

**A proposal to The Arca Foundation**  
**Submitted by The Media Consortium, a project of the Foundation for National Progress**

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*“The stakes are very high for independent media. Will it change? Or will it atrophy? Independent media can become the dominant media in society. Who would have dreamed that 30 years ago?”*Don Tapscott, author of *Wikinomics,*

*The Big Thaw: Charting a New Course for Journalism*, The Media Consortium, 2009

Independent media is at a crossroads. Journalism organizations and producers are struggling to remain relevant and sustainable in a moment of incredible upheaval. Widespread shifts in technology and the crashing economy have forced media organizations to scramble for new business and journalism models. The implications could be dire for our democracy as those dedicated to watchdogging, transparency and investigative journalism disappear. But these changes also offer new opportunities for independent media to cut through the corporate media, impact the public dialogue and become early adopters of new revenue generation models.

As over 40 independent journalism organizations agree, independent media simply can’t make it through this critical moment alone. That’s where The Media Consortium comes in.

The Media Consortium is a network of the country's leading, progressive, independent media outlets. Its mission is to amplify independent media's voice, increase its collective clout, leverage current audiences and reach new ones. The Media Consortium believes it is possible and necessary to seize the current moment to change the debate in this country. It accomplishes this mission by fulfilling 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

The Media Consortium "...echoes the low-cost, high-reward forms of online organizing that liberal groups excelled at in the 2008 election," wrote Harvard University's Neiman Journalism Lab in a July 2008 article. The Media Consortium is leading initiatives that advance and strengthen the independent media sector and the very foundation of democracy itself.

Since 2005, the Consortium has become the leading forum for building partnerships and collaborations among independent media outlets and external allies. In the past 12 months, we’ve developed and launched several projects that expand the audience and impact of independent media; organized a strategic retreat focused on strengthening independent media’s coverage of the economy; developed and released a groundbreaking report on how independent media must strategically evolve; built connections with a diverse array of outside partners to help disseminate critical independent media content; hosted a dynamic membership meeting in Washington, DC, and launched the first phase of a project that invests in the next generation of independent mediamakers.

Past support from The Arca Foundation has been integral to The Media Consortium’s growth to date. The Media Consortium is now a network of over 40 leading independent journalism organizations that work in print, online, on television and on the radio.

Our current members are:

* Afro-Netizen
* AlterNet
* American Forum
* The American Independent News Network
* *The American Prospect*
* Balcony Films
* Brave New Films
* Berrett-Koehler Publishers
* Campus Progress
* *ColorLines*
* Democracy Now!
* Feministing.com
* Free Speech TV
* G. W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism
* GlobalVision/Media Channel
* Grist.org
* GRITtv
* Hightower Lowdown
* Huffington Post Investigative Fund
* *In These Times*
* Inter Press News Service
* LinkTV
* *Mother Jones*
* *Ms. Magazine*
* *The Nation*
* The Nation Institute
* National Alliance for Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC)
* National Radio Project
* New America Media
* The New Press
* OneWorld US
* *The Progressive*
* Public News Service
* RealTV/IWT
* Regional News Network
* Talking Points Memo
* *Texas Observer*
* The Uptake
* *The Washington Monthly*
* Women’s Media Center
* *YES! Magazine*
* The Young Turks

The following proposal outlines our critical programs and strategy for 2010. Each project fulfills one or more of these principles and the overarching mission of The Media Consortium. Support from The Arca Foundation would shore up these and other projects that will help our members turn this moment of crisis into a key opportunity. We're building a stronger, better future for independent media together.

**Foster Collaboration and Coordination**  
The Media Consortium plays a unique role in gathering and bringing key allies and new partners together. Support from the The Arca Foundation will help increase The Media Consortium’s capacity to continue convening important in-person meetings and strategy sessions for its members and independent journalism in 2010.

Organizing Member Meetings and Networking Spaces  
Since its inception, The Media Consortium has organized regular in-person member meetings that provide a critical space for our members and allies to nurture collaborations (and collaborative projects), build concrete relationships and think beyond day-to-day organizational struggles. Using a 1-2 day retreat format, we catalyze forward-thinking and creative strategies that will help the independent media sector thrive in the 21st century.

With the support of The Arca Foundation, The Media Consortium hosted a strategy retreat in April 2009 that looked at how to best cover the current financial crisis and long-term economic issues. The Media Consortium invited a cross-section of policy experts, political and financial insiders, grassroots advocates, media watchdogs and independent media producers. The meeting was a huge success, resulting in critical information sharing, new connections and last but not least, deep brainstorming on opportunities to strengthen the independent media’s reporting around the economy.  Immediate editorial results came shortly after the event, including several articles that ran in *Mother Jones*, the *Nation* and the Washington Independent, plus a video series that ran on GritTV.

