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The Media Consortium 2008: Project Successes and Lessons

The intersecting worlds of media and politics are experiencing a rapid, tectonic shift. Media consolidation has diluted in-depth and investigative reporting and is causing a dearth of critical and diverse voices. While the scope of traditional media narrows, the Internet has created the space and opportunities for anyone to become information generators—making for an exciting and innovative environment for the independent media.

That's where The Media Consortium comes in. Our mission is to harness the opportunities, overcome the challenges, and create a new, game-changing system that allows progressive, independent media to flourish. The Media Consortium provides the necessary incubating space for ideas and relationships that strengthen and transform progressive media organizations.

The Media Consortium has experienced extraordinary growth in 2008. We launched four dynamic projects, shored up organizational infrastructure, and began articulating a vigorous future for independent media. In 2007, The Media Consortium had two part-time staff and had started two projects. Today, we have two full-time and four part-time, project-based contractors, and just over 50 organizational members. We have also developed and fine-tuned the purpose, mission and ultimate strategy of The Media Consortium as a movement-building and sector-strengthening organization.

The Media Consortium is now the space for progressive media and allies to strategize, collaborate, and launch projects that are transforming the independent media sector.

About The Media Consortium

In early March 2005, two-dozen leaders from the worlds of independent print, radio, television, and Internet media answered a call from *Mother Jones*, *The Nation*, and *The American Prospect* to discuss "Independent Media and the Future of Democracy." It was the first time in at least a decade that independent media content producers and distributors came together to talk about strengthening our effectiveness. We continued the conversation through 2005, expanding to include many more media organizations. Our goal: to figure out how a network of independent media could address two challenges we all face:

- How to amplify independent journalism's voice in broader public debates over the crucial political and social issues of our times.
- How to navigate the current wave of profound technological change - change that is reshaping the media business, not to mention redefining the practice of journalism itself.

In early 2006, we coalesced to become The Media Consortium, (in the words of our mission statement):
"To amplify our voices; increase our collective clout; leverage our current audiences and reach out to new ones; attract financial resources; strengthen and transform our individual businesses and our sector's position in a rapidly changing media and political environment; and redefine ourselves and progressivism for a new century."

The Media Consortium is now a network of 50 leading independent journalism organizations that work in print, online, television, and radio. Our current members include:

Afro-Netizen	Hightower Lowdown	RealTV/IWT
Air America Radio	In These Times	Regional News Network
AlterNet	LinkTV	Salon Media Group, Inc.
American Forum	Mother Jones	Sojourners
American News Project	Ms. Magazine	South End Press
The American Prospect	The Nation	Talking Points Memo
Balcony Films	Nation Institute	Texas Observer
Brave New Films	National Alliance for Media Arts	Truthdig
Berrett-Koehler Publishers	and Culture (NAMAC)	The Uptake
Center for Independent Media	National Radio Project	Warandpiece.com
Chelsea Green Publishers	New America Media	The Washington Monthly
ColorLines	New Press	WireTap
Democracy Now	New Voices in Independent	Women's Media Center
Free Speech TV	Journalism	Workers Independent News
GlobalVision/Media Channel	OneWorld US	YES! Magazine
GoLeftTV	The Progressive	The Young Turks
Grist.org	Public News Service	
High Country News	Raw Story	

The Media Consortium has several projects that have launched or are in development, nearly all of them generated during Consortium-facilitated discussions and meetings among member organizations. Each of our strategic projects is tied to one of The Media Consortium's three basic target areas in 2008: **Creating Infrastructure, Amplifying our Voice and Building Connections.**

Creating Infrastructure

Developing Progressive Media "Game Changers"

The very core of The Media Consortium is to advance and strengthen the progressive, independent media sector. Our members agree that now is the moment to think and act big. Thanks to this energy, Media Consortium Project Director Tracy Van Slyke and members of The Media Consortium's Coordinating Committee have worked closely with consultants Tony Deifell and Nicole Boyer to craft the direction of our strategic research and development project which has centered on the creation and implementation of "game changer" process and projects. We define game changers as:

Developments (projects, initiatives, strategies, new models, innovations) that "change the game" for independent media by increasing its impact and influence in the next five years. By definition, these aren't incremental strategies, but rather big bold moves that the TMC could develop or take advantage of in a rapidly changing media landscape.

In addition to integrating many of the questions and ideas that came out of conversations with Media Consortium members, Tony, Nicole and Tracy interviewed all Media Consortium Coordinating Committee members and several outside experts in the fields of media, technology, politics, and financing. These interviews provided perspective on current opportunities, challenges and uncertainties for the sector as well as new possibilities for The Media Consortium and its members to significantly impact and change the landscape. This information formed the base of a two-day strategy meeting in July for Coordinating Committee members.

Outsiders were invited to the meeting to provide "outside-in" thinking, which is useful in breaking internal groupthink dynamics as well as provide additional information and perspectives. Our guests included:

- Art Kleiner, Editor-in-Chief, Strategy+Business magazine
- Mitty Owens, Senior Deputy Director, NYC Office of Financial Empowerment, former program officer at Ford Foundation
- Mike Stanton, Publisher, The Bond Buyer (leading daily newspaper of public finance)

This was the first round of game changing strategy brainstorming. The game changers strategic exploration and development process has continued throughout the year and includes input from all Media Consortium members and additional outside experts. The process intends for members to think outside of their everyday activities and to shift into creative brainstorming.

