**Building One Independent News Sector**

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In April 2011, when I became Executive Director of the Media Consortium, my first priority was to conduct a landscape analysis. The last time I had looked at the landscape had been in 2005, when I consulted for the now-defunct Independent Press Association. Since then, the digital revolution had arrived in earnest. I knew print magazines had been largely replaced by digital sites. What else had happened?

I found that associations representing the independent news sector had not moved with the times. I counted at least 8 associations representing news outlets. Most were based primarily on serving a particular media platform or revenue model—even though in the 21st century, news outlets are becoming multiplatform and revenue models are becoming hybrid.

In May 2012 in San Francisco, I convened a dinner for the heads of these associations to see if there was an interest in combining forces. There was. However, many of these associations were in upheaval—between 2012 and 2015, half of them have changed executive directors. The time was not ripe.

Now, however, I believe the time is ripe to look at federating the many different associations representing independent news. This white paper makes the argument that the latent power of independent news outlets to create impact can only fully emerge if the associations that support them are more strategically organized and better funded.

After a brief introduction of terms, I look first at the business models and platforms used by independent news outlets. Readers may be tempted to skip this rather lengthy section of the report. However, it is impossible to understand the value that associations add—and can add—to the sector without understanding the economic features of this sector.

Once this groundwork is laid, I move on to the role of associations in this ecosystem. First, I demonstrate how associations already provide key infrastructural support for independent news associations —and argue that this support could be substantially increased if outlets had access to the specialized knowledge and services that currently reside in each association. Then, I turn to the role associations could play in supporting independent news content, and the particular value of a federation of associations in creating deeper impact.

**I. Independent Outlets**

**Defining Terms: Independent News in the Digital Age**

The digital revolution is the way we most often—and quite correctly—understand the tremendous shift in the means of news production over the past quarter century. Yet by focusing too much on the emergence of digital technology, we can easily lose sight of some of the digital revolution’s most significant effects. One of the most striking of these may well be the shift in news production, delivery and consumption from corporate chains to independents.

What are some of the most influential news outlets today? Mother Jones. ProPublica. The Young Turks. Raw Story. Politico. All independents.

An independent news outlet is one that answers to its audience rather than to any other entity, whether that be shareholders or the government. Independent outlets are thus different from public outlets like PBS or NPR, which are government funded. Independent outlets are usually non-profit, but they can be for-profit if the for-profit puts its mission before its profit (as in a B-corps).

Independent news outlets have operated as long as there has been distributed news. Yet, with the exception of a handful of large for-profit independents (like the New York Times or the New Yorker before it was bought by Conde Nast), independents in the 20th century rarely reached large audiences. Independents survived primarily by being niche publications—Ms. magazine, for example, appealed to feminists; Orion magazine to environmentalists; The Nation to those with a strong leftist point of view. Meanwhile, the great chains served up “mainstream” news to geographically-located constituencies who had few other options for information that would span all their interests.

The digital revolution flipped the news ecosystem on its head. The internet freed consumers from geographical constraints; now, we can search for any kind of news and find it without leaving our house. We no longer need the big dailies to bring the news to us; instead, we can go out and find the news. And where do we look for the news we want? We often go to niche publications, which we trust to deliver to us the exact type of content we want.

The result is that when we survey the news landscape now, many of the most influential outlets are independent outlets.

**The Independent Business Model**

Independents did not emerge with the digital divide. They preceded it, and they too have been disrupted by it. However, the primary disruption for most independents has been to their platform rather than their business model.

Independents have survived while corporate media has faltered for one reason: they are mission-driven.

Being mission-driven rather than, for example, profit-driven, affects everything about the independent business model, from its use of resources to its sources of revenue. The consequences of this mission focus are critical to any understanding of the sector:

1**.Scale.** Because they are mission-driven, independents can’t scale beyond their area of expertise and influence.

As a matter of fact, most news organizations don’t “scale” in the sense that Google or Facebook have scaled. Even an organization like CBSNews, owned by a global corporation, does not scale well outside North America, limited by the fact that it is English-language and comes from a U.S. perspective. A few independents—those whose mission is quite broad, like “producing journalism that will lead to a more just and democratic world,”—will be able to grow quite large. However, the majority of independents will have a mission that will dictate that their growth is confined to a particular community of readers. For example, a community radio station must remain local to that community; a progressive Jewish outlet can only serve progressive Jews (and allies); an environmental journal serves those who care passionately about the environment.

