**The Open Society Institute**

#### Proposal Title Page

*Please complete and include with your proposal*

**Formal organization name as stated on IRS letter of tax determination:**

 Foundation for National Progress, dba (The Media Consortium is a project of FNP)

**One-sentence description of the proposed initiative:**

*The purpose of this project is to*…This grant will support The Media Consortium’s efforts to place our 45 members on the path to long-term sustainability and at the forefront of tomorrow’s media landscape. It will also support the creation and dissemination of the kind of high-impact journalism that informs and engages citizens in the democratic process.

**Amount Requested: Project Budget: Organization Budget:**

**$** 200,000  **$** 501,000  **$** 501,000

**Proposed Grant Period:** From: January 2010 To: December 2011

 (Month/Year) (Month/Year)

**Proposal/Project Contact** (Principal Investigator)**:**

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 **09/11/09**

##### Signature of Proposal ContactDate



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

**Date: Sept. 11, 2009**
**Contact: Tracy Van Slyke, Director**
**312.315.1127/tracy@themediaconsortium.com**

Quality journalism is a fundamental pillar of our society. As John Pilger, editor of *Tell Me No Lies: Investigative Journalism That Changed The World*, describes: “Without it, our sense of injustice would lose its vocabulary and people would not be armed with the information they need to fight it.”

But our media system is in a critical moment of upheaval. Local newspapers are shuttering and national outlets are slashing reporting jobs by the thousands. The implications could be dire for our democracy. But we are also witnessing a rebirth: swift changes in online technology and platforms are completely refashioning traditional journalism and business models.

The state of independent media is also at a crossroads. Independent media organizations are committed to continuing and increasing the critical journalism needed to inform and activate the public as corporate media shuts down. Technological innovation online and via mobile devices offers significant opportunities to engage new audiences and communities. But the economic climate also brings the prospect of severe downsizing, which leaves little room for experimentation and creativity. As over 40 independent journalism organizations agree, independent media simply can’t make it through this crossroads alone.

That’s where The Media Consortium comes in.

We are a network of the country's leading, progressive, independent media outlets. Our mission is to amplify independent media's voice, increase our collective clout, leverage our current audience and reach new ones. We believe it is possible and necessary to seize the current moment and change the debate in this country. We will accomplish this mission by fulfilling our 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 amongindependent 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 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 Open Society Institute 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
* Air America Radio
* AlterNet
* American Forum
* American News Project
* *The American Prospect*
* Balcony Films
* Brave New Films
* Berrett-Koehler Publishers
* Center for Independent Media
* *ColorLines*
* Democracy Now!
* Feministing.com
* Free Speech TV
* G. W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism
* GlobalVision/Media Channel
* GoLeftTV
* Grist.org
* *High Country News*
* Hightower Lowdown
* *In These Times*
* 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*
* Truthdig
* The Uptake
* *The Washington Monthly*
* WireTap
* Women’s Media Center
* Workers Independent News
* *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 Open Society Institute 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 creates critical space for networking and collaboration. We connect our members to critical information and outside experts to help guide them through the changing political and media landscapes. In April 2009, the consortium hosted a retreat for economic experts and journalists to brainstorm projects and next steps that will strengthen media coverage of the financial crisis. Retreats like this, and our annual membership meetings, nurture relationships and collaborations between among independent media and leading philanthropic organizations.

In addition, the consortium also launched its Tipsheet program in the summer of 2009. The Tipsheet is a platform for nonprofits, NGOs, think tanks and activist organizations to provide story tips to editors, reporters and producers within the consortium. This low-cost, high-impact program will allow independent media outlets to break stories and identify future trends related to critical issues including the economy, environment, civil rights and more.

Organizing Member Meetings and Networking Spaces
Since its inception, The Media Consortium has organized regular in-person members 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. We held three meetings in 2009: An all-member meeting in February, a strategic retreat to discuss and plan high-impact independent journalism around the economy in May, and a coordinating committee planning meeting.

Over 60 individuals traveled across the country to attend our February 2009 meeting in Washington, DC. The meeting melded one-on-one member networking, small and large group discussions, network initiatives on the future media landscape and conversations with special guests. The Media Consortium provided travel stipends to ensure that as many members as possible could attend this critical meeting.

