



Program Profile: Editorial Collaborations in Wisconsin

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On February 11, 2011, Wisconsin's newly elected Governor, Scott Walker, unleashed an assault on the state's unions via a bill that proposed the elimination of collective bargaining for public employees. As Matt Rothschild wrote on Feb. 15 for *The Progressive*, a Media Consortium member that has been based in Madison, WI since 1909, "Newly elected Republican Governor Scott Walker ... is going after public workers right away, demanding steep cuts in benefit packages for all but the police and fire fighters. Many state workers are looking at losing as much as \$5,000 to \$7,000 a year."

Thousands of protesters flooded the streets of Madison in the following weeks. While mainstream media largely ignored what was happening in the Dairy State, TMC staff took advantage of our organization's collaborative infrastructure to enable vital collaboration between independent media outlets—both online and on the ground. In the month following the debut of the bill, members of the Media Consortium produced over 600 pieces of content focused on Wisconsin's struggle to save collective bargaining.

TMC as Facilitator

On Feb. 16, five days after Walker announced his bill, TMC Managing Director Erin Polgreen realized that TMC members were in a unique position to share resources and collaborate around coverage. In short order, Polgreen made several strategic phone calls to create a catalog of resources and seed partnership ideas. She called Madison-based staff of TMC member organizations *The Progressive* and Free Speech Radio News to see if they were willing to coordinate with TMC members on the ground. She contacted organizations that she knew had stringers and staff in the Midwest, including Campus Progress and Truthout. She also recruited a former Media Consortium intern, Raquel Brown, a student at University of Wisconsin, Madison, to put an explainer, or recap blog, together that contextualized what was happening for a broader audience.

On Feb. 17, Polgreen sent a call to action out to the TMC listserv, encouraging members to connect with specific organizations and reporters on the ground, to use the TMC list to coordinate sharing of content, and to share resources. Within hours, members were coordinating coverage with Madison and Midwest-based TMC members, connecting with and sharing stringers, and booking travel to Madison—some even coordinated carpools and lodging.

The UpTake arrived in Madison on Feb. 17. Right away, we hooked up with Andy Kroll of Mother Jones, John Nichols of The Nation, and Laura Flanders of GRITtv /FreeSpeechTV. We were sleeping on each others' couches, linking to each other, and sharing resources.

—Jacob Wheeler, Editor, *The UpTake*

A reporter for the Media Consortium members In These Times and Campus Progress, Micah Uetricht, offered me a ride up from Chicago to Wisconsin and introduced me to my main source for a story that would be filed the next day. ...I was part of the wave of independent media that were on the ground in Wisconsin long before most mainstream media clocked in.

—Yana Kunichoff, Assistant Editor, *Truthout*.

Outcomes

The speedy coordination, organizing, and infrastructural support provided by TMC staff culminated in an avalanche of collaborative, high-quality media. Here's a quick snapshot of what TMC and its members produced:

- To date, members have produced over 800 pieces of content, including video, radio, text, and online articles, focused on Wisconsin's political upheaval. 600 pieces of content were produced during the first month of protests. For an archive of stories, click here: <http://www.google.com/reader/shared/internTMC>.
- A [widget of scrolling headlines](#) (pictured right) and breaking Wisconsin news that was hosted on over 80 websites during the peak of coverage. This widget has been viewed over 2.5 million times.
- TMC commissioned and published three round-up blogs placing the Wisconsin labor struggle in context. Blogs were reprinted at over 30 sites.
- The UpTake quickly coordinated live video coverage of the protests that featured reporters from fellow TMC members. This livestream was some of the only regular video coming out of Madison, and was so popular that it crashed Livestream's servers during the largest protests in Wisconsin. The UpTake and GritTV also partnered to produce programming that aired on FreeSpeechTV.
- TMC members *The Nation*, *Mother Jones*, Democracy Now!, FreeSpeechTV, GritTV, Truthout, *The Progressive*, Free Speech Radio News, Workers' Independent News, and *In These Times* connected on the ground in Madison. Many used local radio station WORT as a base of operations and connecting point for reporters.



Why it worked

Over the past five years, TMC has built a strong cooperative infrastructure that makes it possible to organize members around breaking events. These kinds of collaborations are effective and scalable because TMC staff have a deep understanding of members' assets and can quickly connect national and regional orgs to facilitate coverage. TMC has also built a workflow infrastructure for collaboration that members can easily opt into, thanks in part to our MediaWires program. We are able to track content and provide valuable contextual overviews via open-source blogs that make it easy for new audience members to quickly understand the topline issues that play into breaking news.

This infrastructure is reliant on the strong relationships and networking that TMC has facilitated since 2004. The Wisconsin collaboration would not have happened without full-time staff and general operating funds that made it possible to quickly build and launch tools for sharing. Without TMC as a hub, many of these organizations would not have been in contact with one another and the resulting amplification of Wisconsin coverage would have been much smaller.

What next?

The Wisconsin Supreme Court recently ruled to uphold Walker's bill. The fight for collective bargaining in Wisconsin is now moving to the Supreme Court. TMC members are committed to continue covering this issue, as the rights of unions and public workers are also being threatened in other Midwestern states. The key question now is how can we replicate this kind of syzygy?

Vital feedback TMC received following the Wisconsin collaboration was that regional media organizations were underutilized throughout the process. As we expand as an organization, fostering more collaborations that encourage interaction between local and national media outlets, TMC would like to look deeply at how to build collaborative infrastructure that makes it possible for organizations to connect and act even faster in the future.