2. **Profit**. Independents, whether for-profit or non-profit, are built to be low-budget, tightly-run, low-overhead operations.

One way to make a profit is to scale. Independents, per above, don’t tend to have the potential for extraordinary growth once they are mature (i.e. have found and reached their audience). Another way to make a profit is to reduce expenses. However, since independents are mission-driven, they tend to want to always increase the amount of resources they are putting into content. Finally,

2. Engaged audience. If an independent survives for more than three years, they have found a mission that appeals to some segment of the public. That audience will be extremely engaged and loyal, and usually willing to pay for content via subscription, membership or donation (or all three).

3. Built-in Hybridity. The mission may also provide independents a built-in means to build external revenue. They in essence can create businesses that draw on their editorial expertise. As a result, independents can more easily build hybrid revenue models than their corporate cousins.

One way to understand the hybridity of the independent business model is to look more closely at their different types of revenue streams. These streams fall into a few broad categories:

* Revenue from ads and newsstand (traditional revenue streams)
* Revenue from individuals: subscribers, members, small donors
* Revenue from institutions: foundations, universities, government
* Revenue from other sources (often termed external revenue)

A stable independent news business will have funding from at least two of these different revenue streams, and from at least three different sources. The most stable outlets will have funding from three revenue streams, creating a three-legged stool of revenue.

Traditional Revenue: Advertising and Newsstand

The dailies—and most other corporate news organizations--made most of their money through print ads and only secondarily through subscriptions. Their revenue model was and continues to be based on the number of eyeballs reached. Corporate media have focused on advertising for a good reason. Even in the print era when subscriptions were very profitable, audience-driven revenue was never able to scale in the same way as advertising revenue. Today, what’s killing the dailies is that digital advertising doesn’t scale the way print advertising did.

In the era when advertising was king, a number of independents supplemented subscription and donation with advertising. Larger magazines like the Nation, Utne Reader, and Washington Monthly once relied on advertising for a considerable portion of their budget. An entire segment of independents—the alternative newsweeklies—relied soley on advertising. For the alts, their mission—serving the alternative community of their cities—was symbiotic with local alternative businesses, so they made their money from beer, nightclubs, sex, and now pot ads (often ads the dailies would not take).

The critical difference between corporate and independent reliance on advertising is scale. Corporate media needs a revenue source that matches a high volume audience with high volume revenue. Independents don’t deal in high volume, so it is easier for independents to replace advertising with a menu of other revenue options. Advertising will remain an important element of revenue for many independents, particularly those whose mission is rooted in a geographical locale. However, it will just be one part of a hybrid model.

Newsstand revenue doesn’t exist anymore outside of airports and check-out stands. This fact has hurt all print media, but has hurt corporate magazines (Vogue, Home Beautiful) the most.

Revenue from Individuals: Subscriptions, Memberships and Small Donations

Though media consultants usually put subscriptions, memberships and small donations into very different buckets, they shouldn’t. Each of these revenue categories represents an average person giving a news outlet $25 or so. To the person giving that money, whether they are giving money to subscribe, to become a member, or to donate doesn’t actually make that much difference. What matters to the individual is their attitude towards the publication asking for money.

In the print era, subscriptions were king, because you just couldn’t get news without visiting a library, visting a newsstand, or subscribing to a news outlet. So subscriptions were transactional and almost mechanical. Any good consultant could set up a direct mail series that would yield a 2-3% return in new subscriptions (closer to 5-6% for independents). Corporate news and independents both became proficient in this revenue model.

In the digital era, alas, news wants to be free. Transactional subscriptions no longer work unless an outlet is able to sell news that really can be had nowhere else (e.g. the WSJ can sell breaking news on the stock market to investors; Consumer Reports can sell their studies on new cars to car-buying consumers). In the digital era, a subscription is more like a membership or donation. It is an expression of your identity with a brand.