At the meeting, special guests included: Chris Hughes, the Obama campaign’s online organizing guru; Rep. Raul Grijalva, Co-chair of the Congressional Progressive Caucus; and Laura Quinn of Catalist. These guests provided critical information on how consortium members could integrate online organizing models and social media technology into their work, access an insider’s view of organizing plans within Congress, and investigate opportunities to target and build out new audiences.   These annual meetings are the framework for The Media Consortium's efforts to support and foster relationships, information sharing and collaborations among individual members and the network as a whole.

In 2009, the consortium organized its first issue-focused meeting. 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.

Meeting plans for 2010 include an all-member meeting in February, a Coordinating Committee strategic planning retreat and potential regional meetings and trainings related to the release of and implementation of recommendations from *The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism,* The Media Consortium's forthcoming report on how independent media must navigate the current and future media landscape.

The Media Consortium plays a unique role in gathering and bringing key allies and new partners together. Support from the Open Society Institute 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.

Editorial Tipsheet: Helping the independent media break news
In 2009, the consortium developed a system that fosters a clear pipeline of communication between journalists and organizations on the ground. The goal: build connective tissue between key allies and consortium members that supports the production and distribution of high-quality, high-impact journalism.

Launched as a beta test in July 2009, the program connects issue experts from leading non-profits, think tanks, advocacy organizations and government offices to journalists, producers, reporters and editors within the consortium. How does it work? Recruited experts fill out a short online form and provide story tips, give key “insider” information and note future trends. This information is stored in a private database accessed only by consortium members. The tip sheet helps feed stories and information to consortium members to help them break stories and identify future trends.

MC staff have vetted and recruited a list of organizations and individuals who specialize in areas like economics, labor, foreign policy, women’s rights, civil rights, healthcare, and Congress to feed tips directly to consortium members. Our founding partners for this project include Demos, People for the American Way, Change Congress, and the National Council of La Raza. This is a low-cost, high-impact project that requires consortium staff management. Funds from the Open Society Institute would be directed to staff oversight and management of this project.

**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. We are working to increase media diversity from within and are moving a young, diverse set of media makers into the mainstream.

With independent media demonstrating initiative and dedication to developing talent, we can attract a diverse set of young visionaries, helping to ensure the longevity of our respective organizations and foster the kinds of innovative thinking necessary to building a successful media sphere. We launched the Independent Media Internships in 2009 and will be launching the Media Darlings project in 2010.

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 in May 2009 with five diverse, talented young media makers selected from a pool of 190 applicants. These interns were 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. Four of the five Summer 2009 interns are female; three are bilingual; two are of Hispanic descent; one is of Native American descent.

After only a few weeks of work, one intern authored a groundbreaking report on the impact of the recession on ethnic media, which garnered the 4th highest pageviews of all time for ColorLines.com. Another intern made the front page of the Huffington Post with a blog on the role of Twitter in the Iranian election protests.

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 is providing 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 17 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.

Creating the Next Generation of Media Darlings
While the internships focus on bringing in fresh talent to the sector, there is a critical need to support mid-career independent media makers as well. The Media Darlings project is the next step in building a successful leadership pipeline.

If we want to make the next generation of media leaders, we need to promote, publicize, and connect our talent to the establishment media, targeted audiences, allies, and even unlikely outlets. Media Consortium staff has developed a beta plan for this program that embraces innovative communications strategies to push out and brand these journalists as critical voices. The goals for this initiative include:

* Make the next generation of Media Darlings.
* Create a sustainable and scalable program to increase the influence and impact of a diverse set of independent journalists, their work, and media outlets on the political and public dialogue. We’ll undertake concentrated efforts to increase their presence on MSM, reach new audiences and employ new media/journalism tools.
* Legitimize and expand the audience of the independent media to new and established communities.

