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**Proposal Narrative: Natural Gas Reporting Project**

*Organization Background*

Founded in 2005, The Media Consortium is 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 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

*Executive Summary*

The Media Consortium and a select group of its members— *Earth Island Journal*, National Radio Project, Link TV, Chelsea Green, Specialty Studios and Care2 — are seeking support for our Natural Gas Reporting Project. This multi-media project will shed new light on the booming gas industry in the US through in-depth, investigative reporting broadcast via a variety of platforms. We will tell the stories of those impacted directly by fracking for shale gas. We will also point to positive outcomes, with reports on individuals and communities seeking to hold energy companies accountable to reasonable standards of behavior. A critical component of this project is its multimedia nature—Project members utilize print, digital, radio, tv, film, book, and social media publishing platforms. By building in a multimedia strategy from the start, we will ensure that our reporting and distribution will inform and engage many different types of audiences, with the aim that they become more involved in the political debates over natural gas extraction.

*Proposal Narrative*

No matter who wins the 2012 election, “natural” gas will be on the top of the nation’s energy menu. During the 2012 State of the Union address, President Obama said: “The development of natural gas will create jobs and power trucks and factories that are cleaner and cheaper, proving that we don't have to choose between our environment and our economy.” Mitt Romney agrees.

There’s a problem in that formulation. A range of academic studies and media reports have concluded that fracking is incompatible with protecting the environment and public health [see <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/business/energy-environment/natural-gas/index.html>] . The frack-gas rush occurring across the United States has raised serious questions about this almost completely unregulated industry, including how much it is contributing to groundwater pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and seismic activity. Human health impacts associated with natural gas extraction are especially worrisome.

Because the industry does not release information that would make research possible, academic researchers are often stymied, and dueling studies by researchers create more confusion than clarity for the public. While news organizations have begun to raise the warning flag about fracking, many of the most important stories remain untold, or at least unavailable to the majority of the media-following public. A short list of these stories includes:

• The appearance of “natural” gas wells in urban and suburban communities. The higher population densities in such areas will complicate the challenges of waste-fluid disposal, minor earthquakes, and methane leakage that rural areas and many urban areas such as Dallas-Fort Worth (in the Barnett Shale) are already experiencing.

• The trans-partisan resistance to fracking. Concerns about groundwater pollution and frustration with corporate overreach aren’t limited to environmental organization members. Tea Party groups in Virginia and Ohio, for example, have been involved in opposing fracking in their areas.

• An investigation into the non-disclosure agreements signed by people who have sued the industry and received some compensation. One reason it has been difficult to track instances of groundwater contamination and/or human illnesses associated with fracking is that plaintiffs who settle out of court generally sign agreements not to speak about their case (last summer’s Pennsylvania settlement with three families for $1.6 million was the first we know of where this was not the case). A state-by-state accounting of cases settled out of court would help to illustrate the breadth of the industry’s impacts. This will involve many Freedom of Information Act/Freedom of Information Law requests as well as some serious investigative reporting.

• The slipshod regulation of the country’s spider web network of “natural” gas pipelines. Nearly two years after an explosion in San Bruno, CA killed eight people, most states and the federal government have done little to ensure pipeline safety. And yet pipelines are being proposed — and frequently approved without independent study — at an alarming rate, all over the country.

The list will grow, of course, as our reporters dig into the workings of the gas industry and explore community concerns about fracking.

Why are we--six outlets that specialize in environmental coverage--choosing to collaborate to tell these stories, rather than pursuing them individually? Because this Media Consortium collaboration offers a new, exciting, high-impact way for us to tell these stories. The Climate Desk, to which some Media Consortium members belong , has already demonstrated the power of a number of media to work together to build audience for stories on the environment. The Natural Gas Reporting Project goes further, however, by bringing together a coalition of *multimedia* organizations. This project is an experiment to test our hypothesis that we will gain increased impact by pushing this story out across every single type of media platform.