To some extent, subscriptions always worked this way. For decades, a certain segment has subscribed to The New Yorker in order to place it on their coffee tables. Even in the print era, independents gained subscribers who were less interested in reading their content than in identifying with their mission, and they continue to do so today. Individuals who might not have time to read a full issue of High Country News will still subscribe because they identified with the Mountain West. Young women will purchase a gift subscription to Bitch, the Feminist Response to Pop Culture, as a way of sharing an in-secret—we love pop culture and we know how sexist it really is.

Today, when “front page news” is free everywhere, individuals will still pay to affiliate with a news mission. Whether they pay a subscription to have a printed piece come to their door, or a membership to express an identity shared with others, or donate to thank an outlet for “getting it” will depend on what the outlet’s mission is. But for the person paying that $25, it’s all the same—they are saying, “I agree with you, I identify with you, keep going.”

In fact, a number of for-profit independent outlets have discovered that their loyal audiences will often donate to them even without the non-profit tax write-off (The Nation Associates is one example). That is because the small donor isn’t giving money to save on their taxes—they are giving because they support the organization.

As a result, the category of small amounts of money received from individuals is becoming an increasing percent of the revenue for independents. A good benchmark for a healthy independent (excluding independents based in a locale like the alts) is getting 40-60% of their revenue from individuals giving small amounts ($5-$250).

Because an independent’s audience is necessarily limited (by its niche and mission) this revenue source will never “scale.” However, while audience-driven revenue may not be the most lucrative revenue model, it is a very stable one—the more an independent serves its audience, the more the audience grows and supports the independent. It is essentially these individuals who are keeping the independent sector strong.

Revenue from Institutions: Foundations, Major Donors and University Funding

One of the most significant changes to revenue models over the past decade has been the move by many independents to a nonprofit status. For example, all the members of INN and over 70% of the members of the Media Consortium are 501c3 educational non-profits. Non-profit status has allowed a number of independents to supplement subscriber and donor income with foundation funding and/or university affiliation.

A handful of foundations—Knight, McCormick, Ford, MacArthur, Sloan and Reynolds—funded journalism through the 20th century, primarily supporting public TV and radio. Today, an increasing number of foundations have begun funding the independent news sector. According to Media Impact Funders, 2,956 foundations gave over 2.5 billion dollars to media in general between 2009-2012.

Money for investigative and advocacy journalism in particular has risen over the past several years. Watching as the major dailies close down beats and bureaus, foundations have put more dollars into investigative journalism by independents like the Center for Investigative Reporting. Seeing a kinship in mission with mission-driven independents, foundations with a mission are giving some of their dollars to media as well as to advocacy organizations (for example, the Park Foundation, which focuses on the environment, gives money to the Climate Desk, a multi-outlet collaboration of independents).

Most foundation funding is project-based, which means the money is given to fund a particular beat or investigation. This project-based funding has enabled independent outlets to create content that their base alone would not support. However, foundation funding alone is not a sustainable income stream for independent outlets. An outlet should be able to lose its entire portfolio of foundation funding and still be able to survive, albeit in a much reduced form.

The exception to this statement is money from major donors, those giving above $1000 per year. These donors often give via family foundations, but in many ways they behave more like small donors. They usually care very deeply about an outlet’s mission, and are often willing to provide general support dollars. Having a few major donors can take an outlet through almost any kind of economic catastrophe. Having at least a few major donors, rather than just a single major donor, keeps an outlet independent.

University partnerships are included in this section because they essentially are institutional donors. It’s just that their giving differs significantly from foundations. Rather than direct funding, university partnerships often provide independent outlets with in-kind services. For example, the university might provide the outlet with office space and administrative/bookkeeping help; or it might feed the outlet a steady stream of interns and cub reporters via its journalism program; or it might publish the outlet’s print version, taking revenue from libraries and newsstand and giving the outlet back only revenue from subscribers—or some combination of all of these and more.

Universities, which are usually nonprofits themselves, generally can only work with non-profits. Likewise, smaller foundations tend to only be able to give money to nonprofits and major donors definitely want the tax write-off only available to them if they give to a non-profit. Larger foundations often are able to offer grants to for-profits. Even so, corporate outlets get very little foundation money of any kind. This is an income stream native to public and independent media.