We are currently building a unique collaboration with Joel Silberman and the New Organizing Institute for a project launch with four young journalists in the second half of 2010. Joel is a communications strategist and consultant in addition to his multi-faceted international career as a performer, director, and producer. Media/message consulting clients include People For the American Way Foundation, Media Matters for America, GLAAD, Jonathan Lewis, Jon Stryker, Jane Hamsher/FireDogLake, Nate Silver (fivethiryeight.com), Matt Debergalis (Act Blue), Digby, Jerome Armstrong, Ned Lamont, Working Assets, Young People For, Democracia USA, The Center for Progressive Leadership and the National Women’s Law Center. The New Organizing Institute is the only progressive advocacy and campaign training program focused on cutting-edge online organizing techniques, political technology and the intersection with field and management of these areas of new organizing.

NOI will house Media Talent 2.0, a new initiative developed by Silberman, focused on developing the media talents of the next generation of activists, thinkers and journalists.  The Media Consortium will be one of the founding clients of this critical program.  Media Talent 2.0 and the The Media Consortium agree that beyond reporting skills, diversity will be a key requirement. We are not looking to repeat a pattern of promoting older, white, males, but recruit young, talented reporters who identify as people of color, are from different economic backgrounds and of different genders. Once recruited, these young journalists will undergo a four-day media training with Joel that will include everything from movement coaching to lessons on diction and messaging. After the training, The MC will support a booker housed at Media Talent 2.0 to place these journalists in mainstream media and targeted media, and Joel will be available to coach trainees prior to any media appearances.

A diverse range of Media Consortium members strongly believe that building a successful media leadership pipeline will dramatically scale up independent media as a whole and have tangible benefits for individual media outlets. The Media Consortium staff will be aggressively developing and fundraising for this project throughout the next year to support its growth and impact beyond the test launch. Open Society Institute's support would help The Media Consortium's efforts to bring this project into fruition.

**Focus on Audience Development**
The Media Consortium’s third strategic principle is to leverage our members’ content to expand their audience and to 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 Creative 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 using the NewsLadder ([www.newsladder.net](http://www.newsladder.net)) aggregation platform and distribution tools to link, filter and distribute our members content to new audiences. The Media Consortium is currently focused on four subject areas including: economy, immigration, healthcare, and sustainability/environment. The program is growing in popularity, and many members and allied organizations find the blogs invaluable.

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.  A sample list of our current partners includes:

* 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
* Rock the Vote
* Young People For
* WhiteHouse2.org

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.

In October 2009, MC staff will move all functions of the MediaWires project under one roof, creating a one-stop shop at www.themediaconsortium.org. This transition will more tightly link the syndicated blogs to our members' content to increase traffic and audience development at a lower cost.Support from the Open Society Institute will allow us to both maintain and evolve this program in 2010.

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 this year, The Media Consortium is working with Catalist, a company that houses one of the most comprehensive databases of 250 million voter-aged in the country, to do just that. In 2009, Catalist worked with 15 TMC members and provided 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. Four consortium members, including Air America, *The Nation, Mother Jones* and AlterNet are the founding partners of this network, now called Ad Progress, which is in its initial launch phase. 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 will use 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 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 the right answer. The consortium is developing the Innovation and Incubation Labs project to help our members become leaders of tomorrow's media field. Please see the attached document for more information about this exciting initiative. The Innovation and Incubation Labs will, a major strategic project in 2010, will directly address the crisis in journalism by developing concrete, winning strategies that will help the independent media sector thrive for years to come.   A project specific budget is also attached.

**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.

Media Consortium staff also disseminates findings and information in multiple ways. On a daily basis, we curate and share the “best” information on journalism and business model practices with our members through an RSS feed on our web site and emails to our member list serv. We also conduct strategic brainstorming sessions at our in-person member meetings about this research and how it applies to the work of the network. Consortium staff regularly participate in outside conferences and workshops to share our findings about the network’s development and results from its initiatives.

**Budget and Fundraising for 2010**
The Media Consortium’s projected 2010 budget is $501,000, which includes funds already committed from the Surdna Foundation and The Arca Foundation (noted as roll-over). This also includes 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. This is a moment of great opportunity for progressive journalism organizations to play a crucial part in the shape of our democracy. We must not stop now.

The Media Consortium’s 2010 budget allocates $197,000 for personnel and administrative costs, including organizational support, travel, legal, and website hosting. The balance of $270,000 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.

