading initiatives that advance and strengthen the independent media sector and the very foundation of democracy itself. The following report outlines our progress in 2009 under each of the above strategic principles.

**Foster Collaboration and Coordination**

*The Media Consortium creates critical space for networking and collaboration among independent media outlets. We also connect our members to critical information and outside experts to guide them through changing political and media landscapes.*

Over 60 individuals traveled across the country to attend our February **all-member meeting** in Washington, DC. The meeting melded one-on-one member networking, small and large group discussions, network initiatives on the future media landscape and conversations with special guests. The Media Consortium provided travel stipends to ensure that as many members as possible could attend.

Special guests included: Chris Hughes, the Obama campaign’s online organizing guru; Rep. Raul Grijalva, Co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus; and Laura Quinn of Catalist. These guests provided critical information on how consortium members could integrate online organizing models and social media technology into their work, access an insider’s view of organizing plans within Congress, and investigate opportunities to target and build out new audiences. In late 2009, TMC staff began organizing for its February 2010 member meeting, which will kick off a year of incubation, experimentation and rapid prototyping around moving into mobile, editorial collaboration, audience engagement, and revenue generation models.

With the support of The Arca Foundation, The Media Consortium hosted an **economic strategy retreat** in April 2009 that examined how independent media could provide deep, meaningful coverage of the current financial crisis and long-term economic issues. The Media Consortium invited a cross-section of policy experts, political and financial insiders, grassroots advocates, media watchdogs and independent media producers to the event. The meeting was a huge success, resulting in critical information sharing, new connections and, last but not least, deep brainstorming on how to strengthen independent media’s reporting around the economy. Immediate editorial results came shortly after the event, including several articles that ran in *Mother Jones*, the *Nation* and the Washington Independent, plus a video series that ran on GritTV. This meeting is the basis for a potential editorial collaboration around economic issues developed by a small group of TMC members. TMC is facilitating the evolution of this project, currently known as “Follow The Money” for a 2010 launch.

In 2009, the consortium also developed and launched the **Editorial Tipsheet**. The project fosters a clear pipeline of communication between journalists and organizations on the ground. The goal: build connective tissue between key allies and consortium members that supports the production and distribution of high-quality, high-impact journalism.

Launched as a beta test in July 2009, the program connects issue experts from leading non-profits, think tanks, advocacy organizations and government offices to journalists, producers, reporters and editors within the consortium. Our founding partners for this project include Demos, People for the American Way, Change Congress, and the National Council of La Raza. This is a low-cost, high-impact project.

In addition, The Media Consortium has slowly expanded its membership in 2009—welcoming several new organizations into the fold, including Campus Progress, Care2 and Inter Press Service. We are working on a new membership strategy for 2010 to increase diversity and reach amongst TMC’s membership body.

**Build and Diversify Media Leadership**

*The Media Consortium is committed to creating and sustaining initiatives that recruit the next generation of media producers from a wide variety of cultural and economic backgrounds. We are working to increase media diversity within organizations and move a young, diverse set of media makers affiliated with TMC members into the mainstream.*

The consortium launched its **Independent Media Internships** program in May 2009 with five talented young media makers selected from a pool of 190 applicants. These interns were placed with MC member organizations for a three-month, full-time, paid editorial internship. MC staff worked hard to recruit a diverse set of young people. Four of the five Summer 2009 interns are female; three are bilingual; two are of Hispanic descent; one is of Native American descent.

After only a few weeks of work, one intern authored a groundbreaking report on the impact of the recession on ethnic media, which garnered the 4th highest page views of all time for ColorLines.com. Another intern made the front page of the Huffington Post with a blog on the role of Twitter in the Iranian election protests. The second round of interns began in September 2009 and interns for Winter 2010 are already being placed.

