

**A Proposal for General Support**

**Submitted by:** The Media Consortium,

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The digital revolution hit journalism hard, and it hasn’t let up yet. At first promising to democratize and diversify the news ecosystem, the internet age has succeeded mainly in disrupting old ways of newsgathering. Today, Big News is gradually being upstaged by Big Social, which is not news at all. Fortunately, the public has an alternative: the independent news sector.

With the right support and infrastructure, the independent news sector can provide the public with a stronger, more diverse mix of the local, national and international news it needs. In 2015, the Media Consortium will move boldly to meet that goal by entering into a merger with the Association of Alternative Newsmedia.

**The Back Story**. Today, the mighty empires built from daily newspapers are being sold off in smaller and smaller chunks.[[1]](#endnote-1) Corporate radio is replacing local and international content with cookie-cutter national feeds.[[2]](#endnote-2) Even broadcast TV networks, where 60% of Americans still get their news, are decimating the staffs of both their foreign bureaus and local news desks.[[3]](#endnote-3)

A generation ago, independent news outlets might have cheered the acute illness of big legacy corporate news media. Independent news has always served as an alternative to corporate power, including corporate media power. Even when so many big media empires are breaking apart, independent news still serves as a watchdog for media corporations like Comcast and Time Warner that dominate both internet access and legacy TV. That’s one of the reasons that the Media Consortium continues to run a Media Policy Education and Reporting Project, reporting on media consolidation, internet access issues, and corporate resistance to net neutrality.

Frankly, we observe the crisis in Big News with some schadenfreude. On the one hand, the ongoing dismemberment of Big News has opened up space for citizen journalism and nimble independent news outlets. That’s one reason the membership of the Media Consortium is growing, up 10% since 2013.

It’s not, however, as if corporate news media has been replaced by feisty independents. To the contrary. Instead of a media environment dominated by Big News, our media is increasingly dominated by the combination of Google-style search-based aggregators and sharing sites like Facebook that I call Big Social. Big Social appeals to a content-hungry audience by appearing to offer us “news.”[[4]](#endnote-4) Yet, as Stijn Debrowere has pointed out, “[Neither] YouTube nor Facebook or any of these other companies aim to be an alternative to journalism and much of what they facilitate or do doesn’t look like journalism at all.”[[5]](#endnote-5)

For all its shortcomings, Big News actually cared—still cares-- about “news.” Big Social, however, makes no pretensions to educate or inform us—only to “connect” us.[[6]](#endnote-6) Big Social helps us hear what we already want to hear, and see what we already want to see. As a result, our browsers are filled with cute cat photos, the latest political scandal faced by “the other side,” and of course, plenty of products to buy.[[7]](#endnote-7) In fact, we now know that Big Social designs its feeds not to give us news, but to enable advertisers to hit their marks. [[8]](#endnote-8) The very media that has the temerity to call itself a “news feed” is actually designed to segment and silo us rather than to inform and educate us. It connects us only to a marketplace rather than to each other.

**Independent News is More Critical than ever.** The digital revolution, in short, has meant that the need for real news is even greater now than ever. And increasingly, if we want news gathered by journalists whose primary mission is to inform and educate, the public will need independent news sources. Independent news is no longer just a useful “alternative” to Big News, but a necessary element of our emerging news ecosystem.

Who had the first reporter on scene in northern Nigeria when Boko Haram kidnapped all those girls? [Free Speech Radio News](http://fsrn.org),[[9]](#endnote-9) an outlet with a budget under $250K a year but with a pool of 3000 freelancers worldwide. Who had the only reporter on scene in Ferguson who knew anything about the local community? [The Riverfront Times](http://riverfronttimes.com), the alt-weekly in St. Louis.[[10]](#endnote-10) Who has done the most work to expose dark money in political campaigns? [Mother Jones](http://motherjones.com) and the Center for Media and Democracy’s [PR Watch](http://www.prwatch.org).

Last spring, the Media Consortium was contacted by activists in Kauai who were watching Big Ag chemical corporations purchase access to judges and politicians. They pleaded with us to send some journalists to Kauai to investigate. We did. What we found was that Dow, Monsanto, and DuPont were spending cash to elect officials who would look the other way when these companies sprayed cancer-causing pesticides on their fields. PRWatch, [Making Contact](http://www.radioproject.org), [Grist](http://grist.org), [Earth Island Journal](http://www.earthisland.org/journal/), [Truthout](http://www.truth-out.org), and the local alt paper, the [Hawaii Independent](http://hawaiiindependent.net/), published that story June 20.[[11]](#endnote-11) Suddenly, the [New York Times](http://www.nytimes.com) became interested in Kauai, and began publishing stories that summer.[[12]](#endnote-12) And the primary paper for the state, the [Star Advertiser](http://www.staradvertiser.com), chose on June 24 to publish results of a government pesticide study that had been available since May 16! Without independent eyes in Hawaii, that story might never have come to light!

