Initial Report: August, 2014

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser

AAN Meeting, July 10-12, 2014

Dear TMC members, allies and friends,

At the February 2014 Media Consortium annual meeting, the membership voted to explore a joint venture opportunity with the Association of Alternative Newsmedia. I am writing to update you on steps we have taken to date. They include work with the AAN foundation, tool-sharing, and a joint conference.

**AAN Foundation**. As a first step, the Media Consortium’s strategic planning committee has approved a suggestion made by Tiffany Shackelford, Executive Director of AAN, that we work closely with the AAN Foundation, a 501c3 that is related to but separate from the Alternative Newsmedia Association, a 501c6.

The AAN Foundation has been rebooted after a period of dormancy to support the independent media broadly and specifically to focus on increasing the impact of independent media. I now serve on the AAN Foundation board.

At the AAN convention in Nashville TN, the AAN Foundation decided to pilot a couple of editorial collaborations to see whether we could use Media Consortium expertise to assist AAN members, and to see whether the local aspect of collaborations could garner more foundation dollars for joint TMC-AAN collaborations. The pilot projects consist of a collaboration on how ACA has impacted mental health care (starting in CA and then expanding to other states) and a collaboration on how marijuana legalization has impacted neighboring states. I am actively seeking TMC members to participate in these collaborations.

**Tool-Sharing**. In addition to these pilot projects, AAN and TMC are beginning to share technical assistance tools among our members. AAN generously agreed to help our members “validate” their facebook pages. AAN is also interested in opening up a mobile ad network to TMC members. In return, TMC has shared with AAN access to our Vocus PR account, and has talked to AAN about a brewing project to make an enterprise level email marketing tool available to all our members.

**Joint Conference.** Finally, as per TMC member instructions at our annual meeting, we suggested to the AAN board that we hold a joint conference together. This suggestion was accepted. Our 2015 annual conference, to be held in the Bay Area in late January/ early February, will be held jointly with AAN’s annual digital conference. A save the date will wing your way shortly.

**How can you participate in making these joint ventures a success?**

* Volunteer to work on the joint conference program committee.
* Participate in an editorial collaboration with AAN members.
* Serve on the AAN Exploratory Committee (vetting ideas and helping us shape new joint venture opportunities)
* Reach out to AAN members in your local community.

Please contact me if you are interested in participating in any of these ways, or if you have any questions. Below, for those of you who like to read, I’ve included a brief set of observations about the alts gleaned from my attendance at their annual conference. You may also ask James Trimarco (of Yes!) or Jay Harris for their observations, as they were there as well.

Sincerely,

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser

**Altweekly Conference Observations, from Jo Ellen Kaiser**

Who are AAN members?

AAN members are for-profit local alternative news media. “Local” is as important to them as “progressive” is to us. They were founded as the alternative to the dailies in their marketplaces, and they all work on having a recognizable voice that is “alternative.” That used to mean sex, drugs, and rock n roll; recently it has meant being pro-“medical marijuana” but also pro-LGBT in places like Salt Lake City.

Reading alt-weeklies, you get the sense that they are left-leaning, but they don’t particularly define themselves as left or progressive—rather they see themselves in an oxymoronic role of being the most consummate insiders—knowing everything there is to know about their cities—and the most complete outsiders—ready to criticize hypocrisy and to advocate for those being left out of mainstream conversations.

The alts are passionate about their journalism. I was very struck that they voted down two potential members (out of three) because they felt the journalism of those outlets was not sound. When it comes to fact-checking, accuracy, etc., they definitely are the equals of TMC members (meaning some are super on top of it, some not, but all aspire to a high level).

Many of their editors come from J-schools and still prefer a firewall between editorial and publisher, though that is changing quickly. They pride themselves on truth-telling and often go after government corruption, but it’s a bit difficult for them to go after major advertisers—this is one reason they are interested in diversifying revenue sources.

The alts make (or made) most of their money from food and music ads, and see arts and culture coverage as a key component of their papers. That said, they understand the dailies are failing at local news. One of the big topics at the conference was how to expand the news they do when they don’t have money to increase staff size (and may even be downsizing).

Finally, diversity is not a strong point and may be another area where we bring something to the table. Alt-weekly editors generally feel strongly that they should represent everyone in their communities, but the fact is that most people reading alt-weeklies in most communities are white; most alt-weekly editors are white; and I have yet to find an alt-weekly owner who is a person of color. Gay men are well represented; I did not run into any out and proud lesbians, but of course not everyone wears their identity on their sleeve.

Who Owns the Alts?

Alt-owners really are divided into two types: there are individuals who own their local community paper, and there are entrepreneurs who own groups of papers.

The owners of local community papers are not unlike TMC founders. They love their papers to death, and they do whatever they can to make them succeed. They are passionate about their communities and the need for a community paper.

There are really only two large groups of corporate-owned papers left in the alt world. One group is called New Times, and it is the spinoff of the old Voice Media Group. You may have heard gossip about the Voice Media Group—when you do, the gossip is probably connected to Michael Lacey and Jim Larkin, the former owners of the Village Voice Media Group. When papers in the group were accused of running truly horrific sex-trafficking ads via their sister company Backpage, Lacey and Larkin kept the Backpage company and sold off the The New Times group. What that means is that Lacey, Larkin and the Backpage company are no longer involved in the New Times group, which includes 13 really exceptional papers including the Village Voice, the Miami New Times, and others.

The other big group of papers is run by Chris Farrell of Southcomm. He started with the Nashville Scene, his local paper, but now owns 6 papers, including the Creative Loafing papers (Atlanta).

Then there are a number of owners who own 2-3 papers. For example, Jeff vonKaenel owns papers in Sacramento, Reno, and Chico. Richard Meeker and Mark Zussman own the Willamette Weekly in Portland, the Santa Fe Reporter in Santa Fe NM, and the Indy Week in North Carolina. There are a number of other small groups like this.

My perception, from talking to both the owners and the editors at the different publications, is that, with the exception of New Times, these companies are run as groups of affiliated papers rather than as chains in the traditional sense. For example, they don’t share staff or syndicate across the group. The exception is the New Times people, who do share the same design and format.

What Happens at the AAN Conference?

Like all conferences, folks come to AAN to network. As a young editor from Charlottesville told me, “it was incredible to meet 200 other people doing what I do every day.”

This was their annual conference, and featured an exhibitors area with 20 booths, a keynoter from PEW research center, a keynote by Penny Abernathy (author of the new book on community journalism), and 4 simutaneous sessions during time slots spread over Thursday afternoon, Friday, and Saturday morning. Their annual meeting was Saturday afternoon, followed by their annual awards.

The sessions were a mix of editorial (e.g. long form journalism), marketing (figuring out Facebook by a guy from Facebook), and ad sales, with a sprinkling of related topics. James Trimarco (web editor of Yes!) and Jay Harris went to sessions on Friday and Saturday and can speak to the content.

These folks do know how to have a good time. The host, Southcomm, sponsored parties at a distillery, a honky-tonk, and at the Country Music Hall of Fame with free drinks and food at all places. Their awards ceremony was a blast.

Report from James:

I got a lot of stories that I hope will help TMC members better understand the alts. For example, when escort service advertisers in Sacramento and Baltimore were busted for crimes, alts in Sacramento and Baltimore immediately ran stories on it.

And I came away excited about collaborating with alts when we need coverage from a specific locality. It'll help their editor with reporter pay and help us with local knowledge and distribution. Every alt editor I spoke with about it—without exception—was enthusiastic about this idea.

Hope this brief overview helps introduce you to the Alts. Jo Ellen