The end product will be three new game changing project ideas that will cover opportunities. These ideas will be laid out in a dynamic presentation coupled with short report that places the game changers within a strategy framework. We are excited to develop and produce tangible member-driven projects that will significantly shift the media landscape in the not-so-distant future.

Online Advertising Network

Over the last few years, the rise of online advertising has drastically changed business models across the entire media sector. While many independent media outlets are building out their online advertising capacity, these changes can be costly to implement, technologically difficult, and due to the smaller web presence of some organizations, do not offer guaranteed returns on such a hefty investment. Successful web advertising strategies do have the potential to generate significant amounts of income, however the field is often difficult to parse and even harder to navigate. The solution? Build an advertising network that pools the collective inventories of Consortium members to make a highly marketable package.

In February, The Media Consortium hired the consulting firm Marketechnique to explore opportunities in building an online ad network for progressive media outlets. Marketechnique and Media Consortium staff interviewed 10 MC members around their current advertising platforms, needs, and revenue opportunities. The Media Consortium also conducted a survey of the entire network, assessing the interest and viability of forming an online advertising network. Results included:

- 26 organizations have a total of 4,549,753 unique visitors and 55,776,186 pageviews per month.
- 24 organizations have email products that go out around once a week, reaching approximately 1,002,671 names. Of those 26 respondents, 12 offer ads on their email products.
- 12 respondents currently offer ads on their websites and three to four are interested in incorporating them.

During this time, Marketechnique surveyed the larger online advertising space and evaluated both the viability of a Media Consortium ad network and what would be needed to build it. Marketechnique created a presentation and report around the current online advertising sector and implications for Media Consortium members at the May Meeting.

Armed with this information, we determined that there was a potential significant opportunity for The Media Consortium to help members move into the online advertising network space. Also noted was that certain Media Consortium members needed support in developing their online ad sales strategies. Media Consortium members AlterNet, Air America, *Mother Jones* and *The Nation* came together as the founding outlets for a progressive media ad network. MarketTechnique and Media Consortium staff continued to work with the Consortium and the ad network's founding members through July. These four Media Consortium members are now advancing the network. This is a great milestone--we are so excited to be empowering our members to take lead on projects that benefit the whole, not just one organization.

Amplifying Our Voice

MediaWire

A large part of The Media Consortium's mission is to leverage the resources and journalism of its members to impact political discourse and debate. We want to showcase the first-rate independent

journalism produced by MC members, move it to new and targeted audiences, and build the influence of progressive, independent media. With this goal in mind, we are harnessing new technologies, social networking applications and distribution opportunities to launch the first phase of a MediaWire system that will allow members to share content, increase web traffic, and reach new audiences.

The Media Consortium has partnered with CommonSense New Media to launch its "MediaWire" project using Common Sense's existing NewsLadder technology. Newsladder.net site is the aggregation spot to find TMC member content organized by specific issue. This online platform offers a one-stop shop for the best in "progressive, independent media" organized by specific topics. The Media Consortium is currently sponsoring three newsladders:

- Economy: <http://economy.newsladder.net/>
- Immigration: <http://immigration.newsladder.net/>
- Healthcare: <http://healthcare.newsladder.net/>

Along with the consortium-sponsored NewsLadder sites, we have built out new ways to share and distribute the content among MC members and to new audiences. We are using new media tools including widgets, Facebook, advertising and e-newsletters to push our members' journalism and expertise to new audiences.

We are also creating weekly blogs that round up the "best of/most interesting" journalism by MC members on the three topic areas. The blogs can be found at www.themediaconsortium.org/consortium-report/. They are available to all MC members and posted throughout the blogosphere.

Live From Main Street

Live from Main Street (www.livefrommainstreet.org) is a tour of the U.S. in Election Year 2008, hosted by GRITtv's Laura Flanders and produced by The Media Consortium. In five months, Live from Main Street (www.livefrommainstreet.org) will feature five town halls, each focusing on a key national issue through a local lens. The town halls are broadcast on multiple radio and television channels and written about in print and online outlets. While Live from Main Street had a separate budget, The Media Consortium allocated \$60,000 and significant staff time on strategic development, fundraising, and management. Live from Main Street's goals are to:

- Strengthen progressive, independent media infrastructure through innovative partnerships
- Engage new and existing audiences with quality, independent news and information
- Inspire political participation
- Change the tenor and scope of election coverage
- Highlight important local/national issues

Live from Main Street finished its run in early November after five tremendously successful town hall events in Minneapolis, Miami, Denver, Columbus and Seattle. Each provided unique opportunities for local and national partnership, collaboration, and movement strategizing from both inside and outside of The Media Consortium. Clips from all the Live From Main Street town halls can be found at <http://www.livefrommainstreet.org> or youtube.com/livefrommainstreet.

