

Executive Summary

“No society in history has ever existed without storytelling. The job of storytelling is to tell stories that are true and important. Sure, there may be many distinctions between professionals and amateurs, between breaking news and follow up pieces, between long or short, and so forth. But these are just artifacts of production methods rather than deep truths. And we have to have truth tellers.”

– Clay Shirky

Over the past few years, thousands of reports, articles, and journalism summits have discussed and debated the old media system meltdown. Major technological shifts have impacted the philosophy and business of doing journalism, encompassing all aspects of the business of news, from production, consumption, revenue-generation and the overall costs of creating and distributing quality journalism.

Journalists and independent media-makers have been and will continue to be society’s most valuable truth tellers. However, organizations must now reconcile their historical roles with a new media landscape that is fundamentally changing how media organizations operate. Some outlets have succumbed to the meltdown of old media system by shutting down or drastically cutting their news operations. Others are making small changes to their journalism and business models that will allow them to stay afloat for another day. This report focuses on how independent media organizations can make profound organizational transformations in order to successfully navigate, thrive and lead the way in the current and future media landscape.

As the introduction of "The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism," notes,

While changes to the news industry advanced at a glacial pace for many years... transitions can come as quickly as the levees that broke in New Orleans. Trigger events cause sudden floods before a new system is in place to prevent it. News organizations are facing flash floods and many are in a mode akin to sudden-death, wilderness survival. Laurence Gonzalez, in his book, Deep Survival: Who Lives, Who Dies, and Why, explained that those people who most quickly surrender to their new circumstances, take decisive action, and believe anything is possible are the most ones most likely to survive. Each independent media organization must answer two questions in order to survive, 'What will you be standing on when the water reaches you?' and 'How will you boldly move to higher ground?'

These two questions are central to this report. While many see this moment as a meltdown, we need to look at is an opportunity that, much like the annual flooding of the Nile, has the potential to revitalize the landscape. Amazing possibilities are ahead, including the proliferation of mobile devices that allow anyone to be a reporter or gather critical information about their surroundings; a domestic and international demographic revolution; and the emergence of a new generation of media makers.

Between 2008-09, The Media Consortium (TMC), a network of 45 of the country's leading independent media organizations, conducted a *Game Changer Strategy Project* that resulted in this report. The project's goal was to enable TMC and its members to make bold moves that increase their impact and influence—and reach five times their current collective audience within the next five years. A proxy for TMC's collective online reach as of June 2009 was 17 million monthly website visits.

