Media Consortium Final Report
June 25, 2018

On June 14, 2018, at the Allied Media Conference in Detroit, the Media Consortium met for its last time. The organization will close on December 31, 2018, having achieved its goals and mission.

Founded in 2005 as a 501c3 fiscally sponsored non-profit, the Media Consortium grew into a North American network of 80 independent news organizations, including Democracy Now!, Mother Jones, The Nation, Bitch Media, Public News Service and the Young Turks. The Media Consortium became well-known for its annual conferences, journalism collaborations, and work on media policy issues.

The subjects of its annual conference underscore the extent to which the Media Consortium became a site of experimentation and forward thinking on issues impacting the news media sector:
 2011 fostering journalism collaboration
 2013 fostering business side collaboration
 2014 surveillance of and by media
 2015 hybrid business models
 2016 value of racial equity for media
 2017 building racial equity in media
 2018 movement journalism
That same forward-looking ethos has driven the decision to end current operations.

This report provides an overview of the Media Consortium’s achievements over its dozen years of existence, the rationale for closing down the organization, and the new projects that have already begun to grow from the seeds the Media Consortium sowed.

**Mission Accomplished**

The Media Consortium has achieved the goals we announced at our founding. In a 2005 Pocantico Declaration, founding members declared that the purpose of the Media Consortium would be to amplify the voice of progressive independent media; increase our collective clout; and strengthen and transform our individual businesses.

Independent Progressive Media are Strong. Over the past thirteen years, thanks especially to the work of former director Tracy van Slyke and associate director Erin Polgreen from 2008-2011, we built a sturdy, economically sustainable business model for progressive news centered on individual donor/members.

Long before the New York Times and the Guardian began turning to small donors, the for-profit Nation magazine had pioneered a donation-based revenue stream (tax receipts not given) and Truthout may have been the first non-profit digital-only publication to become sustainable based only on small dollar donors. Tikkun magazine and Bitch Media were early experimenters with membership models for small donors, while Mother Jones successfully combined small donor/members with foundation and major donor outreach to become the multi-million dollar organization it is today.

These independent niche media outlets had to rely on their core supporters rather than on advertising, and so were able to make the digital leap from print subscription to online donation and membership That’s why, even as the number of news outlets operating in the United States fell dramatically from 2008-2018, the Media Consortium grew by 200%. In an even surer sign of sustainability, only 6% of Media Consortium members have closed due to financial constraints since 2013, while a quarter of the members have grown budgets well into the seven figures.

Independent Outlets Work Together to Increase their Collective Clout. Starting in 2011, thanks to the work of current director Jo Ellen Green Kaiser and later, associate director Manolia Charlotin, the Media Consortium has built a strong collaborative culture that has increased the impact of our members.

 While collaboration is becoming institutionalized now, the Media Consortium began large-scale collaborations beginning in 2011 with coverage by 25 outlets of the takeover of the Wisconsin capital and with the 65-outlet Occupy May Day Reporting Project in 2012. At our 2011 conference in San Francisco, we created working groups to focus on collaborative journalism. Those groups turned into a set of 6-8 outlets collaborations on reproductive justice (a focus on Plan B) and environmental justice (pesticide use in Kauai).

As a result of those collaboration, the Media Consortium was asked in 2013 to participate in an academic research project designed to look at whether small outlets could influence conversations on the social platform Twitter. Our hypothesis was that if small outlets co-published and co-promoted content, they could in fact make a significant impact. Working with Prof. Gary King of Harvard we set up an experiment, running 35 collaborations in which the researchers controlled the timing of publication. The results were stunning—we did indeed see a significant change in Twitter conversations based on the content of our stories. The results were so powerful that they were published in Science magazine.

Since that experiment ended in 2016, the Media Consortium has hosted other collaborative efforts, including our current #DishonorRoll project on campus sexual assault. However, we have found that years of working together have led Media Consortium members to reach out to each other for collaborative efforts. Outlets like Truthout, Bitch, Making Contact, Public News Service, The Real News Network, and In These Times regularly develop partnerships with other outlets to better tell complex stories. As a result, we see more stories make impact—like the National Catholic Reporter stories on sexual assault at evangelical colleges, which, with a social media boost from Truthout and Bitch, has led [Franciscan University to reassess its response](https://www.ncronline.org/news/accountability/francsican-university-steubenville-ohio-takes-steps-address-sexual-assault-title) to assault on campus.

The Voice of Progressive Independent Media is Louder. In addition to the business and collaborative efforts, the Media Consortium focused on advocating for the independent media. From 2012-2017 we ran a Media Policy Reporting Project, training over 50 reporters in the beat and producing over 300 media policy focused stories. Several of the reporters we trained, including Mike Ludwig (Truthout) and Alice Ollstein (now at Politico) continue to produce national stories on this beat.

