Media Consortium: Brief Historical Overview 2006-2017

Founded in 2006 by a radical coming together of over 20 progressive media leaders, the Media Consortium was designed to respond to the business threat posed by the digital revolution—and to the frustration these leaders felt at their inability to have more impact during George W. Bush’s reelection campaign.

Under the leadership of Tracy Van Slyke, the Media Consortium’s first Executive Director, the Consortium focused on the digital transition. By 2011, when Van Slyke left, the Consortium had grown to 45 members, and members had discovered a path to economic sustainability via a mix of subscriptions, memberships, donations, foundation grants and external revenue. Since 2011, the Media Consortium has grown to 80 members; only 3 members during that period have gone out of business.

In 2012, under the leadership of Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, the Media Consortium adopted a mission of supporting and growing the impact of its members, focusing on collective impact. Over the next three years, the Consortium initiated over 40 different collaborative efforts to create collective impact, from a 65-outlet joint Occupy May Day reporting collaboration to a 6 outlet investigative report on pesticide use in Kauai. A three-year rigorous study the Consortium conducted with Prof. Gary King validated the focus on collaboration by proving that even collaborations between small outlets produced a measurable change in public sentiment. By 2015, members were collaborating regularly with each other and other media outlets, without support from Media Consortium staff.

Ten years from its founding, the Media Consortium has been an incredible success. Founding member Mother Jones has grown into one of the top ten news outlets in the U.S., mentioned in the same breath as the New York Times. Thanks to collaborative efforts, small publishers like Cascadian Times have been able to produce award-winning content. And with editorial and business support, backbone media organizations in critically important sectors like the environment and reproductive rights have developed strong journalism chops and expanded readership—just look at the way Reproductive Health Reality Check became Rewire, or at the strong reporting coming today from Truthout, the Real News Network, Yes! magazine, Making Contact, and Bitch media.

Given this success, the Media Consortium is now ready to reinvent itself again. Both the Black Lives Matter movement and the election of President Trump indicate that just growing the power of national progressive media is insufficient to meet today’s challenges. Progressive national outlets must find ways to directly engage people from a wide variety of culturally specific communities. Because the business model of most national progressive outlets is based on deepening audience engagement rather than broadening it, expanding and diversifying engagement will require national outlets to partner with local outlets. The Media Consortium will support that work by building a network of equitable partnerships between local outlets and media hubs and national outlets.

That work has begun. Since 2015, the Media Consortium has committed to doing all its work through a racial equity lens, in order to better understand how to build equitable partnerships. 2017 marked a turning point for the organization, as members committed to transform the media ecosystem by creating a collaborative network between local and national outlets. This vision of a media movement based on a national-local network of equitable partners will define the Media Consortium’s future.