Independent news plays a critical role in digging up stories Big News and Big Social miss. Immigration reform finally made headlines in all the major dailies (after immigrants’ struggles had been reported for years in outlets like [Colorlines](http://www.colorlines.com) and the [Nation](http://www.thenation.com)). What was missed in these stories, however, was the intersection between immigrant rights and voting rights. In a Media Consortium collaboration published in April 2018, [Feet in 2 Worlds](http://www.fi2w.org), [News Taco](http://www.newstaco.com), [City Limits](http://www.citylimits.org), Making Contact, and [Public News Service](http://www.publicnewsservice.org) joined together to report on dreamers who have been denied a path to citizenship as well as the large number of legal immigrants who are choosing not to become US citizens (and thus denied the right to vote) because of high costs, language requirements, and more.[[13]](#endnote-13) This story was picked up by the [Huffington Post](http://www.huffingtonpost.com).

The Media Consortium consistently brings diverse niche outlets together to produce in-depth reporting on stories that matter. In a media environment that is so segmented, we in the independent media know that we tell stories better when we tell them together.

**Independent News needs Organizational Support**. In the 1900s, local newspapers prospered when they were bought up by national corporations like Tribune and Gannett because those large corporations provided key infrastructure and business support. Today’s independents likewise require external support. Revenue from subscribers, members, donors, and advertising just barely pays for day-to-day editorial and basic business expenses. There is no extra money to cover long-term journalism projects on the one hand, or innovative business practices on the other. For these, independent journalism outlets turn to associations like the Media Consortium.

In the past year, for example, the Media Consortium has provided discounted email marketing and public relations database services for members; launched a project to provide members with the customer relationship management database they need; entered negotiations to provide a regular source for affordable videojournalism for member outlets; organized an annual conference for members to share best practices and learn about cutting-edge technology; participated (and involved outlets in) a ground-breaking impact study; and organized multiple editorial collaborations around media policy, money in politics, reproductive justice, immigrant rights, voting rights, and education.

When asked what the Media Consortium does for its members, one member said: “Sometimes, we need more technical training, sometimes we need a better means for fostering collaboration and creating new partnerships. Sometimes, we just need funding for important projects. This year in particular, we've found a great need to protect the rights of the press in particular. I'm so grateful for the purpose that TMC serves!”

In the same survey, we asked which Media Consortium activities are important or core to our mission? The answer from our 62 unique respondents was “all of them.” At our strategic planning meeting in Chicago in February, we asked the question another way: what would you do, we asked the 63 people representing 49 outlets, if the Media Consortium ceased to exist? The answer, from Rod Arakaki at Yes!, met resounding agreement: “We would have to create a new Media Consortium!”

**Building an Independent News Infrastructure: TMC + AAN.** We know the digital revolution has disrupted how we get our news. We know independent news organizations are no longer merely an alternative to Big News but are increasingly a necessary element of the new news ecosystem. We know these independent news organizations need our support. So, in 2014, the Media Consortium undertook a year-long strategic planning project to ask, how can we best provide that support?

Since our founding in 2005, the Media Consortium has focused on national news reporting, and on building the impact of independent journalism. To build the infrastructure we need to truly support our largest goals, we realized that we needed to increase our impact by adding outlets that focus on local news reporting. A recent project we did shows the power of a local/national network: in September, Jim Hightower wrote a feature piece highlighting how Amazon has taken shoppers away from local businesses. Fifteen alt-weekly outlets ran that piece, but what excited us was that eight of those outlets did their own reporting on how businesses in their communities were impacted by Amazon. We now have a national reporter pulling those local stories together for a new piece.

Imagine the power of this kind of local/national collaboration on stories around voting rights, money in politics, or climate change!

In the same way, we realize that the Media Consortium’s emphasis on making and measuring impact is helpful, but that our outlets also need more business services and mentoring to help them become more entrepreneurial when it comes to raising revenue. The alt-weekly association, the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, has focused almost exclusively on these business-side issues.

By merging the Media Consortium and the Association of Alternative Newsmedia (AAN), we will be able to provide the strong infrastructure independent news outlets need. AAN’s main organizational arm, a 501c6 trade association, will provide all the outlets with business services, revenue generation ideas, and communication tools. AAN’s 501c3 foundation will become an impact-focused arm, enabling us to reap the benefits of partnerships and collaborations across 250 local and national news outlets

The new AAN-TMC network will encompass outlets serving 200 cities around the US and Canada, as well as over 50 outlets serving different segments of the US and Canadian national market. Working together, we will provide a rich array of business services, cutting edge technology, and editorial collaboration opportunities to this larger network. In the next year, we will offer the following projects:

1) **Mobile Advertising Network.** News is quickly going mobile. Using AAN’s current network as our jumping off point, we will serve these readers with national advertisers and sponsors that few of the outlets could attract on their own. These ads will provide a stand-alone revenue stream for the outlets and for the new network.