While the internships focus on bringing in fresh talent to the sector, it’s also important to support mid-career independent media makers. In 2009, TMC explored the development of **“Creating the Next Generation of Media Darlings.”** Thisprogram will promote, publicize, and connect up-and-coming journalistic talent to establishment media and targeted audiences. Media Consortium staff has developed a beta plan for this program that includes innovative communications strategies to brand these journalists as critical voices. The goals for this initiative include:

* Make the next generation of Media Darlings.
* Create a sustainable and scalable program that will increase the influence and impact of a diverse set of independent journalists, their work, and the media outlets they are affiliated with on the political and public dialogue.
* Legitimize and expand independent media’s audience to include to new and established communities.

TMC is developing this program for a 2010 launch.

**Focus on Audience Development**

*The Media Consortium works to leverage our members’ content in order to expand their audiences and lists (email, twitter, Facebook, etc.) and to increase the impact of their reporting on the public and political dialogue.*

With our **Media Wires project**, the consortium is delivering our members’ reporting on the economy, the environment, health care and immigration to new audiences using a variety of social media tools and external partnerships with non-profits and other news sites.

All Media Consortium member content (articles, video, audio) related to the economy, environment, health care and immigration is aggregated on our hub sites: The Audit, The Mulch, The Pulse and The Diaspora. Each wire has its own dedicated page that includes blogs, a running list of articles from all TMC members on that topic, widgets for any organization to embed, and more.

Our bloggers sift through this content and provide savvy round-ups of the best/most interesting content generated by Media Consortium members every week. The blogs are cross-posted throughout the blogosphere and available for any organization, TMC member or other news site to use.

The Media Wires project delivers between 75,000 and 85,000 new visitors to MC member content every month, and the numbers keep growing. Consortium staff will continue to actively cultivate new partnerships to increase the branding, recognition and impact of our members’ journalism in 2010.

As a major step this year, The Media Consortium is working with Catalist to explore **list-building opportunities** for our members. Catalist houses one of the most comprehensive databases of 250 million voter-aged in the country. In 2009, Catalist worked with 15 TMC members and provided free modeling analysis that details demographic overlays that compare audiences not only to other Media Consortium outlets, but to the nation as well.

While The Media Consortium’s member organizations ostensibly share common political viewpoints, the media channels are diverse, from websites and magazines to television and radio stations. To leverage common political stances, Catalist built a look-alike model that predicted each individual’s interest in an affiliation with media outlets that have a progressive viewpoint, such as members of The Media Consortium. This model was trained by comparing individuals affiliated with two or more Media Consortium members to a random sample of individuals from the voter file, with the aim of finding characteristics that make those affiliated with Media Consortium organizations distinct from the general population. Using the results from this modeling, Catalist is also giving TMC members free access to their demographic database throughout 2009 to help MC members target new subscribers and audiences.

In a September 2009 TMC survey, members overwhelmingly noted they wanted support in individually and collectively building their e-mail and social networking lists. Using both the information cultivated by its work with Catalist and new initiatives in the following year, TMC will work with members in 2010 to accomplish that goal.

**Bring Money and Attention to the Sector**

*The Media Consortium works to support the sector by documenting the need and impact of our members’ reporting and foster entrepreneurial efforts by our members to develop new streams of revenue that will support long-term sustainability.*

In 2008, The Media Consortium supported and organized research for the development of an **online advertising network for independent media**. Four consortium members, including Air America, *The Nation, Mother Jones* and AlterNet are the founding partners of this network, now called Ad Progress, which is in its initial launch phase. TMC is working with other members of the consortium to identify new revenue generating opportunities for a collaboration of members.

As journalism’s old business models melt away, it’s important to know what journalism will look like in the future. Even more critical to the equation is this question: Can independent media producers adapt and lead, or will they disappear with journalism’s Ice Age? In October 2009, TMC released our yearlong study on the future of journalism called [***The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism***](http://www.themediaconsortium.org/thebigthaw)***.*** It is a comprehensive, definitive examination of how the media landscape has changed and how independent media can boldly lead a new future for journalistic enterprises.