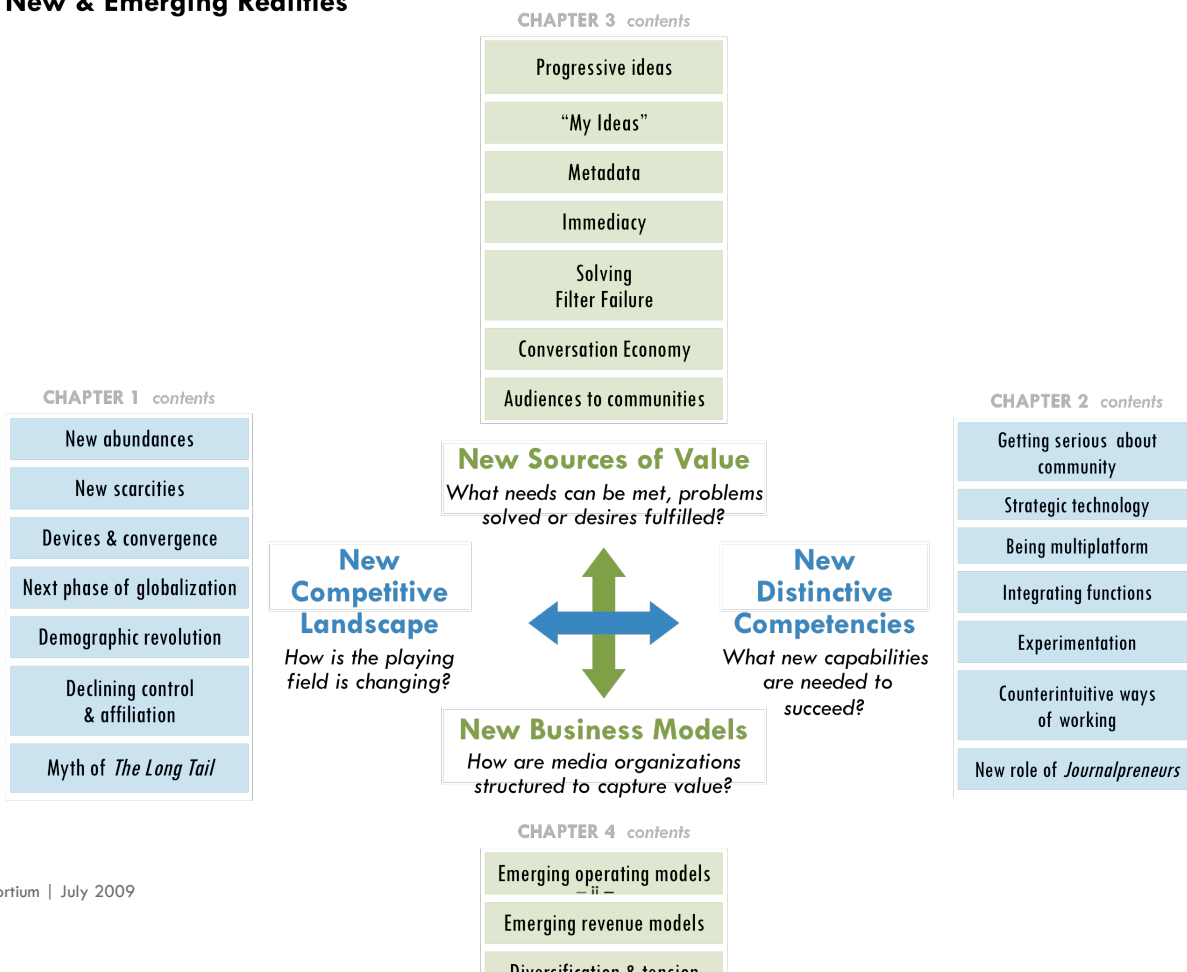
A broad array of information was collected via scenario building, member surveys, interviews with outside thought-leaders and a scan of current reporting and commentary. The most important new realities of the current and not-so-distant media landscape are outlined in Volume 2 of this report. But how can progressive, independent media navigate this moment? Volume 2 also (see diagram) provides a comprehensive examination of the “new and emerging realities” of the current media and technology landscape and their implications.

The Media Consortium Mission Statement:

To amplify our voices; increase our collective voice; leverage our current audiences and reach out to new ones; attract financial resources; strengthen our individual businesses and our sector position in a rapidly changing media and political environment; and redefine ourselves and progress for a new century.

- [Appendix A](#)
List of Participants

Vol. 2: New & Emerging Realities



The above diagram lays out the new challenges and opportunities facing journalism organizations.

New Sources of Value (media makers meeting the needs and desires of its users) influences **Business Models**, (revenue sources). Traditional business models, which were based on old **sources of value** between publishers and readers, have been in flux for the past ten years, which came into sharper focus as the world economic crisis accelerated the collapse of newspapers and other media outlets. However, new sources of value are leading to new business models and opportunities.

A **New Competitive Landscape** (journalism’s playing field) interfaces with the **New Distinctive Competencies** or new capabilities that media outlets need to have to succeed. [TO TONY—ANYTHING TO ADD/CLARIFY HERE?] Collective strategic action has great potential to amplify the power of independent media, especially if undertaken using a consortium structure. However, any bold steps will depend on developing a shared perspective between organizations with historically different missions regarding the shifting media landscape and its future implications.