Government Funding

In general, an outlet that is government-funded is a public outlet, not an independent outlet. The one exception are the PEGS—public, educational and government broadcaster TV channels.

The PEGs were formally created via the Cable Communications Act of 1984, which [allowed](http://vermontaccess.net/peg/) local cable francising authorities to require cable providers to set aside one or more cable television stations for non-commercial public, educational or government use, and to fund the operations at those centers. These centers flourished in the 1980s and 1990s when cable TV was robust; in the digital era, however, as cable TV faced stronger competition, local authorities began allowing cable companies to opt out of supporting PEG stations. Most industry observers expect government funding to continue to decrease for PEGs over the next decade, although the PEGs are pushing back hard.

External Revenue, aka Non-media Businesses

Independent outlets have always held events, sold merchandise, and offered fee-for-service retreats or workshops (or cruises in the case of The Nation). In the digital age, however, they are doing more of it. It is this bucket that mainly is taking the place of advertising for those independent outlets that once sold advertising. And it is this kind of external revenue that balances out foundation funding, giving independent outlets a more stable three-legged revenue base of money from individuals, money from foundations and/or advertising, and external revenue.

Corporate media outlets have tried many of these strategies for bringing in external revenue. Those with clear, strong missions have succeeded. For example, the Economist has been able to create revenue-generating events around its verticals. Ironically, the dailies have had a much harder time diversifying revenue this way because they are too far removed from their base, unlike, for example, the alts. In general, corporate media has a harder time identifying this revenue stream than independents. Compare a magazine like Time with a magazine like Tricycle:The Buddhist Review—which will be more successful at offering targeted workshops and books to its readers? In fact, Tricycle brings in a big chunk of its revenue in these ways, in addition to donations and advertising.

The digital revolution did force independents to rely less on subscriptions and advertising and more on donations, foundations and fee-for-service. However, because independents already operated on a much tighter budget and on a much more diversified revenue basis than the dailies, independents have been able to weather the shift in revenue models remarkably well.

**Independents in a MultiPlatform Age**

While independents have used their hybrid business models to survive the digital transition, they have had a much harder time adjusting to an era that is multiplatform.

Legacy Platforms

Precisely because independents thrive by being niche publications, they traditionally have embraced their platform in a way that can seem a bit obsessive to corporate or public media.

For example, the independent print magazine Adbusters has won a loyal following by playing with print, famously putting out [one issue that had a hole drilled through every page](https://www.adbusters.org/magazine/112). Community radio stations have thrived by literally being the voice of the community with popular dj’s and ethnic music (think of an hour of Lithuanian wedding songs, for example). The alt-weeklies still love their newsprint, and many community TV stations still don’t understand why no one comes to their studios to learn how to operate a professional TV camera.

For independent news outlets, platform also drove (and still drives) revenue. Print provides the platform for advertising revenue, subscription revenue, university interest (in print publications) and marketing via print newsstand. Radio and TV provide the platform for advertising revenue, membership, and event marketing. It is hard for these outlets to imagine leaving their legacy platform behind when it often still brings in most of their revenue.

Finally, it’s important to note that new independents spring up all the time based on the newest platforms. Truthout, ProPublica, and Politico all began as web-based sites. The Young Turks began and remains a YouTube-based site, despite its dalliance with the former CurrentTV. And new independent outlets are emerging that are digital radio (Rivet) and mobile-only (Small World News).

The Challenge of Multiple Platforms

Independents that began on “legacy” media platforms have all had to add a digital element, becoming “multiplatform.” Those unfamiliar with the independent sector often believe the primary challenge the sector faces is becoming digital. That is not true.

The false impression that independents are not digitial natives may arise from the fact that independents are rarely on the frontlines of digital innovation. That’s because independents tightly manage their budgets. Instead of rushing to adopt new technology, well-run indepedents wait for corporate media to try and fail with new products (remember News Corps’ various [attempts at tablet-based news](http://www.poynter.org/news/media-innovation/106466/reports-murdochs-alesia-tablet-project-dead/)?). Once a new technology is proven to be economical and effective—like responsive design—independents quickly add it to their repetoire.