2) **Deeply Discounted Software Tools.** The Vocus PR database and What Counts email marketing service offered by the Media Consortium, and CVC and Insperity services discounts offered by AAN, are just the start of a wide array of deeply discounted tools and services we will offer network members. We are especially interested in offering security tools, like the SafeDrop service TMC was able to offer to four TMC members, courtesy of the Glaser Progress Foundation.

3) **Legal and Technical Assistance.** AAN already has a lawyer on staff to offer legal advice to members; the new network will add an online specialist to help with website and API issues. In addition, ThinkRisk Legal Liability, currently available to AAN members, will be extended to TMC members.

5) **Affordable Access to Video Journalism**. Working with NAMAC, another sister organization, we are setting up a database to bring together independent documentary filmmakers and journalists to share content and cross-promote each other’s work.

6) **Impact Measurement and Analytics.** TMC is in the midst of a multi-year experiment measuring impact which will conclude its current phase in 2015. We will use the data from this research to design better impact measurement systems for the new network.

7) **Editorial Collaboration.** TMC is the leading expert in editorial collaborations, having organized over a dozen collaborations in 2014 alone. The HIghtower collaboration with the AAN Foundation has demonstrated the power of leveraging local and national reporting. In editorial collaborations and partnerships we will find the most immediate payoff for the public of this new network.

8) **Conferences and Communication**. Starting in 2015, our members will be able to take advantage of a fall leadership conference, a spring conference, and a summer conference. The first joint conference will be held in February 2015. Members will also have a password-protected web portal, along with specialized listservs, a weekly enewsletter, a tumblr, and dedicated facebook and twitter feeds.

Some of the value of our new joint organization will be invisible to the public. The shared business tools and services will enable each publication to create its own formula for economic sustainability. Such business-side infrastructure is absolutely vital to the health of the news sector as a whole.

**Public Value of a TMC-AAN Merger.** For the public, the value of that infrastructure will be most apparent in the new kind of editorial these partnered outlets can produce. Here are some of the ways a horizontal news network will work. We will:

1) **Localize National Content and Nationalize Local Content.** Having a local/national network will allow us to create robustly reported and deeply investigated stories that will reflect what is happening locally and that can change policy nationally. Best of all, these stories, because they will be reported by a number of local reporters, will contain the diversity of viewpoints that are too often missing on today’s bifurcated, partisan news outlets. We especially plan to target voting rights as a topic that would benefit from this local/national focus.

2) **Cross-Pollinate Audiences.** Today’s news economy, based on Big Social, deliberately segments and silos audiences. For example, environmental outlets follow fracking; feminist outlets follow reproductive rights. Too often, that means important stories are missed. For example, Media Consortium reporters from both environmental and feminist outlets, working collaboratively, discovered that North Dakota fracking boom towns are drawing sex workers, but offer almost no facilities for reproductive health. That story needs to be told, and it needs to be told to audiences who care about fracking, care about reproductive rights, and care about North Dakota. By creating editorial collaborations across niches, our network is able to cross-pollinate audiences with the news they need to hear.

In 2015, we want to use this kind of cross-pollination to better follow money in politics stories. As we saw in Kauai, money is used in politics to influence policy around particular issues. It is critical that audiences that care about those issues—whether they be environment, reproductive justice, immigration or something else—understand how corporate and big donor money is being used to sway policy.

3) **Pool Reporters to enable Investigative Reporting.** Big Social prioritizes the fast rather than the slow, the breaking news bit rather than the deep investigative report. With razor-thin budgets, most news outlets can’t afford the cost of a six month investigation at home, let alone the cost of an investigation that crosses state and national boundaries. Foundations can and should contribute to this kind of reporting, but relying solely on foundation money is dangerous for any truly independent outlet (what if no foundation is interested in the story that needs telling?)

An independent news network, however, can solve the cost of investigative reporting and travel-based reporting by pooling reporters. Pool reporters have long been used in war zones and other areas where sending reporters is limited by external factors. In a follow-up to our Kauai money in politics story, TMC and AAN recently experimented with pool reporting with great success. Truthout, Earth Island Journal, PR Watch, Making Contact, Cascadia Times, and the Hawaiian Independent joined together to pay Paul Koberstein to research a chlorpyrifos, a particular pesticide used in Kauai; his report, which was published by each outlet on October 11.[[14]](#endnote-14) Each outlet saw a bump in readership from this story, readers from truly diverse outlets—outlets that do not share readership—all saw this important story.

