Media Consortium 2016 Grant Summary

The Media Consortium pursued two goals around media policy in 2015-2016. The first goal was to organize a series of workshops in conjunction with a major conference. The second goal was to work to support strategic planning for the independent news sector.

We are pleased to report that we met both of these goals, discussed separately below.

MEDIA POLICY WORKSHOPS

After meeting a series of setbacks in creating media policy workshops at several different conferences, we were able to partner with IRE to create a media policy track at the IRE conference June 16-19, 2016. The workshops were on the digital divide, zero-rating and surveillance of activists (see attached listing).

In addition to creating the workshops, we fully supported 9 journalists in attending the IRE, including three journalists of color who are not Media Consortium members and who would not otherwise have been able to attend: Sylvia Harvey (freelancer), Aaron Cantu (Lil Sis) and Trenae Nuri (Phillycam).

As expected, media policy organizations were very excited about the workshops and supported them by covering the travel costs for their staff to speak on the panels. The content of the workshops was high quality, and we regret only that they weren’t taped—that was a lesson learned. Next time, we will at least audiotape them.

We marketed the panels by putting them in the schedule and tweeting about them vigorously. The digital divide panel, although scheduled for 9am on day one, was well attended, with 60 audience members. The surveillance panel only attracted 20 attendees, but I strongly believe the poor attendance was due primarily to the fact that it was the final panel of a four day conference. The zero-rating panel was the most poorly attended, despite being at the best time. I believe this is due to the fact that journalists don’t understand zero-rating.

The reports from our journalists (see attached) demonstrate the benefit to bringing journalists and media policy experts together. However, the relatively poor attendance for two of the three panels suggests we may be better off creating a two-day event focused on media policy. Amina Fazlullah has offered to help set up such an event at Georgetown. We will look to that as our next major media policy project.

STRATEGY for the SECTOR

Media Consortium Executive Director focused over the past 18 months on developing a strategic infrastructure for the independent news sector. This work included organizing a Pocantico retreat on the independent sector (May 2015), providing the plenary keynote at the ACM conference (August 2015), attending both AAN conferences in 2015 and the NFCB conference in June 2016 and organizing the media policy track at IRE (June 2016). Kaiser also has restarted a lively quarterly phone conversation between leaders at the eight independent news associations.

One aim of this work was to bring to a head the ongoing merger conversations the Media Consortium had been having with the Association of Alternative Newsmedia. Ultimately, the AAN board was reluctant to pursue this merger. Instead, we have committed to a number of strategic partnerships with AAN. For example, AAN organized a deal with Chartbeat that benefits TMC members while TMC is organizing AAN/TMC pool reporting around the RNC and DNC conventions. We feel this was a good outcome—mergers only work if both sides believe in them.

Much of our original impulse to focus on sector infrastructure frankly revolved around creating sustainability for associations serving the sector. That need remains, certainly for the Consortium itself. Yet the process of looking at infrastructure yielded an entirely different and more important result: Kaiser recognized that a significant block to the development of a truly sustainable and democratic independent news sector is the lack of racial equity in the sector.

The Media Consortium ’s governing body agreed with Kaiser’s assessment and suggested the work begin at home. As a consequence, the Media Consortium developed (and agreed by unanimous vote at our annual business meeting) to implement a strategic plan focused on racial equity.

A key principle of equity work is to fix yourself before working to fix others, so our first step was committing a full-day of the Media Consortium’s conference to a training on racial equity, led by Race Forward and attended by 65 individuals representing 46 outlets. Our next step is to spread this work further, following a three-part plan: 1)raise a racial equity fund that would provide resources to outlets to develop their own strategic plan around racial equity; 2) partner with Maynard or Emma Bowen to develop a mentorship network for journalists of color, including support for the work of these journalists via our TMCinColor newsletter; 3) infuse racial equity into all our work, especially as we choose issues for our editorial collaborations.

We believe that becoming more equitable will particularly help progressive independent outlets partner with local outlets that reach communities of color. Our vision is to create a strong network in which local and national outlets partner with each other, bringing voices from these communities to the national stage and providing communities with localized stories of national import. We have already begun this work via our Philadelphia conference, which featured strong connections with local Philly outlets; via our TMCinColor group; and via our media policy grants, which were promoted especially to our allies working in communities of color. We plan to push this work even further in the next year.

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