

Final Progress Report

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

Date: June 30, 2009

Contact: Tracy Van Slyke, Director

312.315.1127/tracy@themediaconsortium.com

The Media Consortium's projects and reach have grown exponentially in the past year. Since our last report to The Arca Foundation in December 2009, The Media Consortium organized and hosted a dynamic meeting for our members, developed and implemented a new membership strategy, placed six interns in our Independent Media Internship Program, continued to build our successful MediaWires program, organized an editorial collaboration with more than 15 members and partners around the US Social Forum, and launched our groundbreaking Innovation and Incubation Lab.

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
- Support Innovation in Journalism and Business Models

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 80 people attended The Media Consortium's annual member meeting in February. Representatives from dozens of media outlets heard from leading media innovators in the areas of mobile, new models in journalism and community building and revenue generation opportunities. Following the meeting, presenter Aron Pilhofer, interactive web editor for the *New York Times* said, "I wish there were something similar to the consortium for our peer media organizations. You guys are way ahead." The February meeting provided a high-power kick off for a year of incubation, experimentation and rapid prototyping around moving into mobile, editorial collaboration, audience engagement, and revenue generation models.

The meeting also set the tone for how TMC can better engage and leverage its members to strategically lead and define the emerging media landscape. Notes and key findings from the meeting are available at <http://www.themediaconsortium.org/2010-meeting-notes>.

To help identify and shape the future evolution of progressive media sector, we performed a media landscape analysis, asking our members to self-identify their current and future roles. For a deeper review/recap of the process and results, please see [the meeting notes](#). Integrating the results of the exercise, TMC staff used the last few months to revamp its membership recruitment and current membership engagement strategy. The new structure for TMC membership is designed to simultaneously reflect industry changes and help shape the overarching progressive media sector. It includes an ongoing engagement strategy and new tier for Associate Membership in the Consortium. The Associate Membership position is designed to be an easy entry point for young or smaller organizations that may not have the capacity to participate in all TMC projects, but can contribute diversity of audience and innovative business strategies to the mix.

In addition, The Media Consortium has started to expand its membership with new members Truthout and *Earth Island Journal*. Additional full and associate members will be brought on through the last half of 2010.

Member feedback from our February meeting called for more support on editorial collaboration and resource-sharing around events and major news items—specifically for the US Social Forum in Detroit. In response to our members' needs, TMC staff facilitated and launched a **collaborative news syndication service** for USSF. Over 15 Media Consortium members, activist organizations and independent media outlets combined forces to share content, distribute daily email updates of top headlines, syndicate/share content, and host breaking USSF headlines on their websites. The program helped cross-pollinate audiences and increase the reach and impact of reporting from this momentous convening. Participating organizations include: *Yes! Magazine*, the Peoples' Media Center, Rollins University, Terra Viva, Inter Press Service, Africa Action, the Center for Media Justice, FreeSpeechTV and more. Over ten thousand activists and media makers came to Detroit to discuss how to make another world possible, and we helped make sure that their voices were amplified across the media landscape.

Build and Diversify Media Leadership

The Media Consortium is 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. Last semester we placed four interns with Media Consortium members and the Summer program has just begun. Here's what some of the Spring interns had to say about the program:

"The Media Consortium is providing a wonderful and much-needed service to aspiring journalists. The internship stipend allowed me to work for a publication that I admire and live in a place that I love. In addition, I'm appreciative of the feedback I received during the professional development calls and the networking connections I was able to make along the way." — Keith Rutowski, Spring 2010 intern at *Yes! Magazine*

"The Media Consortium internship program provided a wonderful experience with The Washington Independent. My internship has given me a chance to improve my writing and reporting in a completely new medium for me (blogging), develop a beat and meet a number of experienced journalists who were more than helpful as I learned a completely new set of skills." — Julissa Trevino, Spring 2010 intern at The Washington Independent

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 to new audiences using a variety of social media tools and external partnerships. 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. The Media Wires project delivers over tens of thousands of new visitors to MC member content and web sites every month. Consortium staff are actively cultivating new partnerships with organizations like Feet in 2 Worlds, The Independent, and Tck Tck Tck to increase the branding, recognition and impact of our members' journalism in 2010. Our members are especially excited about this project, as it increases the reach and connective tissues between audiences. We're also working to strategically expand this program into new media platforms, and are exploring the creation of an independent media headline ticker with TMC member Free Speech TV.

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 October 2009, TMC released [*The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism*](#). 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. Eight months later, we're still hearing about how this report is dynamically changing the way people think about the future of the independent media sector.

Throughout 2010, TMC Director Tracy Van Slyke has presented *The Big Thaw's* results and recommendations across the country to large groups of journalists and funders. *The Big Thaw* has helped introduce new funders and potential partners to The Media Consortium and its role in the larger media landscape. In addition, we have heard from TMC how *The Big Thaw* has influenced and informed the business and long-term planning of TMC members. "I

read *The Big Thaw* from front to back, and then made all my staff read it," said Teresa Stack, president of *The Nation*. "We had multiple meetings about the report as well." Jennifer Kirby of LinkTV wrote to TMC staff that large elements of *The Big Thaw* had been incorporated into their new business plan.

The Big Thaw has also been used to build curriculum for students at Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism. Here's what others are saying about the report:

"*The Big Thaw* did several things that were nearly impossible. It described the state of the practice with authority and absolute clarity... What surprised me most about *The Big Thaw* is that, despite the breathtaking rate of change, I still find myself referring back to it..."