The Media Consortium is now working with eight journalism organizations (*Mother Jones, The Nation*, The Nation Institute, the Huffington Post Investigative Fund, The American Independent, *The American Prospect, ColorLines* and *Facing South)* to develop a groundbreaking, high-impact collaboration called ***Follow The Money****,* “to support deeper reporting on the economic crisis, the unfettered corporate dominance over economic policy, improve public understanding of the issues that impact their pocketbooks and increase the prospects for meaningful reform.” (See *Follow The Money* Full Proposal.)

In February 2010, The Media Consortium hosted its annual member meeting, with over 90 attendees including representatives from member organizations from around the country and external experts and allies in mobile, journalism models, revenue models and more. The meeting built on the recommendations and groundwork laid out by *The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism,* The Media Consortium's 2009 report on how independent media must navigate the current and future media landscape.  The meeting kicks off a year of incubation, experimentation and collaboration that will be focused through its many programs including its MediaWire program, its Incubation and Innovation Lab Program, *Follow The Money* and more.

**Build and Diversify Media Leadership**  
Despite massive shifts in the American demographic makeup, many news outlets are still lead by and reach an aging white population. Now is a critical moment for the independent media sector to identify how it can evolve to be truly representative of the United States' changing demographic. To help build those bridges, The Media Consortium is committed to creating and sustaining initiatives that invest in the next generation of media producers from a wide variety of cultural and economic backgrounds.

Fostering the Reporters of Tomorrow  
In order to increase diversity in the sector, we need to create more entry points for journalists of varying economic and social backgrounds. Many independent media outlets don’t have the resources to pay a full-time intern, which makes it difficult for low-income young people to participate. To address this issue, the consortium launched its “Independent Media Internships” program. Interns are placed with MC member organizations for a three-month, full-time, paid editorial internship. MC staff worked hard to recruit a diverse set of young people and place them with our members.

Here’s how the program works: Both Media Consortium members and prospective interns fill out an application form and must meet criteria set by the consortium in order to participate. Members must give their intern one to two major editorial projects and provide weekly duties, including fact-checking, reporting and more. They must also provide mentorship to their intern via bi-weekly, one-on-one check-ins with top editors and/or reporters. The consortium provides a $2,000 stipend over three months to each intern. We’re partnering with existing university internship placement programs to promote and recruit students.

Interns also participate in monthly professional development conference calls, which MC staff are co-organizing with Free Press. We are providing channels for the interns to network/build professional support systems and learn from leading practitioners in the fields of journalism, new media and media policy.

*Here's what the interns and their advisers had to say about the program:*

"[Our intern] is years ahead of her peers and on equal footing with many media pros who have five years experience. She is a natural." Beau Friedlander, Air America

"I am learning so much about ... new media, editing, writing, and countless other things that this internship entails. I think this experience will turn out to be really valuable as I move on to a career in independent media." OneWorld intern

"Keep rocking." AlterNet intern

We placed seven interns with another set of member outlets in Fall 2009 and plan to place at least 12 interns in 2010. With support, we can continue our efforts to foster the next set of talented media makers and reporters to work within the independent media sector.

**Focus on Audience Development**  
The Media Consortium’s third strategic principle is to leverage our members’ content to expand their audience and increase their impact on the public and political dialog. With our MediaWires project, the consortium is delivering our members’ reporting on the economy, health care, immigration and sustainability/the environment to new audiences using a variety of social media tools and external partnerships. We are also focusing on list-building strategies and demographic analysis for our members and the collective progressive media sector.

MediaWires: Building Audiences Through Aggregation and Strategic Distribution  
The MediaWires project showcases the first-rate independent journalism produced by our members, brings their work to larger audiences and builds the influence of their journalism in the public debate through creative online distribution strategies, including aggregation and syndication partnerships.

In 2008, The Media Consortium launched its MediaWire project by linking, filtering and distributing our members content to new audiences on three main issues-the economy/corporate power, immigration, healthcare. We added a new issue focus of the environment in summer 2009 and ramped up its content during the Cop15 climate convention.

