May 25, 2011

Herb Block Foundation

Encouraging Citizen Involvement

1730 M. Street NW Ste 901

Washington DC 20036

Dear Marcela Brane,

NOTE TO ERIN: MAKE SURE TO SHORTEN ALL LINKS VIA BITLY AND WRITE THEM OUT IN THE LOI

Thanks to social networking tools and portable devices, headline news is more abundant than ever. Yet there are fewer and fewer entry points for citizens to understand and engage with complex issues that impact their lives, such as the ongoing financial crisis. Our democracy is struggling as a result. But there is hope.

A new generation of artists are merging comics with the journalistic process, making the issues that impact our democracy relevant and accessible. From urban planning to for-profit colleges; Iraqi refugees to foreign policy, today’s graphic journalists are producing high-impact work that is highly portable across multiple platforms, technologies, and languages. Their work can inform and activate millions of citizens, but only if we build a cooperative infrastructure that makes it possible for media organizations to incubate, produce, and distribute such work.

To address these problems and build a strong infrastructure to support innovative graphic journalism, The Media Consortium is excited to propose a four month long Graphic Journalism Incubator. This program will dramatically scale up media outlets’ ability to communicate complex concepts via visual narrative, thus expanding their audiences and engaging their constituencies in the issues that shape their lives. Comics, or graphic journalism is one of the most exciting opportunities to educate audiences and encourage involvement in public life. To take advantage of this opportunity and empower news outlets as ignition points for civic engagement, The Media Consortium is seeking a grant of $25,000 from the Herb Block Foundation for a Graphic Journalism Incubator.

**Who We Are**

The Media Consortium is a nonprofit national network of independent media organizations. Our members include *The Nation*, *Yes! Magazine*, LinkTV, and Alternet. Founded in 2006, our mission is to amplify independent media's voice in order to impact public discourse. We achieve this mission by fostering editorial collaborations and supporting innovation among our membership body. In the past year, The Media Consortium has successfully executed three innovation labs designed to help members engage their constituencies in the production and dissemination of news. From integrating gaming mechanics into the news distribution process to integrating communities in the production and dissemination of news, TMC has built a powerful infrastructure for seeding journalistic innovations in independent media. QUOTE ABOUT ABOUT HOW AWESOME WE ARE HERE?

A few Media Consortium members, including the *American Prospect* and *Truthout* are beginning to experiment with narrative comics, bur most media organizations don’t know where to start. Furthermore, most graphic journalists work as freelance staff and do not have long-term relationships with many media outlets. The Graphic Journalism Lab’s objectives will be to enable media organizations to experiment with graphic journalism via hands on trainings and partnerships—in order to enable media to better inform, educate and involve citizens around pressing policy issues.

Media Consortium brings special expertise to this new field. Our Managing Director Erin Polgreen has written about comics journalism and spoken about the emerging field at the National Conference for Media Reform and other venues. She has relationships with many of the best comics journalists working today. Erin will manage this project, ensuring that content produced by the lab will be specifically designed to empower citizens to understand complex policy data so that they can better engage in the democratic process.

**Incubator Overview**

Graphic journalism is a hybrid field that merges meticulously researched and fact-checked stories with lucid illustrative work. In the last year, a treasure trove of high-impact work has been released. Here’s a snapshot of the baseline impact of this emerging field:

* Susie Cagle’s [An Education in For-Profit Educations](http://campusprogress.org/articles/infographic_an_education_in_for-profit_education/) has been picked up by Lifehacker, Consumerist, and Huffington Post. This reported infocomic has gotten over 38,000 unique pageviews on Campus Progress, and has been shared on Facebook over 4,000 times.
* Dan Archer’s [Honduran Coup: A Graphic History](http://www.archcomix.com/honduran-coup-comic/%22%20%5Ct%20%22_blank) garnered over 20,000 unique pageviewss in the first weeks of being published online and then went viral on Boing Boing, which led to print runs in Sweden, Denmark, Greece, Brazil, and India. It has been translated into multiple languages, including Spanish and Japanese, and Archer has also turned the comic into a successful iPhone app.
* Wendy MacNaughton’s comic about [San Francisco Public Libraries](http://therumpus.net/2011/05/meanwhile-the-san-francisco-public-library/) garnered 18,000 uniques and 2500 Facebook “likes” in its first three days of publication.

