Merger Story

Incident:

March 2013 Media Consortium Board Meeting

9 people; everyone is grim

Challenge: will we need to shut the Consortium down?

Lesson Learned:

We can’t. Although we may be too small to make it on our own, but what we offer is something vital. “If the Media Consortium didn’t exist, we’d have to invent it.”

Journey:

Who cares enough about us to keep us going?

1) Members care, but they can’t keep us going

2) Funders care, but don’t care enough to give us general support

3) What we do does not have a clear emotional pull for the public

Big Idea:

Other independent media care about us. We all need each other.

Incident:

May 2013, a first-time ever meeting of the heads of all the independent media asosciations.

Characters:

At least 8 associations that all serve independent media:

AAN serves local alternative print weeklies

LION serves hyperlocal digital news sites

INN serves investigative journalism centers

NFCB serves community radio

ACM serves community TV

NAMAC serves community media centers and documentarians

AIR servies independent radio producers]

And we, the Media Consortium, serve progressive independent news on all platforms

Challenge: It turns out that all but one of us was facing a crisis in funding and leadership. Each organization had been built when media was platform based, but now, after the digital revolution, news is no longer platform specific. What that means is that all our members, our funders, our public, are now in one big pot. The differences that were meaningful are no longer that meaningful. Yet all of our members rely on us as associations to help them make it through the digital revolution, to help them stay in business. They, like we, are too small to go it alone.

Lesson Learned: We have to find a way to work together.

Over 2014, we started to see that happen.

First INN, the investigative group, the group that had been successful at fundraising, decided to take LION, the hyperlocals, under its wing, and obtain grants to provide them with training. It was a win-win for both of them: INN got paid to train, and LION members got subsidized for the training they needed.

Then ACM, the community TV people, and NFCB, the community radio people, held a joint conference in 2013. That was followed by a joint conference between ACM and NAMAC, the documentary film people, in 2014. All three of those organization have had singificant changes in top leadership, but have realized that the future lies in working together.

What I noticed, however, was that these joint conferences and programs were one-off events. What if we could work together in a more ongoing way?

Incident:

In February 2014 I stood in front of my members and presented a budget. A year after our board meeting, the numbers still looked dismal. But this time, I had a way forward for them. What if, I suggested, we merge with AAN?

Challenges:

The alt-weeklies were finally feeling the digital revolution. They were starting to lose members, and worried that their ad-model was going away. That also impacted their association, AAN, which is based on revenue from serving ads to members. They needed a new infusion of members to bolster their numbers, and they needed to learn from non-profits how to build membership and donor lists. The Media Consortium as an organization needed access to non-foundation cash, and its members needed to learn from the AAN entrepreneurs how to create side businesses.

Lesson Learned:

By merging, members on all sides would be served, and the two organizations would benefit from sharing back office and funding streams. But as we talked, we realized there were even more benefits.

Local news is dying. National outlets used to rely on daily papers for local stories and data. No more. Often, the alts are the only truly functioning papers left in town. Yet the alts have had trouble taking advantage of this fact, as they have been used to publishing weekly rather than daily. By joining forces, national papers can provide content to alts, which the alts can localize and then feed back to the nationals. We can replace the old-fashioned vertical news organizations—CBS, Washington Post, LA Times, NBC—with a new horizontal news organization built out of partnerships between the hundreds of local papers working with dozens of national sites. Instead of creating news that is top-down, this is news that is bottom-up, coming from the grassroots.

In other words, this merger will not only solve the problem of some great independent media organizations, it will also provide a way for Americans to get better news. Wow.

May 2013