We know that different demographics access media over different variety of platforms. We also know that broadcast TV and radio are more important than digital platforms for the low income and rural communities that may be most affected by fracking. [See <https://www.centerforsocialinclusion.org/ideas/broadband-equity/>] In our multimedia collaboration, text-based stories will come out online, in print, and as full-length books. Producers will accompany reporters to ensure that, from the start, content is produced for radio, YouTube spots, and TV specials. Using multiple platforms across different media outlets will give a longer life to each story, reach a greater audience, and promote viral pickup. All of our reporting — whether radio, video, or print — will be cross-promoted via social media. Our multimedia storytelling will better reach those who need to have a say in determining our energy future.

Our unique distribution model will reach a base audience of at least 30 million readers, viewers and listeners. We will leverage our audience to create impact by building outreach materials into our project. Care2 will create petitions based specifically on the investigative reports we generate, activating their 19 million members to address fracking. Specialty Studios will use their expertise to create educational materials. And we will work directly with grassroots activists like Maura Stephens in New York and Chris Wahmhoff in Kalamazoo to source stories and to ensure that the information we find is acted upon.

This unique collaboration will work across media platforms to deliver reporting that will give people the information they need to influence lawmakers and help create policies to protect the environment and public health.

Specifically, Park Foundation support will help underwrite:

* Reporters’ and producers’ fees for print, digital, radio, and video stories to allow us to produce high quality journalism;
* Travel costs for reporters and producers to travel to fracking hot spots to produce investigative journalism;
* Production costs of video reports for radio and television broadcast;
* Writer’s fee for at least one in-depth book about hydraulic fracturing;

*Project Collaborators & Principal Personnel*

The organizations involved in the Natural Gas Reporting Project are well positioned to make a significant impact with this collaboration. Each of our outlets has a proven track record of breaking important stories. Our independent news organizations are an essential alternative to the corporate media, helping to frame the political debate and reporting stories that often go unnoticed by larger outlets.

TMC **Executive Director Jo Ellen Kaiser** will oversee this multi-organization effort. Passionate about mission-driven independent media, Jo Ellen has worked for a succession of independent magazines, including stints as Managing Editor and Associate Publisher of *Tikkun*, Publisher of *LiP*: Informed Revolt, and Executive Director and Editor-in-Chief of *Zeek*. She is driven by a belief that democratic societies thrive only when their members have access to accurate information and informed opinion.

**The Media Consortium** has a strong track record of managing similar collaborations among members. Past collaborations have been funded by such foundations as OSI, Wyncote, and the Media Democracy Fund. Media Consortium project management staff will facilitate the partnership, ensure partners meet specific output goals, manage the budget, and track impact.

For our Natural Gas Reporting Project, Media Consortium staff will coordinate coverage among these outlets:

***Earth Island Journal*** ([www.earthislandjournal.org](http://www.earthislandjournal.org/)) is a quarterly magazine that publishes hard-hitting investigative journalism, analysis, and essays that make connections between the environment and other contemporary issues. By serving as a forum for debates among environmental advocates, the *Journal* is helping to grow a smarter, sharper, more strategic environmental movement. As part of the Natural Gas Reporting Project, the Journal will field freelance reporters in fracking regions to do print and web stories.

**Link TV** ([www.linktv.org](http://www.linktv.org/)) broadcasts programs that engage, educate and activate viewers to become involved in the world. These programs provide a unique perspective on international news, current events, and diverse cultures, presenting issues not often covered in the US media. As part of the Natural Gas Reporting Project, Link TV will increase its coverage of fracking-related controversies.

**National Radio Project** ([www.radioproject.org](http://www.radioproject.org/)) is an independent, non-profit organization committed to investigative journalism, in-depth critical analysis, the promotion of civic participation and the dissemination of educational material. Its core focus is the radio newsmagazine Making Contact, broadcast on more than 140 stations across the US. As part of the Natural Gas Reporting Project, National Radio Project will produce in-depth radio segments about the gas industry.