As an organization, the Media Consortium worked closely with the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press, signing over two dozen amici briefs, and joined the coalition advocating for net neutrality. Behind the scenes, we supported efforts to release reporters from prison and to push back against policies set by digital platforms that hurt small independent outlets.

Media Consortium Director Kaiser built a coalition of independent media publishers by organizing a semi-annual meeting of her colleagues at other associations. The Media Consortium and the Association of Alternative Media (AAN) held a joint conference in 2013. Kaiser keynoted talks at the Association of Community Media (ACM) and at the National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB) and currently serves on the foundation boards of AAN and ACM. The Media Consortium welcomed the emergence of the Institute for Nonprofit News and the Local Independent Online Publishers Association; those associations are now positioned to continue the work of building the role for independents in the media sector.

A New Landscape. In 2005, independent outlets saw the chain newspapers as their primary competition, and worried mainly about how they would survive the digital transition. As it turns out, the digital revolution has been catastrophic for chain newspapers, but relatively kind to niche independents that were able to build online subscribers and turn subscribers into members and donors. In fact, a recent report suggests that all news organizations, including corporate news, adopt the revenue methods first developed by the kinds of organizations that have been long-time Media Consortium members.

With the digital revolution came new digital-only outlets, both for-profit (Vox, Buzzfeed) and non-profit (ProPublica, CIR). While the for-profit outlets have been competitive with independents, the non-profit outlets have deepened and supported the collaborative culture independent outlets had been building. Foundations serving the news system have supported collaboration as well, leading to the rise of the Center for Cooperative Media and dedicated funding for collaboration. An independent nonprofit organized to fund collaboration among independents is no longer necessary.

In this environment, a number of independent outlets have seized the opportunity to grow, becoming strong voices on the national media scene. Mother Jones is perhaps the best case study of a relatively niche outlet that has become a major national player, but they are not alone. Outlets like the Young Turks, the Real News Network, Dissent, The Nation and even niche outlets like Bitch Media and Rewire now have a much larger share of audience than was once possible for independents. While these outlets still need the support of an association to organize collective action on behalf of the independent news sector, they no longer need an organization to make the case that they must continue to exist. In short, they no longer need the Media Consortium—at least as the organization was originally constituted.

**Choosing a Future**

Organizations, like animals, don’t like to die. Staff want to retain their jobs. Board members and funders tend to see the closing down of an organization as a sign of institutional failure. Organizations thus face tremendous pressure to continue.

Any organization looking strategically at its future should ask the following two questions:

1)Have we truly fulfilled our mission as an organization?
2) Is there an adjacent mission that we should take on?

In 2013, the Media Consortium began considering these questions. We had already grown to 60+ outlets from 40, and our members were gaining strength daily. We seemed close to fulfilling our original mission so we began researching adjacent missions. One obvious direction for the Media Consortium was to pivot from being primarily a voice for independent media to being a trade association, supporting independent media.

Strategic planning in this direction quickly revealed that neither the Media Consortium nor any other group would ever have enough members to fund a trade association via dues. The simple reason is that independent news media tend to have very tight budgets, meaning they have deep reluctance to spend more than a few hundred dollars per year in dues. Meanwhile, the entire universe of independent news media outlets is likely too small to support a trade association at that dues level (no conclusive study has been done of the number of independent news outlets in the United States but INN, LION, AAN and NFCB combined currently have under 600 members). Nor would an organization of low-budget members be likely to get corporate sponsorships. So we looked at merging with another association, the Association of Alternative Media (AAN), and also began talks with foundation funders about supporting a larger purpose for the Media Consortium.

Neither of these efforts succeeded. While Media Consortium members voted to merge with AAN, seeing similarities in their fierce independence, “alternative” stance, and commitment to journalism, AAN members ultimately clung to their core identity as weekly print publishers. Nor did talks with the largest news media funders go anywhere. For these philanthropies—Democracy Fund, Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, and the Open Society Foundation--the Media Consortium’s history as an organization driven by progressive political values precluded them from giving the Media Consortium any general support. Instead, the same foundation funders chose to develop INN and LION into defacto trade associations for the independent sector, supplying INN in particular with over $2 million/year in funding.

We thank OSF for funding our business-related work in 2009-2011, the Voqal Fund for supporting the impact study in 2014-2017, and the Media Democracy Fund for funding our media policy work. Profound gratitude to the Quixote Foundation for its vision, and especially to the Wallace Global Fund, which provided general support from 2010-2018. Special thanks to the Foundation for National Progress, which served as our fiscal sponsor and gave us important in-kind support, and to the New Economy Coalition for their fundraising support and partnership on the New Economy Reporting Project.

**The Challenge of Racial Equity**

In 2015, Media Consortium Director Jo Ellen Kaiser identified racial equity as the next major challenge for the progressive news sector. Instead of focusing on building a “pipeline” for journalists of color, the Media Consortium chose to focus on building workplaces where journalists of color are decision-makers, the wielders of power instead of its beneficiaries.

