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**A Proposal for General Support**

**Submitted by:** The Media Consortium,

a project of the Foundation for National Progress

As the 2016 election heats up, the role of journalists will be more important than ever.

We will rely on journalists to account for the unlimited campaign spending allowed by the Citizens United ruling; to watch whether states are using new voting laws to take away the right to vote from rural, indigent, and immigrant citizens; and to hold politicians accountable when they lie about issues like climate change or women’s reproductive health needs. And we will need journalists to accurately report on progressive movements like Black Lives Matter and why these movements themselves matter.

Corporate news media have never had a very good track record at telling these kinds of stories. Now, they are even less likely to be able to do so as their capacity shrinks. 2015 once again saw a steady [decline in the number of journalists](http://asne.org/content.asp?pl=140&sl=129&contentid=129) especially at regional daily newspapers and local broadcast and radio newsrooms.

These regional newsrooms played a key role in translating national policies into local news, and vice versa. Most of that work was done by beat reporters, who had an in-depth knowledge of a particular population or a topic area such as education, labor or the enviroment. That era of local newsrooms staffed with beat reporters is [gone](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2015/05/27/bob-schieffer-is-right-the-decline-of-local-media-is-totally-terrible/). Nor will it be filled by national newsrooms, which have been [cutting local bureaus](http://articles.latimes.com/2010/feb/27/entertainment/la-et-abc-news27-2010feb27) and [issue-based beats](http://insideclimatenews.org/news/20141024/npr-reduces-its-environment-team-one-reporter). Once again, it will be up to the independent press to fill in the big holes in newsgathering left by a profit-seeking corporate news media.

The good news is that independent journalism is alive and well. The Media Consortium, the home for progressive news outlets, grew this year, topping 75 members for the first time in its history. Working closely with the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, Media Consortium members have increased their ability to provide in-depth comprehensive reporting on areas of national interest. Through such collaborative editorial partnerships, Media Consortium members are leading the way to a new kind of news gathering, one based on horizontally distributed networks of independent outlets. It’s a new model for the digital age.

**Covering the Issues That Matter**

Media Consortium members specialize in covering the issues that matter today. As national news providers step back, the Media Consortium is helping our members step forward. Here are just a few of the issues we are helping our members cover in 2016.

Climate Change

Despite the pressing urgency of climate change, national news outlets from [NPR](http://insideclimatenews.org/news/20141024/npr-reduces-its-environment-team-one-reporter) to the [New York Times](http://grist.org/climate-energy/nyt-wapo-cut-back-environment-coverage-since-were-not-worried-about-that-anymore/) have cut back on their environmental coverage. Independent outlets have stepped into that void. Outlets with a long-time environmental focus such as Grist, Earth Island Journal and Orion are being joined by Mother Jones, Democracy Now!, Making Contact, AlterNet, and Truthout, all of which employ reporters focused on the environment.

The Media Consortium has begun amplifying this coverage through our impact project. Each month, we are helping members collaborate on editorial partnerships around climate change reporting. This year we’ve organized collaborations around the California Drought (May 12), the Right’s Climate Wars (June 15), and the impact of fracking on climate change (Sept 1). Outlets participating so far include Grist, Earth Island Journal, the Progressive, Yes! magazine, Truthout, Bitch Media, In These Times, and High Country News.

Impact: According to a Harvard team we are working closely with to measure impact, these collaborations are changing people’s attitudes about climate change. Researchers are seeing a 5-10% sentiment change around climate change when these collaborations run.

Outcomes:

* Change sentiment around climate change
* Increase # of outlets reporting on climate chnge
* Increase depth of coverage on climate change via collaboration

While the impact experiment will conclude in January 2016 (with results to be published in Spring 2016), the Media Consortium is committed to continuing these collaborative partnerships on climate change. Our members tell us that these joint editorial partnerships not only increase the audience and impact of stories, but also improve each outlet’s reporting as they learn from each other how to better cover stories.

Voting Rights

The slow death of the big dailies is nowhere more evident than in the dismal lack of coverage of voting rights. In state after state, citizens are being denied the right to vote by what [Hillary Clinton has called](http://www.cnn.com/2015/10/17/politics/hillary-clinton-alabama-voter-id-laws/) a series of new Jim Crow laws. For example, Alabama requires a driver’s license to vote, but its governor has just said he’s planning to close down 30 licensing offices—almost all in majority African American communities.

News organizations like the [Washington Post](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/10/17/amid-voting-rights-criticim-alabama-partially-backs-off-controversial-plan-to-close-driver-license-offices/) are covering the “hard news”—the what—but they are not covering the why (and local papers cover [even less](http://www.al.com/news/index.ssf/2015/08/alea_to_begin_phasing_out_driv.html)). National news outlets just don't have the resources to dig into what is happening in each state. Nor are local corporate news sources covering the whole story--they don't have the resources to provide a national context for their locality's attacks on voting rights.

The solution once again lives in the independent news sector, where our members are willing to work together to provide deeper coverage.

Media Consortium members already have been stepping up to cover these new Jim Crow laws through data journalism (at [The Nation](http://www.thenation.com/article/50-years-after-bloody-sunday-voting-rights-are-under-attack/)), follow-the-money investigations ([PR Watch](http://www.prwatch.org/news/2015/07/12889/saucy-suffragettes-party-voting-rights-wisconsin-are-rolled-back)), updates on politicians’ positions ([Colorlines](http://www.colorlines.com/categories/voting-rights)), and features providing historical context ([Democracy Now!)](http://www.democracynow.org/2015/3/9/voting_rights_remain_under_attack_50)

Now, to personalize these stories, the Media Consortium will join forces with the Association for Alternative Newsmedia. These local alternative newsmedia are on the ground in almost every state, from Alabama ([Lagniappe](http://www.pageturnpro.com/Lagniappe/68506-Lagniappe-101515/index.html#26)) to Wyoming (Planet Jackson Hole). Using AAN’s story platform, we will network together national outlets with local outlets to marry data journalism, investigative reporting, and contextualized features with gripping personal stories.

