June 25, 2015

Jo Ellen and Tiffany,

The “exploratory committees” had a very productive conversation on June 8. We found sufficient common ground in the nature of our memberships, in the challenges we’re facing, and in the possibilities of learning from each other that we’re very enthusiastic about testing some ways that AAN and TMC can work closely more together. So while we believe that further talk of a merger *per se* is premature, we agreed that we wanted to think ahead about the next year and design into the plans for TMC and AAN a number of ideas, big and small, that would let us see if we can produce some concrete positive results of a deeper affiliation. Success at that could help smooth the way toward a more formal alliance or merger. Accordingly, we’d like to charge you with coming up with a draft of that plan.

Here are some of the ideas that seem to us to be promising for the memberships of both organizations. Starting with these, we’d like you to add your own ideas and develop a work plan, including any budget and staffing implications. You should feel free, of course, to refine what we’ve suggested here, to provide reality checks about feasibility (e.g., how much of this can reasonably be taken on), and to suggest how to prioritize among the ideas. In no particular order, though:

1. Implement a joint list serve on social media. While this could be used to facilitate the cross-promotion of stories, we also think it should specifically encourage the sharing of best practices and know-how around technology. (There was some interest in expanding the existing TMC list into a joint list.)
2. Negotiate a group rate for the professional version of Chartbeat, available to members of both AAN and TMC. Do you see other “low-hanging fruit” for services that would be of value to both memberships?
3. Extend the agreement with AAN’s first amendment lawyer to TMC members on the same terms.
4. Introduce AAN members to what TMC members know about foundation fundraising, potentially through a panel or workshop at the Salt Lake City AAN convention.
5. Foundation funding for editorial initiatives. Understanding that foundations generally have long decision lead times and with the aim of securing funding for 2016 initiatives, we would like to move quickly to test the proposition that foundation funders would be supportive of editorial projects that combine the strengths of national and local independent media. To kick that off, we believe we need to bring together a group of our editors to identify several projects of significant mutual interest; we also would like a process for framing those ideas for funders. (Off-the-top thoughts about topics included the increasing lack of transparency in public records; coordination on criminal justice/policing coverage; and local/national reporting on campaign financing.)
6. Collaborate on the “advocacy sales” effort by Sue Bel Air (sp?), including both AAN members and TMC members that accept advertising in the network.
7. Plan for another joint AAN/TMC digital conference in San Francisco in the spring of 2016. Consideration should be given for more elbow room generally and more space for and revenue from exhibitors, potentially moving the location to the East Bay.

 Topics of potential interest include:

* How different organizations staff and structure their IT and digital media functions, Revenue from SEO consultation (e.g., what New Times is doing),
* How different organizations are dealing with “native” advertising.
* Use of data to help us run our businesses better. There was a shared sense that, while we all have access to increasing amounts of data about our customers, that we don’t have the capacity and resources to take business advantage of that data.
* Data visualization. We share an understanding that data viz will be an increasingly important part of telling stories as well as effective social media, but need more
* Database journalism.
* Incorporating video into our journalism.
1. Consider a gathering, or a day-long extension of a gathering that is already planned, focused on funding journalism in the new media age. Topics could include membership models, subscriptions, local and community foundations.
2. [The Coral Project.](http://coralproject.net/) Willamette Week has been approached about potential interest in this joint project of the Knight Foundation and Mozilla “to improve communities on news sites.” Is this something that AAN and TMC might coordinate for our memberships more broadly?
3. Coordinate on a support–your-media day (such as the effort that came out of the Innovation Lab a couple years ago)?

That’s a long list of possibilities, but it reflects our enthusiasm about the potential of working together. We’d like to pull you into the conversation to get your thoughts about the substance and to develop a work plan for achieving some successes over the next nine months plus. In the baseball metaphor part of the meeting, we were looking “to hit some singles and doubles.” Ideally, we would have your draft prior to the Salt Lake convention so that we can incorporate at least some follow-on conversations into the SLC agenda.

Take a look and let us get your thoughts on how best to follow up – and thanks for getting this conversation kicked off.

All the best,

Jay Harris for

Sally, Mark, Chuck and Jeanne,

Maya, Steve, Susan, and Kim