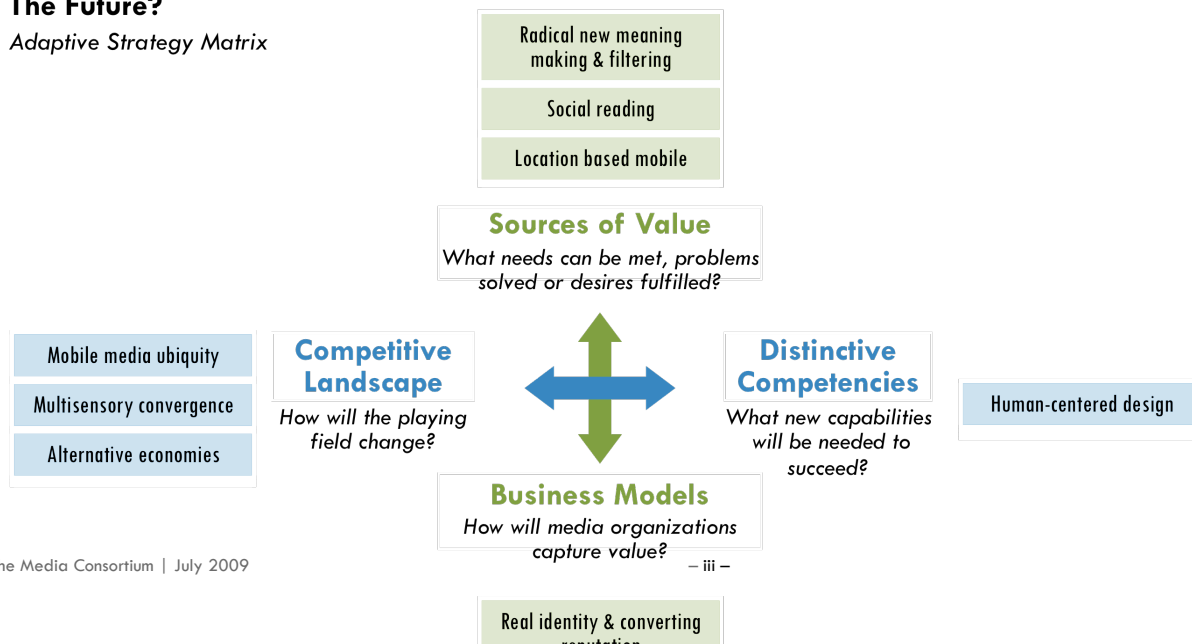
The Future

Volume 3 of this box set highlights current uncertainties and opportunities media outlets must navigate to reach a sustainable future, including how consumers will act, which trends will last, whether online media is helping or hurting our democracy and how the biggest players will affect the game.

The people interviewed for this report also highlighted possible game changers to come (see diagram below). Most of these trends are already underway in their early stage. While they have yet to reach game-changing scale, many of them will. Independent media makers must have their fingers on the pulse of future technological and media evolutions that will continue to alter the media landscape.

The Future?

Adaptive Strategy Matrix



Progressive, independent media has an important legacy to maintain. For years it has provided quality reporting, deep investigative journalism, and profiles of the voices ignored in mainstream media.

The Media Consortium has taken care not to narrowly define "progressive" as many individuals and organizations relate to the term in different ways. But we share common beliefs that bring our members together, including a strong commitment to the common good. Our members play an active role as champions for accountability for government and other institutions in our society. They also work for social, racial and gender justice. Progressive, independent media plays a critical role in our society, often questioning those in power, breaking stories and providing important context and analysis to the most critical issues of our time, long before the traditional mass media has taken up the mantle. Alyssa Katz, author of *Our Lot: How Real Estate Came to Own Us* and freelance reporter details in a Columbia Journalism Review her perspective of how the independent media did a better job of covering the lead up to the recent financial crisis better than the mainstream media in "Why Alt Media Beat the MSM to the Mortgage Crisis":

First and foremost, we looked for the real-world impacts of business practices. Financial journalists tend to focus on the internal benefits (to investors and bankers) of economic activity, without accounting for external social costs... Two, we indies were also reporting out in the real world, in my case thanks to a magazine (Mother Jones) that values and invests in place-based reporting... Lastly, I was free (and predisposed) to question authority, not to mention the basic business practices of large financial institutions.

These attributes, while describing the independent media's coverage of the recent economic crisis, can also be applied to the standards, care and quality of reporting that progressive media produces on a daily basis.