This grant will be divided between supporting general operations for The Media Consortium related to staff oversight, management and project support. General operations support will help us to sustain and expand capacity for The Media Consortium. A majority of the grant’s funds will be directed to the projects themselves, including: The Winter/Spring expansion of the Independent Media Internships program;thegrowth of theMediaWires project through the first half of 2010; the launch of the Innovation and Incubation Lab project, business/audience development opportunities and provide ongoing collaboration and networking support for members.

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 $200,000 over two years from The Open Society Institute.



**Innovation and Incubation Lab**A project of The Media Consortium

**Introduction**

*“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)

Independent media is facing broad opportunities and challenges. Business models are broken by the migration of audiences and ad dollars to the digital space and a complicated online ecosystem that includes new competitors. The digital revolution has also given birth to many new independent media organizations and created unprecedented opportunities for the entire sector.

The cost of reaching new audiences has dropped radically and the emerging media sphere includes a welcome emphasis on independent, critical, diverse news and opinion. Media Consortium members like The Young Turks, Salon and Talking Points Memo are proving that you can reach audiences of hundreds of thousands, even millions of people each day using new media. These organizations are building web-native editorial products and web-native business models that are revolutionizing the business.

But many journalism outlets are having trouble bridging the gap between yesterday and tomorrow's media.Media Consortium members can shift their organizations out of crisis mode and take advantage of the tremendous opportunity the digital revolution provides—but only if they understand the tone, pace, technology, and unique editorial products that thrive on the web. And those who are succeeding can expand on the lessons they've learned and begin to build institutions that will sustain themselves for years to come. Through its Innovation and Incubation Lab (II Lab), The Media Consortium will create a dynamic program that offers consulting, expertise, and a strategic space to help its members understand, navigate and experiment to overcome crisis and move into opportunity.

In 2009, The Media Consortium produced a comprehensive look at the current and future media environment in a report called, *The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism*, (to be released in late September 2009). The report lays out both the crisis and opportunities that media makers are fielding, and makes recommendations on how The Media Consortium can help move its members to more sustainable and robust models. Broad recommendations include:

* Increase experimentation
* Leverage unique role of consortium
* Build audiences as communities

But time is running out. Corporate media is starting to regain its footing in the digital space and the crisis with old models is forcing some brands to scale back faster than they can scale up to a new approach.

It’s time to get to work. One of the most important recommendations from the report was for The Media Consortium to develop an Incubation and Innovation Lab that supports 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. The Media Consortium has developed a program that combines one-on-one consulting and organized and ongoing lab environments to accomplish this goal. This lab would also serve as a feedback and education system for members to build upon their experiments and experiences.

**About II Lab**

*“Publishers can fight it and cling to old, crumbling models, or they can get in the game themselves by offering content producers sophisticated ways to reach/observe/respond to reader behavior, directly."*

—Johanna Vondeling, Vice President, Editorial and Digital, Berrett-Kohler Publishers

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

The Media Consortium's Innovation and Incubation Lab (II Lab) will focus on helping members experiment with new business, publishing and editorial models that take advantage of the new, web-enabled reader/publisher relationships. Appropriate and effective models will vary depending on the outlet's individual editorial goals, resources and business needs. II lab will allow members to learn from outside experts and trade experiences, information, and ongoing questions with each other. Members will not only discover the best strategies for their organizations, but learn 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 of in which education, deployment of practices and evolution of experiments moves outward to benefit the whole independent media sector. Experimentation will lead to successes, sometimes failures, and create space for media outlets to identify and implement a long-term formula for ongoing sustainability and impact that will support their critical journalism.

Cumulatively, these publishing and editorial strands represent a strong and strategic shift for independent media makers to move towards new opportunities that will encourage sustainability, long-term impact for their content, and a healthy transition into 21st century media models. II Lab will implement this strategy in two parts: The first being one-on-one consulting with a select group of MC members; the second, small-group labs that support education, collaboration and experimentation around specific business and journalism topics.

**The Program**

**PART ONE: One-on-One Consulting**

While many TMC members are eager to experiment and innovate, they do not have first-hand experience or capacity to make the first strides towards long-term sustainability. This deep thinking and experimentation requires funds many members do not have to hire the right consultants or staff to lead the process. That is why the first part of The II Lab will provide special, one-on-one consulting for TMC members. In a recent member survey, 88% of members said that they were very interested in this process.

