Initial Report: July 13, 2014

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AAN Meeting, July 10-12, 2014

**Top-Level Observations**

* Top-down structure. AAN decisions are made largely by 15-20 leaders, a mix of long-time members, large members, and individuals who put in time as volunteers on the AAN board and on committees
* Strongly positive re: TMC. The AAN Board and the AAN Foundation Board, as well as those few AAN leaders who aren’t presently serving on one of their Boards, are all in favor of working closely with the Media Consortium, including a possible merger.
* Key interests re: working with TMC:

1. Nonprofit know-how; they want to funnel philanthropic $$ thru the AAN Foundation to AAN members, and many want to learn how to take small donor donations. They want to learn from us.
2. Nationalize/ Localize. They are interested in editorial collaborations that would allow them to localize national content ( which they have done before via a syndication model and call a “share”) and to nationalize local content (which they have not done before)
3. Infographics/ Data/ Multimedia. They are seeking ways to expand their news coverage, particularly through multimedia tools that will engage readers. They think we know how to do this….
4. Gain members. They are losing members. They once were a 200+ organization and now are at 120 members. They’d like to be larger again.
5. Larger voice in national media. AAN (quite rightly) believes they are ignored or disparaged by peers. They want a bigger profile and believe our outlets bring that.

**AAN Foundation Reboot and Plans**

AAN received a 501c3 designation for the Alternative News Foundation almost 20 years ago (I will dig up the date). They started a foundation in order to receive funds to run a minority fellowship program like G.W.W. When that program lost its funding over a decade ago, the Foundation went dormant.

This year, Tiffany and AAN Board President Sally Freeman of Boise Weekly decided to reboot the AAN Foundation. They changed its bylaws to general sounding stuff re: supporting independent media, and brought on a new board. The board is currently set up to be majority AAN members. The bylaws specify that the AAN Foundation president will be the previous AAN 501c6 president. These bylaws could be changed. Tiffany and Sally have worked to ensure TMC has a strong voice on the board. The board members are as follows:

Fran Zankowski (Colorado Independent and former AAN President): President

Kevin Goldberg (AAN attorney): Secretary

Tiffany Schackelford (AAN E.D.): Treasurer

Sally Freeman (Boise Weekly and current AAN President)

Jeff vonKnaepel (Sacramento News and Review; AAN member)

Richard Meeker (Willamette Weekly; AAN member)

Michael Hollett (Toronto NOW; AAN member)

Richard Rodriguez (ASU professor)

Elizabeth Osder (consultant, friendly to merger plans)

Gregg Zachary (ASU professor, friendly to merger plans)

Jay Harris (former and hopefully future TMC member)

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser (TMC ED)

This reconstituted board held its first board meeting on Wednesday, July 9, 2014. After introductions, board members were invited to speak about their hopes for the board. I did not speak during this segment. All of the AAN members talked about their desire for the board to become a center for editorial collaborations that would increase the impact of the alternative media. They hoped to find foundation funding for these collaborations. Secondarily, they hoped that some of this funding might fund some of the activities of AAN that are educational in purpose, such as the programming of AAN conferences.

I was really excited to hear that their vision was very close to the Media Consortium’s vision (though ours is more expansive around impact). I then spoke about the benefits of partnership and not reinventing the wheel. I suggested that if such partnership worked, we could look at a merger.

My presentation was warmly received. A decision was made to do two joint editorial projects together, with me paid as project manager. We also decided to recommend to the AAN Board to hold a joint meeting in Jan/Feb in San Francisco (our annual meeting, AAN’s digital meeting). The AAN people feel they were burned by Don’s Alternet plan back in the 1990s, and so want to pilot a partnership with us first; I also think that makes sense on our side.

The two proposed editorial collaborations are:

1. Pot legislation. Obviously, pot coverage sells for alt-weeklies, but their idea is interesting—to compare legalization in the different states and in nearby states, to look at which models work and which don’t.

2. ACA and mental health. Jeff at the Sacramento News and Review has discovered evidence that the ACA may make mental health care more expensive. I don’t have a grip on the whole story yet, but other editors I talked with at AAN agree there is probably a story here. This is one I think many TMC members would be interested in as well.

Next Steps:

1. Pot story aimed at late Sept; ACA at early to mid Oct (both pre-election)

2. I will work with AAN staff on joint conference

3. AAN Foundation board to meet in September by phone

**Conference Observations**

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 papers left in the alt world. One group is called New Times, and it is the spinoff of the old Voice Media Group. When Don Hazen and older folks grumble about alt owners, they mostly are thinking about Michael Lacey and Jim Larkin, who owned the Village Voice Media Group and were apparently super profit driven and not very nice—and were responsible for truly horrific sex-trafficking ads via their company Backpage. Lacey and Larkin kept the Backpage company and sold off the The New Times group which includes 13 papers including the Village Voice, the Miami New Times, and others.

The other big group of papers if 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.