*Prototype Fund call: We’re open to diverse perspectives on topics ranging from, but not limited to, the role of algorithms in news consumption, methods for separating facts from fiction, building bridges across ideological divides, and strategies for ensuring journalism organizations are authentic to the communities they serve.*

**Title:**

Transformative Media Network: Building Capacity to Authentically Serve Communities.

**Describe Your Project (300 words)**

Think of your most trusted news source. For some of us, it may CBS, ABC, or CNN. But for many of us, our most trusted news source is the one that is most authentic to our community. It’s the podcaster who sounds like our friends, the Youtube show that speaks deeply to our ethnicity or heritage, or the website that keeps us up to date on the issues we care most passionately about. We trust the news that is produced by people who understand who we are.

What if we could get all (or at least most) of the news we need and want from this trusted news outlet? What if, instead of a top-down system run by a few coastal editors and producers, we could build a bottom-up news network that begins with and centers on communities?

Our project is a pilot and prototype of this kind of truly transformative media network. Our goal is to bring together local journalists, working within particular geographies and demographies, with national journalists working within national demographies and areas of interest in order to create ongoing equitable local-national partnerships.

We will begin in three metro areas: Chicago, Los Angeles and Boston. In each area, we will organize 12-15 news outlets deeply engaged with local and/or demographic communities plus 5-8 outlets authentically engaged with communities of interest on a national scale. Beginning with face-to-face meetings in each city, we will hold monthly in-person or video meetings; ensure each cohort members is involved in at least one local-national partnership; support cohort members in forming equitable partnerships with each other; and train members to use our slack-connected cloud database to develop partnerships so that the collaboration on local-national reporting continues after the project ends.

The aim of this prototype is to test our assumptions and build infrastructure. One tangible collateral product will be a Code for Equitable Partnerships to set guidelines around racial/gender/geographic equity and power differentials in outlet size. Another tangible collateral will be the increased use and expansion of our new Slack-driven cloud database, a tool for generating partnerships.

**What Problem are you trying to solve? (300 words)**

The “fake news” conversation usually focuses on the stream of misinformation coming from social media. But social media is not really the source of our problem. If the public had trusted sources to provide all the news we need, most of us would treat Facebook news the way we treat the National Enquirer—a fun read, but not something to take seriously.

The deepest problem we face is that the public no longer trusts the mass media outlets that once provided a one-stop source for news. Frankly, one reason for this lack of trust is that newsroom cuts have disconnected most of those mass media outlets from local communities. So, seeking out stories that truly reflect our lives, many of us turn to social media.

The good news is that there is a third way. A significant sector of news is still highly trusted by the public—news outlets that are authentic to the communities they serve whether those communities be geographic, demographic, or communities of interest. Examples include the Twin Cities Daily Planet, an award-winning outlet serving Black readers in Minneapolis-St. Paul; Bitch magazine, serving millennial feminists nationally, and Earth Island Journal, serving those passionate about the environment.

What makes these outlets powerful, however, is precisely that they are niche. They can provide news about the niche, but that still leaves their communities without news relevant to other areas of their lives. A reader of the Twin Cities Daily Planet still needs news about the nation and the world; a reader of Earth Island Journal still needs news about her local politicians.

What’s needed is a way to deliver all the news a person needs via the news outlet he trusts the most. That’s the problem this project begins to solve.

**Who Will be Impacted by Your Project and How do you Understand their Needs?** (300 words)

This project is designed to build infrastructure. It will most directly impact news outlets seeking to serve community-based needs. If successful, this project will provide local news outlets with partners for national news, and national news outlets with partners for local news. It will provide white-dominant outlets with a more authentic way to tell the stories of people of color, and PoC outlets with an easier way to distribute their content.

We know the needs of these outlets intimately because we work with them daily. The Media Consortium represents over 80 independent news outlets: local, regional and national. Through our TMCinColor program, we have begun working closely with another 20 outlets that primarily serve communities of color. And through our close relationships with the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, the Alliance for Community Media, and the National Federation of Community Broadcasters we have come to know their members in the world of alternative newsmedia, public access channels, and community radio.

Most critically, this project originated with a strong request from our members at our TMC2017 conference for an infrastructure for collaboration. That support was echoed when we engaged our community by asking them to choose which project we should put forward for this proposal—the unanimous choice was this Transformative Media Network proposal.

**Please list team members and their qualifications**

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Executive Director, The Media Consortium

Jo Ellen has run the Media Consortium for six years. A leading voice on collaborative partnerships within independent media, Jo Ellen recently gave the plenary address at ACM and publishes frequently in MediaShift. She serves on the board of the Foundation of the Alliance for Community Media and on the board of the Foundation for the Association of Alternative Newsmedia.

Manolia Charlotin, Associate Director, The Media Consortium

Deeply familiar with ethnic communities, Manolia is herself an immigrant of Haitian descent who speaks five languages. As a journalist who has led 3 community media outlets, Manolia understands the desire of these journalists and storytellers to tell the truth of their communities, and knows how to support them in their work. She has led numerous collaborative media efforts, including 35 reporting collaborations among 40 Media Consortium members.

**What progress, if any, have you made on this project?**

Our project is ambitious. We propose it only because we have spent several years working towards building a transformative media network.

We first tackled the difficulty of helping understaffed, highly independent outlets learn to collaborate with each other. In 2015, the Media Consortium ran 35 collaborations among 40 different outlets. We learned from that experience that outlets need a project manager to keep the project on track, and resources to cover the additional time spent by reporters and editors on the collaborative aspect of a project.

As the 2015 collaborations were ending, we saw the rise of a number of community-based movements, including the Black Lives Matter movement, Standing Rock, and Latinx organizing around immigration reform. Many of our outlets struggled to engage with these communities, so we responded early in 2016 by holding an all-day racial equity workshop. That workshop has proven critically important in helping outlets that have historically been white-dominant to partner equitably with outlets that are racially diverse.

This year, we tested our member’s ability to create equitable partnerships by inviting staff from 20 local outlets run by and for people of color to our annual meeting. A significant success, the 2017 meeting actually gave birth to the idea for this project.

Finally, we chose the cities for our pilot project based on the expressed interest of our members and partners. We already have a group of 15 outlets working in Chicago, funded partly via our Impact Driver program with The Chicago Community Trust. In Boston, Media Consortium member Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism has already organized 13 community news outlets. And at our annual conference in March, a very vocal group of 8 outlets from Los Angeles asked us to start up a regional network there.

We are in contact with the Free Press and their efforts in New Jersey and North Carolina and the Solutions Journalism Network. Our goal is to create tools and infrastructure that will support their efforts (and those of others) as well.