**Care2** ([www.care2.com](http://www.care2.com/) ) is a trusted social action network that empowers millions of people to lead a healthy, sustainable lifestyle and support socially responsible causes. Care2's content includes original stories, blogs, and syndication partners covering causes ranging from politics to human rights and animal welfare. By integrating relevant content with action opportunities such as petitions, pledges, and daily actions, Care2 builds a deeper level of passion and engagement with its 19 million users. As part of the Natural Gas Reporting Project, Care2 will host a range of petitions that target elected officials and seek to influence their votes on bills governing the gas industry.

**Specialty Studios** ([www.specialtystudios.com](http://www.specialtystudios.com)) is a fully integrated media and content studio harnessing the power of socially conscious media to touch hearts, engage minds, and inspire action. We partner with producers to build powerful campaigns that get audiences actively involved in creating solutions to the world's most pressing challenges.

For 26 years, **Chelsea Green** ([www.chelseagreen.com](http://www.chelseagreen.com/)) has been the publishing leader for books on the politics and practice of sustainable living. The company, which just recently became employee-owned, leads the industry both in terms of content—foundational books on renewable energy, green building, organic agriculture, eco-cuisine, and ethical business. As part of the Natural Gas Reporting Project, Chelsea Green will publish a book that addresses the possible dangers posed by hydraulic fracturing.

*Project Timeline*

The Natural Gas Reporting Project is a two-plus year endeavor to deepen coverage during this crucial time for the gas industry.

The project will begin with a reporter and producer going out to research stories. After 3-6 months of research time, stories will begin appearing at least monthly online, in print, on radio, on TV and via social media (including petitions) for the next 18 months. A book project based on this reporting will be scheduled by Chelsea Green for publication approximately 24-30 months after the start of this project. Depending on the politics of the gas industry, we may seek additional funding to extend the project.

*Other Fundraising: Committed Sources and Pending Sources*

The Media Consortium has launched a metrics experiment that is looking specifically at whether editorial collaborations create greater impact than one-off stories in the digital space. Approximately $10-$15,000 of funding for the metrics experiment (already committed via the Deutsch Foundation) will be applied to this Natural Gas collaboration.

The Media Consortium has also applied for funding for a media policy project that is designed to look specifically at the intersection of media policy with other policy areas, including fracking. If we receive this grant from the Media and Democracy Fund, up to $5,000 can be put towards the Natural Gas collaboration.

We have sent Letters of Intent to the Heinz Foundation and the 11th Hour Foundation to support the Natural Gas Reporting Project; we are waiting to hear back from those two organizations. The Media Consortium and Specialty Studios have jointly submitted an application to the Fledgling Fund for $50,000 to support some of the video production costs of this effort.

*Evaluation Criteria*

We will use four quantitative metrics for gauging success:

• Measuring the number of online readers, listeners, and viewers for each story;

• Tracking where and how our stories are re-printed or re-posted online by other outlets;

• Calculating the number of people who follow through to take action via Care2;

• Measuring the extent to which our stories change the prevailing narratives or memes in the digital space (a tool being developed for us by Crimson Hexagon as part of our Metrics Impact Innovation and Incubation Lab).

Given the sizable audiences of Care2 and LinkTV, we expect that we will reach over 30 million people with our stories.

Impact cannot just be measured by numbers, however. Impact for us is measured by actions people take as a result of engaging with the content of our stories. [See <http://www.ethanzuckerman.com/blog/2011/06/30/metrics-for-civic-impacts-of-journalism/>]. We will measure this impact through qualitative metrics—recording stories of real people who engaged in natural gas debates and actions in their communities as a result of our stories. We will harvest these stories by working closely with our colleagues in the advocacy and activist worlds, who will see the impact our material has on their work. The real measure of our success will be hearing that our stories did in fact lead audiences to take action to protect our environment and communities.

Finally, and not insignificantly, our ability to maintain and develop this collaboration over a two-year period will demonstrate that multimedia collaborations are possible, and will encourage further collaborative work in the media sector.