Media policy is an area that will especially benefit from pool reporting, especially as we expand to an international focus. Often, media policy news is made at conferences, meetings, or other events that are by invitation only or held in removed locations. By pooling reporters, we will be able to bring media policy issues to all our audiences.

**Next Steps.** Both AAN and TMC are approaching our partnership mindful that a truly functional new organization will have to be welcomed by all our members. Thus, we are proceeding with slow, calibrated steps.

Between July 2014 and January 2015 we are working together on a few discreet projects, including the Hightower share described above and an editorial collaboration around mental health and the ACA. In addition, three individuals with close ties to TMC, including TMC’s Executive Director Jo Ellen Kaiser, have been added to the AAN Foundation board.

February 4-7, 2015: TMC and AAN will hold a joint conference, combining AAN’s digital conference with TMC’s annual conference.

February 7, 2015: TMC members will officially vote to merge with AAN.

February 2015 to June 2015: Merger details will be negotiated with a joint committee, with the aim of producing new bylaws for the new organization.

July 2015: The merger and the new bylaws will be put before the members of AAN at their annual meeting in July 2015.

July 2015-July 2016: Unless we reach quick agreement, we will not name the new organization right away. Instead, we will take 6 months to a year to come up with a name that resonates with members of the new organization.

**Conclusion.** In the almost 10 years since the Media Consortium was first imagined, at Pocantico in 2005, we have faced the challenge of the digital revolution as we have pursued our mission of supporting and growing the impact of the independent news sector. As the digital revolution has matured, we see an opportunity for the independent news sector to become a critical source of reported news for the public. We are moving to take advantage of that opportunity by merging with a sister association, the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, with the aim of bringing local and national independent news outlets together.

The advantages of this merger are signficant. Together, we will be better able to support independnet news organizations in the infrastructure work they cannot achieve on their own, including providing them with the business tools and services that will secure their financial sustainability. But the real promise of our joint organization lies in our joint mission to serve the public by providing the public with the news they need: news that is local, national and international; news that crosses niches and topic areas; news that is accurate and well-reported, from features to investigative journalism.

Thank you for supporting the Media Consortium as we move towards this vision.[[15]](#endnote-15)

1. Pew records that dailies are still cutting newsroom staff: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2013/06/25/newspaper-newsrooms-suffer-large-staffing-decreases/>. The most recent media empire to recognize its print business is dying is Gannett: http://dealbook.nytimes.com/2014/08/05/gannett-to-spin-off-its-print-business/ [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Free Press has documented the problem of cross-ownership and consolidation in local TV and radio: <http://www.freepress.net/ownership/chart> See also this 2013 Pew report: <http://www.journalism.org/2014/03/26/a-boom-in-acquisitions-and-content-sharing-shapes-local-tv-news-in-2013/> [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The American Journalism Review first noted this trend in 2003: <http://ajrarchive.org/article.asp?id=3409>; the last US news bureau in Iraq closed in 2013: <http://www.mediabistro.com/tvnewser/cnn-shutters-baghdad-bureau-the-last-tv-news-bureau-in-iraq_b181431> [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Though Twitter’s service as a breaking news site may not last forever: <http://www.theguardian.com/media/media-blog/2014/oct/12/twitter-breaking-news-pr-vivian-schiller> [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. <http://debrouwere.org/2012/05/04/fungible/> [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. See Facebook’s Principles: <https://www.facebook.com/principles.php> [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. Valleywag on Facebook’s 2014 algorighm change: <http://valleywag.gawker.com/facebook-is-about-to-make-everyone-pay-1547309811> [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. It’s very useful to read suggestions to advertisers for how to use facebook: <http://www.businessinsider.com/10-rules-for-advertising-on-facebook-2009-7> or http://www.krusecontrolinc.com/master-facebook-ads-strategy/ [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. Sam Olukoya filed the report for FSRN, and was later hired by corporate outlets: http://fsrn.org/2014/05/mass-abduction-of-nigerian-schoolgirls-prompts-international-outrage/ [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. For example, their piece from August 7 on 7 peaceful ways to respond to Michael Brown’s death: <http://blogs.riverfronttimes.com/dailyrft/2014/08/7_peaceful_ways_to_respond_to_michael_browns_death_ferguson_unrest.php> [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. This collaboration used a joint website, <http://wtfcorporations.com> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/26/business/energy-environment/judge-strikes-down-local-law-restricting-pesticides-in-hawaii.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. See <http://fi2w.org/2014/04/28/podcast-the-road-not-taken-millions-of-immigrants-could-apply-for-citizenship-but-havent/> and <http://www.newstaco.com/2014/05/05/millions-of-legal-immigrants-skipping-u-s-citizenship/> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. The Truthout url is <http://truth-out.org/news/item/26759-the-ghost-in-the-gmo-machine> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)