The project includes a social media toolkit that makes MC member content easily accessible and available to new audiences and partners. Toolkit components include:

* **Weekly Blogs** round up the best reporting from our members on immigration, healthcare and the economy and are published three times a week. The blogs are available for MC members to post on their own sites and are cross-posted on sites like Huffington Post, Open Left, Firedoglake, Open Salon and featured on the Washington Post’s politics page. You can read the blogs at [www.themediaconsortium.com/consortium-report](http://www.themediaconsortium.com/consortium-report).
* **Headline Widgets** featuring real-time headline updates from MC members are available for members and organizational allies to post on their sites. An additional widget feature packages all MC member content. Widgets link directly to MC member web sites, in order to drive traffic back to the originating content source.

In addition, we’re working with other non-profits, NGOs and philanthropic organizations that already have networks in place to help funnel this content to their engaged, invested audiences.

Our weekly blogs—The Audit, The Pulse, The Diaspora and The Mulch—are performing very well and helping increase traffic and awareness of the independent media sector at large. The program is growing in popularity, and many members and allied organizations find the blogs invaluable. Zach Carter, our Weekly Audit (economy/corporate power) blogger is on the fast track to being one of the most sought after reporters on economic and corporate issues and has freelanced consistently for *The Nation*, The Nation Institute, *Yes! Magazine,* AlterNet and more over the past year. Lindsay Beyerstein, our Weekly Pulse (healthcare) is frequently booked on radio and television shows to discuss her work and our members reporting.

CurrentTV is the latest organization to start featuring the blogs as a part of their blogging and community site. Other new publishing partners include OneClimate.net, The Climate Community, The Smirking Chimp, and our products are featured on other sites, including:

* America’s Voice
* Campaign for America's Future
* Care2
* Demos
* Drum Major Institute
* Good Jobs First
* National Council for Research on Women
* OMB Watch
* OneAmerica
* Young People For

Cumulatively, these tools deliver between 75,000 and 85,000 new visitors to MC member content every month, and the numbers will keep growing. Consortium staff will continue to actively cultivate new partnerships to increase the branding, recognition and impact of our members’ journalism.

Understanding and Building Audiences Through List Analysis   
Understanding an audience's size and how they interact with media has been part of the consortium’s strategic focus since the beginning. But times have changed since we last looked at who was reading, watching and listening to independent media. Technological tools, like Twitter, are creating a broad swath of new media consumption habits, and the 2008 presidential election engaged millions of citizens in a previously unheard of manner. In order for our sector to plan for future distribution and business models, we need to know what our current and future audience needs/wants, where they are located, and how they’re planning to interact with media.

As a major step in 2009, Catalist—a company that houses one of the most comprehensive databases of 250 million voter-aged in the country—work with TMC and 15 of its members to provide free modeling analysis that details demographic overlays that compare audiences not only to other Media Consortium outlets, but to the nation as well.

While The Media Consortium’s member organizations ostensibly share common political viewpoints, the media channels are diverse, from websites and magazines to television and radio stations. To leverage the common political stance, Catalist built a look-alike model predicting each individual’s interest in an affiliation with media outlets that have a progressive viewpoint, such as members of The Media Consortium. This model was trained by comparing individuals affiliated with two or more Media Consortium members to a random sample of individuals from the voter file, with the aim of finding characteristics that make those affiliated with Media Consortium organizations distinct from the general population. Using the results from this modeling, Catalist is also giving MC members free access to their demographic database throughout 2009 to help MC members target new subscribers and audiences.

In a September 2009 TMC survey, members overwhelmingly noted they wanted support in individually and collectively building their e-mail and social networking lists. Using both the information cultivated by its work with Catalist and new initiatives in the following year, TMC will work with members to accomplish that goal.

**Bring Money and Attention to the Sector**  
Issues of economic sustainability are plaguing mainstream and independent media. The Media Consortium has already advanced specific ideas and projects to help remedy this problem. In 2009, The Media Consortium supported initial research for the development of an online advertising network for independent media. Consortium members, including *The Nation, Mother Jones* and AlterNet are the founding partners of this network, now called Ad Progress, which is in its initial launch phase. The Media Consortium is working with the founding members to direct start up money to get this program off the ground in 2010. Consortium members with online advertising capabilities will be encouraged to join, with the goal of reaching new advertisers and bringing in additional revenue.

Looking towards the future, we believe that there is a unique opportunity to reshape the playing field for independent media. Ideas and projects around the future of journalism, community building, outside economic factors and new technologies are being brought into this process with the release of our report, *The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism*. In late 2009 and throughout 2010, The Media Consortium is using this report as the foundation for generating conversation among members, outside partners, universities, and more to lay out the critical role and needs of the progressive, independent media landscape. In addition, The Media Consortium staff will continue to detail and demonstrate the impact of the progressive, independent media sector and its members at conferences, in the press and among key partners.