Materials from the town halls were available for open source distribution among Media Consortium members, allies and partners to virally disseminate around the Internet for maximum impact. Members of The Media Consortium also produced original content connected to the issues of each town hall.

Live from Main Street has partnered with national outlets and groups including MoveOn.org, Free Press, FireDogLake, and many others to publicize and disseminate this content. Local groups and partnerships

range from Progress Ohio to the Miami Worker's Center. We have heard from many local community members and attendees who are excited that independent media is paying attention to the issues and people that the mainstream media has ignored. Live from Main Streets town halls have been covered in local radio interviews, newspaper articles and blogs. We're successfully propelling vital issues to new levels of media and public awareness.

"At 'Live from Main Street Miami,' local citizens had a chance to voice their concerns – speaking directly to those responsible for elements of the crisis through a representative from Countrywide Mortgage who was on a LFMS panel-and offering innovative solutions for how to deal with the economic crisis," said Live from Main Street Producer Tracy Fleischman. "In addition, Live from Main Street Denver' served as a unique kick-off event for the DNC, giving local and national progressive leaders a chance to put forth a real agenda for change for the DNC. It was streamed live on a dozen Media Consortium member web sites and blogs. Over 500 people attended the event. LFMS Denver truly gave a platform to the voices of everyday Americans."

We wrapped the project up in October with "Live from Main Street Seattle: Women on Real National Security," which reported and examined what real national security means to women. What makes American women feel secure-is it our military or our social policies? We are currently analyzing how this project succeeded and lessons learned that will help inform future Media Consortium projects.

Building Connections

Member Meetings

Every year, The Media Consortium convenes two in-person meetings for our members and allies. In May, more than 65 members, friends, and allies converged in Denver, Colorado for The Media Consortium's eighth membership meeting. The two-day meeting focused on action.

We debuted several key projects including "**Live From Main Street**," "**The MediaWires Project**" and the **Online Advertising Network** (all described above) during the Denver meeting. In the form of member-organized "Media Labs," small groups were formed to provide in-depth peer-to-peer assistance sessions focused on Web 2.0, advertising and marketing ideas and questions. Last but not least, Tracy Van Slyke, Media Consortium Project Director, and strategic consultant Tony Deifell, president of Next Consulting, led two large-scale brainstorming sessions focused on surfacing key questions around the progressive media landscape. Four small-groups emerged:

- Strategic Collaborations/Multi-purposing Content
- The Big Game Changer
- Ad Revenue Opportunities
- Threats and Opportunities of New Demographics

On both the first and second days, the break out groups focused on creating a central question of inquiry around each issue, outlining the top three reasons that it was a priority, and identifying the key questions around this issue. These central inquiry questions and sub-questions have been integrated into the organization's strategic process throughout 2008.

Denver was selected as the meeting site in advance of the Democratic National Convention. This created a unique opportunity to learn more about the changing dynamics of the region and its larger impact on the national landscape. Local media and organization representatives discussed how the region acts as a microcosm for issues including immigration, environmentalism, and progressive organizing, and also discussed the role of progressive and mainstream media. In another session, local organizers and activists

were brought in to discuss Media Consortium members' coverage, organizing and logistics as they prepared for the DNC.

The MC Listserv

When the Media Consortium was first taking shape, there were few places for progressive media leaders to interact, build deep professional relationships, and address larger structural issues. The connectivity tools launched at the founding of The Media Consortium have borne fruit. The listserv is used to solicit ideas and convey updates on Media Consortium activities, projects, and events. It is also a place for members to share ideas and information with each other. In the latter part of 2008, the listserv has served as a key resource to facilitate action, dialogue, and collaboration around Media Consortium projects.

Members and allies are also sharing information that has led to non-consortium collaborations. Based on a thread from our listserv, MoveOn.org turned the Department of Health and Human Services attempts to re-brand contraception as abortion into an email-based action.

"The MC has played a central role in this collaboration," wrote Amie Newman, Managing Editor of RH Reality Check "[By] working with Move On, Public News Service, [RH Reality Check] and others, MoveOn was able to gather 325,000 signatures for this action, and RH Reality Check saw our largest number of readers in one week and one of our most successful series of feature stories/articles in the history of our site."

The listserv continues to be a hotbed of discussion and up to date reports. Members and allies used the listserv to inform and organize during the arrests of journalists (including Media Consortium members Democracy Now, The Real News, Public News Service, and The Uptake) throughout the Republican National Convention.

What's In Store for 2009

The Media Consortium continues on a positive and proactive trajectory. 2008 is a tremendous growth year for the organization and has provided valuable lessons to hone our strategic goals and projects. We are taking these lessons and applying them to projects that are currently in development for 2009. Also in our planning for next year, we are providing the space and flexibility to integrate ideas and strategies generated from our game changing planning process that will be complete in November. We believe that we have a unique opportunity to reshape the playing field for the progressive, independent media because Media Consortium members now have a strong history of collaboration and partnership.

For more information about The Media Consortium's strategy and projects in 2009, please contact Tracy Van Slyke at tracy@themediaconsortium.com.