Foundations in particular should understand that independents’ reluctance to try out expensive new technology is not a sign that they are dinosaurs; rather it is a smart business reponse. Independents’ first job is to protect their mission and to serve their audience. Adding technology that will put them in debt or distract their staff from the mission will only hurt the outlet.

The truly difficult and important challenge for independents is deciding which platform to make their primary platform. Going digital first is not necessarily the right decision for all independents.

One outlet that did go digital first with success is Mother Jones. Mother Jones has kept their print magazine, but they now run all their stories online first, and then publish some of these same stories in print. Instead of losing revenue with this formula, Mother Jones was able to retain their most loyal print subscribers. Why? Because those readers were buying the brand and identity more than they were buying the actual reading experience. On top of those core subscribers, Mother Jones was able to build a whole new base of loyal digital readers. Both groups donate, with the result that Mother Jones has entered a phase of unparalleled growth.

Brave New Films also made a smart digital transition. Started as a film production company, BNF realized a few years ago that viewers online prefer short video to watching longer documentaries. In response, BNF changed their production methods, creating a series of short videos on the way to producing a [full-length documentary](http://www.bravenewfilms.org/unmanned). Now, viewers can choose to watch a short video, or a documentary, or both, and BNF is better able to fulfill its mission by getting more content out to the public.

On the other hand, some legacy outlets, after taking a long hard look at going digital first, have opted to remain with their legacy platform. Orion magazine, for example, has found that even their younger readers prefer the print magazine, with its large photos and richly textured feel, to their digital presence. They have thus doubled down on print by adding print books and merchandise, as their readers clearly like physical “stuff.”

Too many independent outlets, however, have not done the strategic work necessary to choose their primary platform. As a result, they are multiplatform, but may be missing out on significant opportunities for new readers and new revenue. They may even be missing out on technology that may better help them fulfill their mission.

**Strengthening the Independent Sector**

From looking at the revenue and platforms of the independent sector, we can deduce a few basic truths:

1. Because mission is king of revenue as well as their raison d’etre, independents invest heavily in content creation and audience development, but tend to underinvest in traditional business operations.

2. Well-run independent outlets have revenue streams that are diversified and stable, but low-yield. Efficiency and Economy are their watchwords.

3. Independents are willing to adapt to new technologies, but move much more slowly in this regard than their corporate counsins.

Independents are essentially conservative when it comes to their business practices. They seek to conserve their mission, conserve their audience, and conserve their money. This protective impulse tends to make independent outlets good at weathering economic storms. That’s why, for example, only one Media Consortium outlet went out of business during the Great Recession.

On the other hand, being lean, mean and hungry means that very few independent outlets have the capacity to develop a culture of best business practices, to quickly assimilate new technologies, or to plan strategically for the future. More than their corporate peers, independent outlets require outside help to support them in these areas.

Value of Associations.

Without associations to act as the business infrastructure for independents, independents cannot survive long term. That is why independent outlets will tell you that if their current association dies, they will just start another one. Foundations that want to support the independent news sector must support the associations that provide the infrastructure for that sector.

What does that infrastructure look like?

* Revenue-sharing programs
* Discounted Software

(bulk buys of software that outlets could not otherwise afford)

* Free or low-cost Legal Consulting
* Free or low-cost Technical Assistance
* Free or low-cost Business Consulting
* Access to peers that share your business model
* Access to high-level speakers at conferences and events
* And more

Essentially, independent news associations replace business positions at large corporations that have titles like Director, Learning and Developmen (HR) or Financial Analyst or Project Coordinator. Those positions that would be considered “corporate” rather than “editorial” or “technology” are filled in large part through education of non-corporate employees via the association.

Perhaps this is one reason there are so many different associations for this sector. Most of the associations were founded before the digital era, and so are based on the very different platforms then extant: TV (PEGs), Radio (community radio and radio producers), Film (documentarians and community film centers), Print weeklies (the alts), Print newspapers (the ethnic press) and Print magazines (that association went under in 2006).

Especially when platforms mattered, independent outlets had to learn from their peers, as only their peers shared both their platform and their revenue model. For example, documentarians shared advice on distribution to film festivals; print weeklies focused on their ad network, which could bring them well-paying ads from outside their locale; and PEGs had sessions on applying for government funding.