**Support Innovation in Journalism and Business Models**

*The stakes are very high for independent media. Will it change or will it atrophy? Independent media can become the dominant media in society. Who would have dreamed that 30 years ago?"*

—Don Tapscott, author of *Wikinomics*

*The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future of Journalism* (The Media Consortium, September, 2009)

The media sector is at a point of rebirth. The Media Consortium developed this strategic principle to make sure we help our members successfully take advantage of the moment. Journalism and business models are even more closely tied than ever before, but no one model is the silver bullet. In 2010, The Media Consortium is launching its Incubation and Innovation Labs project to help our members become leaders of tomorrow's media field.

Incubation and Innovation Labs

The Incubation and Innovation Labs is The Media Consortium’s dynamic new program to support its 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.

This two-part program helps our members research, discuss and experiment with new business, publishing and editorial models that take advantage of the new, web-enabled reader/publisher relationships. The two components to this program are the Digital Refresh Workshop and Small Group Labs.

Digital Refresh Workshop

The Digital Refresh Workshop is a three-month turbo charge for Media Consortium members’ digital operations. This workshop will provide intensive hands-on support and training to help our members analyze, understand, and innovate around key digital strategies, including list/community building, revenue generation and how to harness new journalism production strategies. By the end of the workshop, participating organizations will have completed an in-depth analysis of their current digital profiles, determined future goals to revamp their digital strategies, and will take the first step towards launching an experiment to reach those goals.

The Digital Refresh workshop will provide members with cutting edge tools and smart guidance to achieve ongoing innovation for long-term sustainability and impact.

Small Group Labs

Throughout 2010/2011, The Media Consortium will organize a small group of TMC members to work with each other and outside experts to generate one or more experiments in mobile, revenue-generation, journalism and community building models. The Small Group Labs will also allow members to trade experiences, share information, and find answers to ongoing questions. Members will not only discover the best strategies for their organizations, but how to implement them—a critical component of ongoing success.

At the end of the lab cycle, participating members will share experiences and lessons learned with MC members and allies, creating a ripple effect in which education, deployment of practices and evolution of experiments moves outward to benefit the whole independent media sector. Experimentation will create strategies and space for media outlets to identify and implement a long-term formula for ongoing sustainability and impact that will support their critical journalism.  
  
**Measuring Success**  
The Media Consortium’s projects are subject to a rigorous assessment by our coordinating committee, staff and project participants. One of the big measures for our success over the next year is to see how our projects fulfill our strategic principles. These principles are the guiding paths to internal evaluation, but also provide a framework for action steps and future developments. We also ask ourselves how a project has succeeded using the below criteria:

* **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?

Throughout a project’s lifespan, consortium staff work to maximize its impact. Based on the project’s scope and goals, we use different methods to track and assess success, but all projects are subject to evaluated on their impact and their potential to evolve. When applicable, MC staff uses a combination of measurements, including web traffic/audience growth, members’ buy-in and benefit from projects, and overall consortium staff time devoted to each project, to help in the assessment process. We evaluate a project and choose next steps based on our members and Coordinating Committee’s feedback on regular reports.

**Budget and Fundraising for 2010**   
The Media Consortium’s projected 2010 budget is $404,000. Funds already committed include support from The Open Society Institute and The Surdna Foundation with additional projected revenue from membership dues. Additional funds will allow us to increase support for our members and grow projects with concrete benefits for the sector. The Media Consortium’s 2010 budget allocates $204,000 for personnel and administrative costs, including organizational support, travel, legal, and website hosting. The balance of $175,000 is allocated to direct program expenses for projects that fulfill The Media Consortium’s goals and strategies.

The Media Consortium provides space and resources for independent media outlets to think big and beyond quick fixes. Our projects are focused on long-term gains for our members. At the same time, we are dealing with media organizations that are already economically pinched and a media system mired in an apocalyptic moment. Consortium projects feed collaboration and the support of high-impact media making, and create a strong foundation for a sustainable and high-impact independent media sector. These projects and the workings of The Media Consortium are core to the network’s ongoing work and success. Additional funds will be sought for our highly anticipated *Follow The Money* program.

The Media Consortium continues to draw support from its members, funders and allies, and our initiatives are positively impacting the independent media sector. Therefore, on behalf of the dozens of journalism organizations that make up The Media Consortium, we seek a renewal grant of $50,000 from The Arca Foundation.