Dear Media Consortium members and friends,

As we prepare for Thanksgiving, I write to thank you for your participation in the Media Consortium. Much more than a trade association, we are a mission-based nonprofit organized to grow the impact of the independent news sector. This year, we celebrate our 10th anniversary, a landmark during this age of flux. And in celebrating our past decade, we look forward to our next.

The digital revolution is not yet over. This revolution has not just been about technology, about web 2.0 or mobile. Rather, the digital revolution has been a cultural revolution, changing how we engage with each other. The old model, in which trusted news outlets provided content and individuals passively received it, has just about disappeared. Instead, our cultural experiences are more interactive, as our users now create content too.

This revolution challenges old business models, but also opens up new opportunities. In particular, we finally have the opportunity to engage with those individuals we formerly only reported on. (A theorist might say that our subjects have re-appropriated themselves and reclaimed their own subjectivity). To realize this opportunity, however, we have to encounter the inherent limitations of our practices.

These limitations have to do with the traditional practice of journalism, from a print-first focus to an insistence on objectivity at the expense of engagement. But the limitations we face also include racial biases—ways of seeing and acting that have made it easy for many of us to pursue the news business through the lens of a culture that demands and privileges whiteness.

As Christopher Rabb reminded us at our meeting in 2013 in Baltimore, we all have worked hard to accumulate cultural capital. Just as many women have had to climb up the ladder using the rungs of an old-boy network, most of us have gotten where we are today by climbing up the rungs of a culture in which whiteness is privileged—a climb much easier for some than for others. Now we are reporters and producers, marketers and publishers, curators and directors who are in a position where we have some influence on our culture.

Yet what we discovered over the past two years is that, having climbed into these positions, we are cut off from some of the communities we most want to represent. Many TMC outlets were caught flat-footed when Ferguson happened. Some are having trouble now reporting on refugees. This is not just an issue of needing to hire the right person at the right time. Malkia Cyril, in a powerful talk at our 2014 meeting in 2014, blamed the news media for using a race-neutral lens to discuss surveillance. Cyril called on us to do a better job of recognizing the structural racism that informs the surveillance system, to center our reporting on race impacts, and to raise up the voices of those who have been left out of our stories.

I’ve noticed with pride that over the past year, Media Consortium members have heard this call. You have changed the kind of stories you report on and expanded your pool of reporters. A significant number of you have set up fellowships for reporters of color and created “black lives matter” verticals. The Media Consortium has done the same, with our social media aggregator, #blackspringindymedia, and with our weekly newsletter, #TMCinColor.

But I can say, from a personal perspective, that simply hiring staffers of color and running more stories about people of color is not enough. After spending a year listening to people of color in the news business—at a gathering in Pocantico, at the Detroit NNPA meeting of legacy black papers, at the International Society of Journalists conference in Austin, at the meeting of public access stations in Pasadena and at the Experience Engagement gathering in Portland—after spending months listening to people of color in the news business, I have learned that simply hiring a more diverse staff is not enough.

To change the Media Consortium’s culture, I’m having to reprioritize. I’m shiftin where we spend money—and spend time. I’m starting to ask myself different questions.

As part of that change, I am focusing a full day of our upcoming conference on a race equity training, to be led by trainers at Race Forward. This will cost money that we don’t have yet—but I have faith that we must go in this direction if the progressive news media is to fulfill our mission. I ask each of you to send two staffers to this training on February 19—and I ask that you send at least one person of color. To do this work we must create the community we seek.

As Cyril said, to counter structural racism, we have to change the way we think. We have to learn how to approach all our work with a racial equity lens. Because if we do not infuse all of our work—including our business side—with an equity perspective, we will continue to find ourselves blindsided on issues of race. We will miss out on important stories. We will lack the means to communicate with communities other than our own. And that means that we will miss out on the engagement opportunities that are critical to our missions and our success, as a sector and as individual outlets.

Please make plans now to attend our conference, February 17-20 in Philadelphia. Help us celebrate our past on February 17. Work on our present on February 18, at a full day of conference panels and workshops. And work on the future on February 19, at our full-day training. Register at www.tmcmedia2016.org

Sincerely

Jo Ellen