Today, associations serving the independent sector still offer the opportunity for outlets to learn from their peers. However, as revenue models have diversified and platforms have merged, there is less of a need for platform-specific assocations. In fact, independent outlets might benefit more from an association that would embrace revenue hybridity and mutliple platforms rather than separate distinct associations based on outmoded models.

A Federated Association would support Revenue Hybridity

The legacy associations have supported members by helping them adopt the revenue model specific to the members of that association. For example, the Association of Alternative Newsmedia (alt-weeklies) has implemented an ad network that enables its local members to get a piece of large national ad buys. NAMAC (filmmakers and community media) offers a multi-day leadership retreat to enable filmmakers and community media makers to “grow up” into leadership roles running the large programs and centers they have created. And the Alliance for Community Media has offered tips on gaining and retaining government funding for education channels.

In a hybrid revenue environment, we need to ensure that these kinds of programs are available to everyone in the independent news sector. Community radio stations and a number of regional and national news organizations could profit from AAN’s national ad buys, for example. Perhaps other types of community media would be eligible to receive funding for government or educational channels. NAMAC does make its programs available to non-members, but few non-members hear about it or participate. Why not create one federated space so that any member of an association could apply on an equal basis to these kinds of programs?

A federation of associations would also educate outlets to consider adopting a hybrid business model. There is no reason why for-profit independents cannot ask their loyal followers to become “members” or even to donate small amounts (as long as they are clear the amounts are not tax-deductible). Non-profit outlets need to think of themselves as businesses, and could learn from the entrepreneurial attitude of for-profits. If The Nation can sell wine club memberships to its readers, why can’t a local community center work a deal to sell passes to the local museum or amusement park?

No matter what their business model, independents survive and thrive because of their mission. They would all do better if they could share with each other ways to monetize that mission.

A Federated Association would support Multiple Platforms

Platform no longer divides outlets from each other. All outlets must be digital. Whether they are primarily audio, visual, or text-based, outlets can learn digital dos and don’ts from each other. Why have separate conferences attended by the same set of consultants (and the usual suspects from Facebook and Google) when associations could join together to put on one conference at which independents could learn digital tips from each other?

For their biggest challenge, choosing a primary platform, outlets could also learn from each other. Outlets that began in print are adding podcasts; those that began in radio are adding video; video outlets are adding text. Each format does require a special skill set—and who better to teach that skill set than outlets that specialize in it?

Community radio outlets already teach citizen journalists; they would make great teachers for any digital outlet interested in podcasting; documentary filmmakers could share content and tips for building impact through short video; experts in print can help other outlets make the collateral materials that are still needed.

The opportunities on the business side, and on the technical side, are large for independent outlets and associations that are willing to work with each other. The even bigger opportunity, however, lies, as always for independents, with mission.

**The Big Picture: Associations and Mission**

This report focuses on the business side of the independent sector since a primary function of any association is to help its members stay in business. However, because independents are mission-driven, simply staying in business or even prospering in business is not the measure of success. Success for independents is measured by how well they fulfill their mission.

The fact that mission is the key driver for independents explains why so many of the associations that support them are 501c3 nonprofits rather than 501c6 trade associations. The mission of independent news associations as a sector is to ensure that our democracy provides an outlet for every voice in our democracy, including the voices who dissent from the mainstream.

Independents as a sector embrace citizen journalism, ethnic journalism, and advocacy journalism. We tell the stories of hyperlocal communities as well as national movements that fly under the radar. Our members make sure that issues that may not be on the front page of corporate media—from police surveillance to climate change to immigrant worker working conditions—get a hearing.

Independents face a fundamental problem, however, in fulfilling their missions. The independent business model is all about the niche—independents are so robust because they dig deep into a particular audience. Yet, for independents to make impact, they must ensure that the journalism they produce gets a hearing beyond their niche audience.

For example: It is important, as an absolute value, for journalists to tell how the [North American Free Trade Agreement has led to the increase in undocumented immigrants](http://www.radioproject.org/2015/03/women-rising-27-ann-lopez-the-reality-of-farm-workers-in-the-us-and-mexico/) and the agribusinesses that profit from them. To make impact, however, that story has to be heard by the average consumer. The question we have wrestled with is how to ensure that stories can be heard beyond an outlet’s niche without forcing the outlet to try to “scale” beyond its optimum size (and go bankrupt in the process).