Impact: It is difficult to measure impact of journalism vs advocacy work on an issue like voting rights. We will be tracking the # of stories produced, the # of opens (via pixel ping) and any public mentions of these stories.

Outcome: We expect the first of these stories to appear in early 2016 and to increase as primary season begins. The goal is to inform the public about the deterioration of voting rights and to provide information on solutions to better access to voting.

#BlackLivesMatter

When it comes to reporting on progressive change movements, it’s natural to turn to Media Consortium members. Many of our members were founded to be the voice of a progressive movement, from The Nation (abolition) to Mother Jones (Progressive labor movement) to Ms. Magazine (feminism) and Waging Nonviolence (nonviolent struggle). Media Consortium members were at the forefront of the Seattle WTO protests, and more recently the Occupy movement.

The #BlackLivesMatter movement, however, has challenged Media Consortium members whose staffs—and audiences—have largely been composed of Euro-Americans, i.e. white people. Like corporate media, Media Consortium members’ lack of staff diversity and community connections made it more difficult for many of them to report on #Ferguson, Eric Garner in New York, and Freddie Gray in Baltimore.

The Media Consortium is working to improve our members’ reporting on this critically important progressive movement in a number of ways.

1. Support Staff of Color

Though few of our outlets are as diverse as Colorlines or feministing, most of our outlets do have at least one reporter of color. These staffers often can feel isolated. To provide them with a sense of community, and to amplify their work, the Media Consortium has started a platform that aggregates stories about Black Lives matter, available at <http://blackspringindymedia.org>, and a weekly newsletter, #TMCinColor that features journalists of color. One way to create diversity is to positively promote it.

2. Culture Change

Just bringing on more people of color will not be enough to adequately cover a movement like #BlackLivesMatter. As Dori Maynard said, even in news organizations that have a diverse staff, the strengths of that diversity are often not reflected in either the content or the business practices. To truly hear the stories people of color need and want to tell, outlets must change their culture. They must change what they consider important and how they go about assigning stories. The need to do this work is so great that the Media Consortium will be using our 10th Anniversary Conference as a three-day workshop designed to help our outlets begin this work of culture change.

3. Reporting with a Community rather than for an Audience

Progressive outlets have always known that it is not possible to report “objectively” on political movements. That’s why Media Consortium outlets have always been transparent about our point of view: we are progressive. Simply adopting a point of view is not enough, however, to cover communities that have suffered deep injustice. News outlets need to listen to these communities as well as speak to them. Any reporting on #BlackLivesMatter that will matter will be reporting done with community rather than for it.

Journalists will still be journalists. Our members will still follow each story where it leads. But to find the stories that matter they will need to work with communities. And that’s why our final initiative involves connecting Media Consortium outlets up with community media outlets that already have trusted links to these communities. At a regional gathering in Chicago in May, organized by New America Media and supported by the Media Consortium, we will begin the delicate work of weaving a network between community and independent news media.

**A Networked News Ecosystem.**

"As institutional capacity declines, news organizations need not sacrifice the depth of their offerings given the resources available elsewhere in the ecosystem. In other words: make journalistic partnerships a more regular part of the institutional repertoire." [TOW report of Dec 2014](http://towcenter.org/research/post-industrial-journalism-adapting-to-the-present-2/)

At the Media Consortium, we are working on a new theory of change. Drawn from in-depth discussions with leaders across the news media, and drawing from a number of recent reports, we believe that the future of independent news will be a networked news ecosystem.

Theory of Change

A networked news ecosystem will be critical to providing Americans with the full range of news they need as citizens in a democracy ([Tow report](http://towcenter.org/research/post-industrial-journalism-adapting-to-the-present-2/), [Pew Research](http://www.journalism.org/2015/03/05/legacy-outlets-drive-the-news-agenda-but-specialty-providers-diversify-the-ecosystem/)).

That networked news system must start with community members as providers as well as consumers of news ([#buildwith](http://buildwith.org)). Working [with community](http://www.poynter.org/news/mediawire/323083/5-lessons-on-diversity-and-journalism-from-dori-maynard/) as well as for community will ensure that the news reflects issues and events relevant to people of color.

Community and Independent news outlets are best positioned to work together to build a networked news ecosystem. Because they are mission-driven, they are able to set aside profit-driven competition in order to build a more sustainable news economy that provides the news communities need.

Vision

By 2025 we will have created a horizontally distributed network of community and independent news outlets that work together to provide the news their communities want and need. This network will be grounded in participatory journalism, working with communities to identify the stories that matter, but will be able to route stories with potential regional or national impact to journalists best able to conduct data-driven analysis, to investigate wrongdoing, to link local stories to national policy and vice versa, and to synthesize stories from many different localities and communities. The result will be rich, comprehensive news available to users from the outlet of their choice.

It is this networked ecosystem that will allow us to provide in-depth high-impact reporting on climate change; that will give us access to local stories and national context for the gravest issues facing American democracy such as voting rights; and that will enable us to provide the same kind of excellent coverage for all the communities in our country—and eventually the world.

What it will take to make this vision a reality is infrastructure support—a belief in and commitment to the power of organizing of the news media. The Wallace Global Fund has been the Media Consortium’s strong supporter for this critical work. We thank you and look forward to continuing to work with you towards a stronger, more democratic news system.