– George Gendron, former Editor-in-Chief of *Inc. Magazine*, Founder/Director of Innovation & Entrepreneurship, Clark University

"*The Big Thaw* doesn't waste time clinging to outdated notions or bemoaning the economic trajectory of traditional journalism. It confronts the realities of a new paradigm in media. We tell our students that they will shape the future of media. They will. And studies like *The Big Thaw* help light the path."

– Jean Folkerts, Dean, UNC-Chapel Hill School of Journalism & Mass Communication

Support Innovation in Journalism and Business Models

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 has two components that are now underway: The Digital Refresh Workshop and the Digital Innovation Studio.

The Digital Refresh Workshop is a three-month turbo charge for our members' digital operations. This low-cost workshop provides intensive, hands-on support and training to help organizations analyze, understand and innovate around key digital strategies, including list/community building, revenue generation and how to harness new journalism production strategies.

The first Digital Refresh Workshop kicked off in May with *The American Prospect*, where TMC staff and Andrew Golis, head of blogging and Political Editor at Yahoo!, conducted a digital audit for the organization and strategized on big picture digital editorial and business goals for future implementation. In mid-June, the Digital Refresh Workshop team travelled to St. Paul, MN for its workshop with The Uptake—an innovative video and citizen journalism organization. Our last scheduled Digital Refresh Workshop scheduled is with *ColorLines* in July.

By the end of each workshop, organizations will have completed an in-depth analysis of its current digital profile, determined future goals to revamp their digital strategy, and will take the first step towards launching an experiment to reach those goals. TMC staff is providing three months of consulting and advice for each organization, on topics ranging from building and launching an online audience survey, to feedback and support on the build out and editorial workflow for a new organizational website. The Digital Refresh workshop will provide organizations with cutting edge tools and smart guidance to achieve ongoing innovation for long-term sustainability and impact.

Our second program, the Digital Innovation Lab has three tracks: Moving into Mobile, New Community and Journalism Models, and New Revenue Generation Strategies. Organized by Media Consortium staff, these small group sessions include regular conference calls with participating members and outside experts, at least one in-person meeting for lab participants, online information sharing spaces, and more.

The Digital Innovation Studio has kicked off with 12 different groups participating in total. We launched the Moving into Mobile lab in early June and are conducting weekly calls with researchers in the field of mobile texting, marketing, and app development along with experts from organizations like Google, Mozilla, Hack/Hackers and more.

We are currently kick-starting the Community and Journalism lab and the New Revenue Generation group will start up in the Fall. With these small-group labs, The Media Consortium's goals are to support deep learning and incremental shifts for TMC members to develop new models of revenue generation, audience expansion and new editorial opportunities. Cumulatively, these labs will catalyze a broad shift in how independent media outlets operate, survive and thrive in a 21st century landscape.

In addition to organizing the labs, The Media Consortium will provide seed money of \$10,000-\$15,000 to help incubate a collaborative experiment. 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.

As Laura McGann wrote for Neiman Journalism Lab of TMC's program, "All news organizations are struggling to innovate, but smaller shops face an even higher hurdle. When a swamped staff is busy with day-to-day operations, and the technical development team is one person — or nonexistent — collaboration offers huge potential." Members will not only discover the best strategies for their organizations, but how to implement them—a critical component of ongoing success.

Evaluation and Challenges

As we laid out in our 2009 proposal, TMC progress is evaluated by examining how well our projects fulfill our four strategic principles and help us accomplish our overall mission. TMC also asks the following questions to ensure programmatic quality:

- **Sustainability:** Are we supporting efforts that bring in new money or relieve financial burdens for members?
Are we setting the stage for long-term sustainability for the sector?
- **Impact:** Are the projects supporting members to have more of an impact on the public and political debate?
Is the project helping to build connections among members and outside partners to increase impact?
- **Audience:** Is the project helping members and their journalism reach and build its audiences now or in the future?

The Media Consortium has always provided vital space and resources for independent media outlets to think big and beyond quick fixes. Our projects are focused on concrete gains for our members. We have had record successes over the last year in terms of both fulfilling and expanding upon our organizational mission and vision, especially in the current economic climate. Our programming is reaching and engaging influentials and changing public perception of independent media. Industry press, technology leaders and funders are talking about how TMC is helping its membership evolve for the future media landscape.

While the last year has been stellar in terms of output and reach, there have been challenges in terms of capacity and member involvement. Times are still tough economically, which makes it difficult for many cash-strapped organizations to contribute the time and energy needed to really increase the impact of our programming. Our organization is also at a point where increased investment in staffing would net huge gains for our programs, and we are aggressively pursuing additional funding to increase our impact.

To that end, TMC staff continue to build programmatic strategies that account for multiple economic and bandwidth-related variables. We operate as a lean organization with little overhead in order to maximize the amount of money and time we can contribute to programs that support our members. When developing a program or evaluating its reach, we make our programmatic decisions by balancing the need for immediate member benefit and long-term strategic growth for both individual members and the progressive sector as a whole.

Thanks to the support of The Arca Foundation, TMC has been able to effectively build out the impact and audience of progressive, independent media and helping our members situate themselves in the new journalism landscape. The Arca Foundation has acted as a connector to potential new funders, provided great advice on the funding environment and has been an overall fantastic advocate for the The Media Consortium.

In the last twelve months, The Media Consortium has provided members with programming that is vital to the future of independent media. In many ways, this year represents a turning point for the organization and its members. We've laid a strong foundation to build upon, and the next year has tremendous opportunities to further expand our presence and programming.