Consulting services will include landscape assessment, goal setting, and plan development. Three members will receive this specialized consulting per each three-month period. Andrew Golis, Deputy Publisher of Talking Points Memo, will provide consulting services. In his time at TPM, Andrew scaled up the organization's business and editorial models, capturing early success and rationalizing it into the current model. In early 2009, Time Magazine called TPM “the prototype of what a successful Web-based news organization is likely to be in the future.”

Consulting for each member will follow a similar strategic arc, but be tailored to the specific member's needs. By the end of the consulting period, members will have a full overview of the current and future media landscape, have determined their five-year goals for growth and laid out a one-year plan to help achieve those goals. Golis will work with each member an average of 20 hours/month, including a two-day strategic retreat to kick-start the consulting time-period and weekly consulting and training for members to determine the ins-and-outs, best practices, tools and opportunities for the first part of that one-year plan. Overall, the consulting will help members lay the path to increasing sustainability through revenue models, audience development and impact enhancement through new editorial opportunities. The results of the consultation will then be shared with other MC members, providing invaluable case studies and lessons learned to the sector.

If funding allows, The Media Consortium will also provide $3,000 seed money to members participating in the program to move forward on one or two of the major ideas that emerged from the goal-setting and plan development process. This money will not be directed towards current operations, but to support innovation and experimentation with new business or journalism model ideas developed during the consulting process.

Through this part of the II Lab, The Media Consortium hopes to provide one-on-one consulting for at least 12 of its 45 members over a 12-month period.Media Consortium members will be asked to pay a nominal fee of $500 for this expert three-month consulting program to help cover operational costs, including travel, lodging, etc.

**PART TWO: Small Group Labs**

While some members receive intense one-on-one consulting, small group labs will run concurrently. Lab participants will focus on one particular business or journalism topic, such as experimenting with mobile delivery of content that they will research, explore and ultimately experiment around. Organized by Media Consortium staff, these small group sessions will include regular conference calls with participating members and outside experts, at least one in-person meeting for lab participants, online information sharing spaces (wikis, list servs, etc.) and more. This structure will provide lab members with the opportunity and space for self-education, peer knowledge sharing, access to outside experts, and collaborations that can scale up and improve the long-term sustainability of their outlets.

With these small-group labs, The Media Consortium's goals are to support deep learning and incremental shifts for TMC members to develop new models of revenue generation, audience development and editorial opportunities. Cumulatively, these labs will catalyze a broad shift in how independent media outlets operate, survive and thrive in a 21st century landscape.

Through a members survey in August 2009, The Media Consortium has already identified the three main topics of interest for members to explore and experiment with during the next 12 months, including: Creating mobile content and cutting deals for revenue opportunities, experimenting with journalism models, and increasing reader-supported content.

Each lab will run for four to five months. The first lab will start in the first quarter of 2010. In addition to organizing the labs, The Media Consortium will provide seed money of $15,000 to help incubate a collaborative experiment. If costs go over $15,000, TMC members will decide how to pool resources to cover the difference. The small-group labs will follow these basic phases:

*Step 1: Identify members to participate in lab*

*Step 2: Resource Gathering and Research*

*Step 3: Experiment Idea Generation and Decision-Making*

*Step 4: Design and Implement Experiment*

*Step 5: Assess and Move Forward*

**Conclusion**

As *The Big Thaw* notes, “While changes to the news industry advanced at a glacial pace for many years ... transitions can come as quickly as the levees that broke in New Orleans. Trigger events cause sudden floods before a new system is in place to prevent it. News organizations are facing flash floods and many are in a mode akin to sudden-death, wilderness survival. Laurence Gonzalez, in his book, *Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why*, explained that those people who most quickly surrender to their new circumstances, take decisive action, and believe anything is possible are the most ones most likely to survive. Each independent media organization must answer two questions in order to survive, 'What will you be standing on when the water reaches you?' and 'How will you boldly move to higher ground?'"

The II Lab program will provide critical help to Media Consortium members seeking higher ground. Through experimentation and testing, we can create more opportunity and stability for the future of independent media.