Progressive media outlets are not only at the forefront of critical journalism, but are also important members of a flourishing democracy. Many see the progressive media as a niche sector, that only "preaches to the choir." This is not the case. Progressive media is highly influential, with the ability to reach and inform tens of millions of active engaged members of our society. The numbers are astounding. In 2006, The Media Consortium decided to figure out how big our choir is—and who those choristers are. After contracting Paradyz-Matera, a list management and analysis firm, 16 consortium members agreed to pour their various lists – subscribers, donors, registered online users, newsletter subscribers, and so on – into a single file. These 16 organizations had a combined file size of 2.9 million names (about the same size as MoveOn.org's file): 1.8 million confirmed regular mail names, and 1.1 million confirmed email addresses.

Furthermore, only 1 in 4 names on the original list is shared between two or more organizations – to put it another way, 75% of the original list is served by only one media outlet, meaning there is very little audience crossover.

The size of the file size alone tells us that collectively the progressive media is a sector with significant influence. It also demonstrates that it has real opportunities to grow its audience, which could have a critical effect on the economic models of these organizations and the impact and reach of their journalism.

In 2009, another 15 members of The Media Consortium submitted membership, subscriber, and/or donor data from snail mail and email lists to Catalist, company which houses one of the most comprehensive databases of 250 million voter-aged in the country, for demographic analysis. Catalist was able to match those lists to almost one million names and documented that of those names:

- 72% participated in 2008 General Election
- There was a slight majority of female audience members (56%) to male (42%)
- The age range for audience members spread across the voting population, including:
 - 25-34: 11.33%
 - 35-49: 18.47%
 - 50-64: 29.82%
 - 65-79: 19.88%

To survive and thrive in this environment, like all media makers, progressive, independent media needs to individually and collectively shift their understanding of journalism: How it's produced, who is producing it, and how to deliver it to a changing demographic. Matching those strategies to both current and future technological shifts as well as new business models is critical. Now is the time to stretch creative boundaries and evolve so that we can strengthen independent journalism and attain long-term sustainability.

Recommendations

The Media Consortium and other members of independent media can take advantage of emerging and future industry conditions by making four decisive moves:

I. Change internally

New models will most likely come from new players. The first and deepest change is to rethink and restructure consortiums or more formal networks (such as The Media Consortium) and individual media organizations to include the emerging field of technologists, entrepreneurs and independent media-makers. We must integrate new skill sets, cultivate creativity and amplify the reach of independent media.

II. Increase experimentation

Greater experimentation will win. Journalism organizations must have the resources to increase their capacity to utilize new technology, journalistic practices and business models. Experimentation is key to evolve and remain strong and vital members of our democracy. Experimentation can range across the spectrum including: moving into mobile and other "anywhere, anyone, anytime" devices, integrating interaction with a community of users, producing new forms of online visual journalism (i.e. multiplatform, data visualization, etc.), using technology to deepen journalism from point and shoot reporting to long-term storytelling and contextualizing, and last but not least, connecting those new added values to new revenue generating models.

Many of these concepts are highlighted and analyzed in the report.

III. Leverage unique role of a consortium

Standing together will be more valuable than working alone. Since independent media will continue to grow more diverse and fragmented, TMC must actively leverage the collective power of its membership to negotiate deals, influence public policy and build journalism's new ecosystem to benefit all members.

TMC has been an industry leader in this area, but must continue to build on this recommendation. Other networks such as the Investigative News Network, have gathered to address more granular, niche-oriented organizational needs. Through formal and informal networks, media outlets are finding new ways to connect and collaborate with each other in order to share strategies, resources, and editorial information. It is critical for media organizations to break out of their silos and learn to work together.

IV. Building audiences as communities

Decentralized communities will create the greatest impact. Media consumers have more power than ever before. They will be attracted to the most user-focused media ventures. Media organizations can grow their audiences by building broader reach and deeper communities. People today are less tied to formal institutions, and they increasingly affiliate with decentralized networks of individuals and groups. To this end, TMC members can not only better reach more diverse audiences in America and global audiences by working together, but also engage those audiences in more efficient and valuable ways, which tap their full potential as producers, community builders and agents of social change.

It's simply not enough to talk about community anymore, or think of community as the comment-makers on articles. Media must strategically make community-building a part of the development, production, and distribution process.

NEED A LITTLE CONCLUSION WORK HERE.

Out of the research and analysis conducted through this report, 16 specific recommendations were developed for TMC and its members. Those ideas are kept confidential among The Media Consortium and its members. For more information on those recommendations, please contact tracy@themediaconsortium.com.