The study was born out of a “game changer” strategy project initiated in 2008 by The Media Consortium to support the evolution of independent media. The Media Consortium commissioned this project because we want to lead our members and other independent media outlets into a new era of sustainable and powerful journalism. Four key recommendations for independent media emerged from the study:

1. **Change internally:** The first and deepest change is to rethink how media organizations and formal networks are structured. By integrating technologists, entrepreneurs and individual media-makers, independent media will cultivate new competencies and strategies to change the journalism field.
2. **Increase experimentation:** Journalism organizations must increase their capacity to innovate with new technology, journalistic practices and business models. They can do this by pursuing “rapid, low-cost innovation” and pooling their experimental efforts. Funders must invest in the long-term sustainability of journalism’s truth-telling by investing in greater experimentation among both new and existing players.
3. **Leverage unique role of a consortium:** Since independent media will continue to grow more diverse and fragmented, it is critical that media-makers break out of organizational silos and work together. The more that independent media-makers leverage their collective power, the more they can negotiate deals, influence public policy and build journalism’s new ecosystem.
4. **Building audiences as communities:** Media organizations must create platforms for users to participate in the journalistic process, work with each other on projects and build their own online communities independent of publishers.

Josh Stearns wrote for Savethenews.org, “*The Big Thaw …* is refreshingly different from every other report published this year. Whereas most reports focus on what went wrong with journalism in America and consider new models and experiments currently under way, *The Big Thaw* delves into the future. … It reads less like a report and more like a travel guide of what’s to come, giving the reader a glimpse at an exciting new landscape.”

Jason Barnett, executive director of The Uptake, wrote, "The problems facing the news industry are complicated and solutions are hard to find. *The Big Thaw* is a comprehensive look into the recent challenges and provides clear ways forward. If you care about the future of media, read every page." The UpTake is a cutting edge online video and citizen journalism organization and a TMC member.

*The Big Thaw* integrates two of our strategic principles: bringing money and attention to the sector and supporting innovation in journalism and business models. TMC is using findings from *The Big Thaw* to structure our Innovation and Incubation Labs, which will launch in 2010.

**Support Innovation in Journalism and Business Models**

*Journalism is in a moment of death and rebirth. Media Consortium members can shift their organizations out of crisis mode and take advantage of the tremendous opportunity the digital revolution provides—but only if they understand the tone, pace, technology, and unique editorial products that thrive on the web and can lead to sustainability. The Media Consortium is strategically supporting members as they develop and deepen critical new capacities and skills.*

One of the most important specific recommendations from *The Big Thaw* was for The Media Consortium to support members in conducting rapid prototyping as a low-cost way to test new business, technology and content development models at a scale that they would not be able to achieve alone. Throughout the latter half of 2009, TMC laid the groundwork for the 2010 launch of its **Innovation and Incubation Lab** (II Lab), an ongoing program.The II Lab combines one-on-one consulting and ongoing lab environments to accomplish this goal.

The II Lab will help TMC members research, discuss and experiment with new business, publishing and editorial models that take advantage of the new, web-enabled reader/publisher relationships. Each lab will result in one or more experiments from multiple members of the consortium. II Lab will also allow members to learn from outside experts as well as trade experiences, information, and ongoing questions with each other. Members will not only discover the best strategies for their organizations, but how to implement them—a critical component of ongoing success. At the end of the lab cycle, participating members will share experiences and lessons learned with MC members and allies, creating a ripple effect in which education, deployment of practices and evolution of experiments moves outward to benefit the whole independent media sector. Experimentation will lead to successes, sometimes failures, and create space for media outlets to identify and implement a long-term formula for ongoing sustainability and impact that will support their critical journalism.

In 2009, TMC identified new opportunities to help important progressive media organizations to increase their impact on the public dialogue, move the political debate, and last, but not least, survive and thrive for years to come. We look forward to building on our success in 2010 to help support the critical journalism that is essential for our democracy.