As the numbers above demonstrate, reported comics are incredibly actionable and sharable. All of the above works have had moderate success without a solid cooperative infrastructure to support their creation and expand their reach and impact. With the support of the Herb Block Foundation, TMC could build a collaborative process by which the impact and reach of this content would be exponentially expanded. Graphic journalism has the ability to disseminate information via smart visuals and pithy text, which makes the form imminently sharable—the perfect ignition for citizen engagement in today’s social media environment.

Through an application process, TMC staff will select 5-7 Media Consortium members (list of Consortium members [available here](http://www.themediaconsortium.org/our-members)) to participate in this lab. The lab will take place over a three to four month period, and will focus on educating newsroom staff, connecting them to leaders in the graphic journalism field, and creating space for them to experiment with graphic journalism hands on with a dedicated fellow.

First, members will participate in webinars led by comics journalists demonstrating the different kinds of visuals such journalists can create, the software necessary to support digital comics art, and the logistics of pricing and production. After this initial educational period, the Consortium will place comics journalists in fellowships with each organization, with the requirement that the journalist and organization collaborate to produce at least 3 pieces designed to engage and empower citizens around policy issues over the next three months.

At the end of the project, organizations will provide analytics on how many readers/users viewed these pieces and, if they included an “action” component, how many viewers “took action” after viewing the pieces. Each media organization will also provide a written report on what they learned and how they plan to use comics journalists in the future.

**Partnerships**

The key to making this program sustainable and high impact is strong partnerships. The above-mentioned artists are part of a collective, [GraphicJournos](http://www.graphicjournos.com), and have agreed to be strategic partners for this program. They will help craft trainings and partner with media outlets to produce content.

We are also incredibly excited to count Cartoon Movement, an international publishing house for political comics and graphic journalism, as a partner and sponsor. Cartoon Movement will financially sponsor one fellow in the production of three works for this incubator. CM will also make content produced via this partnership available for international syndication, massively increasing its reach. The cash value of this partnership is $5,000 and the in-kind is at least another $5,000 of additional promotion and distribution assistance.

**Anticipated Impact and Outcomes**

15-21 new pieces of comics journalism

Increased capacity of news organizations to use comics journalism

Increased engagement of citizens in complex, data-driven news stories

NEED TO NOTE REGIONS OF IMPACT, MAKE SURE ABOVE TEXT IS INTEGRATED INTO PROSE.

Media Consortium members include both national and regional organizations from around the United States, and we will encourage outlets to produce a mixture of content that is designed to reach audiences on a local and national level. We anticipate that the comics journalism generated by this project will reach millions of media consumers users on a national level.

This project requires $30,000 to fully fund 7 organizations. We are requesting $25,000 from the Herb Block Foundation, and HAVE XXX IN SUPPORT COMMITTED FROM CARTOON MOVEMENT seeking individual donors to make up the remainder. We are able to begin this lab as soon as we receive funding, with an anticipated start date of October 1, 2011. A copy of the Foundation for National Progress’ 501c3 letter is attached. I’ve also attached our operating budget and the FNP’s audited financial statement.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a full proposal to the Herb Block Foundation.

Sincerely,



Jo Ellen Green Kaiser

Executive Director, The Media Consortium

joellen@themediaconsortium.com

• a brief statement of the issues to be addressed, and of your organization's involvement with these issues,

• a brief summary of the activities for which you are requesting support, including an outline of your objectives and anticipated outcomes, and a list of potential partners,

• the population and geographic areas targeted,

• the planned starting date and duration of the proposed activities,

• the total amount of funding needed, the amount requested from The Herb Block Foundation, and the sources (both in-hand and requested) of other support,

• a copy of your organization's IRS 501(c)(3) letter, and

• your organization's current total Operating Budget and audited financial statement.