One page summary

After five years of training media policy reporters, we heard that the richest learning experience for them happened at in-person events, and especially at conferences where they could meet directly with media policy experts and activists.

In response, the Media Consortium tried to raise funds to create a mini-media policy conference. However, that proposal was not compelling to funders other than MDF. In 2016 we thus tried a different tack: creating a media policy track at the largest conference for reporters in the United States, the conference of Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE). IRE Director Mark Horvit welcomed us and has been a great partner.

That conference will happen June 16-19, after this proposal is due, and will include workshops on the digital divide (broadband access); zero rating (net neutrality) and the surveillance of activists. We have had terrific buy-in from policy experts and activists who with only two exceptions are paying their own way to have the opportunity to speak at these workshops. We are using the remainder of our MDF money (about $11,000) to offer travel grants to reporters.

We are confident enough in the success of this concept that we propose to increase the size of the track and travel grant fund next year. In keeping with our commitment to racial equity, we would like to ensure that journalists of color have the opportunity to attend our workshops. In keeping with our goal of media diversity and building a grassroots media ecosystem, we would like to bring community media reporters together with reporters from our national and local news outlets.

At the workshop, we will provide a cocktail hour break so the reporters can meet up. And after the workshop we plan to offer a series of briefing calls as a followup. This year we will interview reporters to find out what more we can do to support both the training they receive and our goal of having them collaborate with each other, and use that information to support our 2017 project.

Narrative

In the digital era, both media and media policy continue to change at a rapid rate. In media policy, what was old is new again, as questions of access that we thought were solved—like lifeline and net neutrality--become, well, problematic again. At the same time, we face new threats, especially the threat to our rights from indiscriminate surveillance by governmental entities on the national, state, local and even neighborhood level.

It is more critical than ever for the public to understand media policy. But telling the story is not enough. Who tells this story of media policy, how they tell it, and who they tell it for matters quite a lot. A journalist of color may have a different perspective from a white journalist about stingrays that track cell phone use. Telecom monopolies may mean something different to a low-income teen who can’t afford to access the internet to do homework than to a well-off private school white suburban teen who is bummed the upload speed he gets isn’t fast enough for his video game. Rural communities have a different stake in hearing about broadband access than most suburban communities.

In short, when media policy stories are told at all, they often are not told from an equity perspective.

Organization History. The Media Consortium, a national network of over 80 independent progressive news outlets, has spent five years developing the capacity to train reporters in media policy. We have held dozens of telephone briefings, organized travel to media policy conferences, and provided grants for in-depth media policy investigations. The Media Consortium—and our executive director, Jo Ellen Kaiser—are recognized and respected as allies in media policy and activist circles.

As our 10th anniversary approached, Media Consortium members took the opportunity to do a 360 degree look at our organization. Our main finding was that our outlets had largely achieved economic sustainability and were making progress on impact. What we lacked, however, was diversity in our outlets’ staffing, outreach to communities of color, and stories that would appeal to those communities. We thus made a commitment to focus our next five years on applying a racial equity lens to all our work.

When we looked at our media policy work, with that lens, we were pleased that media policy reporters and expert sources we recruited included a significant number of people of diverse ethnicities. We recognized, however, that we had not involved communities of color in telling media policy stories about themselves, nor had we made those stories relevant to communities of color. As a result, we decided we had to make a specific effort to tell the media policy story in a way that is racially equitable. We are now ready to engage that work.

Proposed Project. A commitment is a good first step, but what matters is the process of following through. Our plan for 2017 is to leverage our resources to bring independent and community journalists to a rich series of intersectional workshops on media policy, race and poverty, and to follow through with opportunities for these journalists to deepen their learning and collaborate with each other. We will:

* Produce trainings on media policy that focus on communities of color, working especially closely with Center for Media Justice and Color of Change;
* Provide funding for journalists of color and journalists from community media outlets to attend media policy phone briefings and workhops
* Connect The Media Consortium’s national and regional reporters to the community media reporters for what we hope will be collaborative storytelling.

For several years our journailsts had asked us to set up a mini-conference on media policy. We already were running media policy events at our annual conference, but that conference is attended primarily by publishers and editors rather than by reporters. After failing to get funding for a stand-alone conference, we approached Mark Horvit, who runs the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE) association. His annual conference has been growing and now brings close to 3000 reporters together to discover new story ideas and deepen their policy knowledge.

We are pioneering this IRE workshop track in 2016, using MDF funds, with workshops on broadband access, zero-rating, and activist surveillance. Our goal is that this will eventually become a robust track or even day at the IRE conference, replacing the much mourned but apparently deceased National Conference on Media Reform.

In 2017, we will set up a media policy track consisting of 3 to 5 workshops at IRE. Approximately 35% of the grant will go to project management and 50% will be used to create a travel grant fund for journalists of color, journalists from local community media, and other independent journalists. We expect that the majority of speakers will come at their organization’s own expense.

We know that simply sending reporters to a conference is not enough. So we will support the cadre of MDF-funded reporters with a fun get-together at the conference and with a series of follow-up phone briefings.

Measurable benchmarks:

* Creating a 3-5 workshop track at IRE 2017
* Providing travel/registration grants to 10-20 reporters, with at least two-thirds journalists of color and one-third journalists from community media.
* Creating a set of 4 or more followup briefing calls.

Qualitative benchmarks:

* Create significant interactions between community and independent media
* Create the conditions for collaborations between these media
* Produce new, vibrant, compelling stories on the intersection of race, poverty and media policy.

Success for us will be stories of community and independent journalists working together to tell rich media policy stories that put communities of color at their center.