From 2015 the Media Consortium has pursued that goal by

* Hiring Haitian-American Manolia Charlotin in 2016 as Membership and then Associate Director;
* Creating a TMCinColor listserv in 2016 as a safe space for journalists of color;
* Paying for 60 members to take a full-day racial equity workshop run by Race Forward in 2016;
* Using travel grants to ensure that 50% of our speakers and over 50% of participants at our 2016 conference were journalists of color;
* Bringing in journalists of color once again in 2017 and running our annual conference as an unconference to give every participant the opportunity to shape the organization’s direction.

This work, and the intentions around it, have already produced concrete changes among Media Consortium members. Bitch Media and Yes! magazine reorganized their staffs as a direct result of our 2016 meeting. Members like Scalawag, The Real News Network, Berrett-Koehler, and Democracy Now! found support for their already-existing efforts to employ a racial equity lens in their work.

As we moved deeper into equity work, however, we recognized that going further would require resources the Media Consortium did not have and was not able to obtain. Most journalism foundations seem more interested in funding mentorship and pipeline programs that move journalists of color from place to place rather than funding programs that create opportunities for journalists and business-side staff of color to obtain positions of power where they currently work.

We also came to understand that the best way to build a racially equitable journalism sector would be to center media and media makers working in communities of color—to build power from the grassroots to the grasstops, rather than keeping power at the top and drawing individuals up. The Media Consortium is not the best container for such work. It was founded originally by a small circle of elite, white-run (and mostly male-dominated) independent outlets, and despite efforts to democratize and diversify its membership, the organization’s history structures its programs, in much the same way that our skeletons determine our body size and shape.

The work of racial equity is ultimately deeply rooted in a set of social, moral and political values. Promoting racial equity (as opposed to racial diversity) means believing in the intersection of race and class; believing that the capitalist economy relies on the exploitation of black and brown people; and believing that white supremacy, patriarchy, mono-lingualism, ableism, and other power analyses are real and must be sites of contestation in our culture.

Journalism institutions--including journalism schools, journalism membership organizations, journalism foundations and the largest news outlets-- don’t want to hear these analyses. In their recent desire to appeal to the “Trump voter” or “middle America,” journalism institutions have been rejecting overtly values-based work, even as they admit that “objectivity” does not exist. What this means is that the work of racial equity in media is going to have to move to social justice spaces if it is going to find resources and partners.

**Where We Go From Here**

The journalism world is innately conservative—not in its partisan politics, which skew liberal Democrat, but in its refusal to adapt to new circumstances and a changing world. Nothing stands still, however, and there are exciting new efforts happening right now in the journalism sector.

New Voices New Jersey and New Voices North Carolina, run by Free Press and supported by the Democracy Fund, point to a community-centered vision for journalism. City Bureau is receiving generous support because they have developed a model for centering community that also maintains many traditional journalistic practices. The Boston Institute for Nonprofit Journalism has built ties between community outlets across Boston. Allied Media Projects has worked for over a decade to promote local media makers in Detroit, particularly individuals who cross boundaries between art, education, and reporting. And there are exciting projects happening in Boyle Heights, Los Angeles; Albuquerque, New Mexico; Arkansas; Philadelphia, Baltimore, and elsewhere.

At our Detroit gathering this year, Media Consortium members were most enthusiastic about an effort begun by Anna Simonton which she has termed Movement Journalism. So were attendees at the Allied Media Conference, where 8 of the 10 Movement Journalism track sessions were so full that people were turned away at the doors.

Movement Journalism argues that social justice movements—and grassroots civil society efforts generally—should be as important to journalists as are Wall Street numbers or pronouncements by politicians. If we think the stock market rising is a story, why isn’t the rise of a people’s movement a story? If we will run a story about a politician’s ideas for affordable housing, why shouldn’t we run a story about a land trust that actually is making affordable housing a reality right now?

Movement Journalism is about empowering people in a community to tell the stories of their community—with journalists supporting them, rather than vice versa. Movement journalists are as willing to sit down with activists and advocates as we are to sit down with politicians and policy makers. Movement Journalism is being transparent about our values, even as we pursue a craft that requires us to follow a story where it leads.

Because we believe the future of journalism is local and community-centric, we are cautious about jumping to form a new organization. What the times require is a coalition instead of a Center, a network instead of an Institute. Leadership must come from those doing the work at the grassroots.

As that effort comes into being, we will work on specific projects: researching alternative economic models for journalism including coops and public funding; identifying organizations already doing grassroots journalism training and developing a curriculum based on best practices; and sharing power and building power by supporting hubs of local community news outlets.

We leave Detroit and the Media Consortium with energy to re-imagine what journalism can do and be. Stay tuned!