It turns out that associations can provide a critical role in helping outlets reach beyond their native niches to build impact. In the digital era, when mission is more important than ever, helping outlets build impact may be the most important role an association has—and it’s another role associations can do best in concert with each other.

Collective Impact

It bears repeating one more time that independents are niche organizations. Their special sauce is digging deep into that niche, whether it be a special topic, locale, or point of view. Too often this specificity—which often limits the size of an outlet’s primary audience--is viewed from outside the sector as a weakness rather than a strength. Recent collaborative efforts have shown that quite the opposite is the case. The specificity of independent outlets can be a huge resource in tackling reporting on the truly complex issues that define contemporary life.

Take as an example the topic studies show interests most potential voters: education. Education reporting in the United States requires a number of different areas of expertise, including: hyperlocal reporting across many different locales; national reporting to understand how national education policies and movements impact local schools; reporters who specialize in an analysis of structural inequality to better understand the intersection of race and education; and investigative reporting, to track money flows to policy groups and school boards.

An ever-decreasing handful of corporate news outlets employ beat reporters to try to cover the complexity of education reporting. However, few of these reporters are likely to have the range of reporting skills just described. The Media Consortium has found a solution: bring together a number of outlets with different specialties to collaborate around complex reporting topics.

Recently, for example, the Media Consortium produced a [collaboration](http://wtfcorporations.com/about-the-project/) on the impact of pesticide-ready GMO seeds being farmed in quantity on the island of Kauai. We brought together Grist, Earth Island Journal and Cascadian Times, which all specialize in reporting on GMOs and pesticides; the Hawaii Independent, which reports on politics on Kauai; Making Contact, which does in-depth reporting on the intersection of native peoples and economic issues; PRWatch, which tracks how corporate spending influences local politics; and Truthout, which offers strong point of view analysis. The outcome of that multi-month collaboration was a set of stories that changed the politics on Kauai and Maui.

The success of these kinds of multi-outlet collaborations is predicted by sociologists John Kania and Mark Kramer, writing for the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](http://www.ssireview.org/articles/entry/collective_impact). Drawing on complexity science, Kania and Kramer suggest that no one solution can ever be found to complex societal problems; instead, those who want to change the social fabric must parallel its complexity. **When a number of actors who represent different aspects of a social issue join together with a common agenda and a shared set of rules, their interactions can actually create new solutions —** what Kania and Kramer refer to as “emergent solutions.”  They call this ability for a set of organizations working together to locate new opportunities and resources where none before existed “collective impact.”

In journalism, collective impact looks somewhat different. Rather than coming together with a shared “agenda,” these networked newsrooms join together to explore a shared question. As they bring together their diverse resources and capacities, they will learn from each other how to tell this complex story in new ways. The promise of this method is that this new, unfolding story will open up new pathways to action, revealing for the public relevant and critical context to fuel and inform their choices.

The true power of the independent news sector is its ability to create collective impact.

Associations are the Backbone

Individual outlets need shared infrastructure to enable collaborations that work. That’s the opinion of Kania, Kramer, and Fay Hanley Brown: “The expectation that collaboration can occur without a supporting infrastructure is one of the most frequent reasons why it fails.” [Stanford Social Review](http://www.ssireview.org/pdf/Channeling_Change_PDF.pdf)

No one should expect outlets to have that infrastructure in place already. Recall that a key truth about independent news outlets is that they are lean operations that tend to underinvest in management. Most independent outlets simply don’t have the project management power to pull off a multi-partner collaboration on their own. They need to put that infrastructure in place.

For example, when Grist, Mother Jones, The Atlantic, CIR, and others decided to collaborate on climate reporting, they realized they needed project management staff. Thus, the Climate Desk was established, housed at Mother Jones with a full-time project manager, a full-time producer, and a full-time editor, all of whom work to coordinate with journalists at the participating outlets. Without that infrastructure, the collaboration could not exist.

The Climate Desk is unusual. Most collaborative reporting projects are not envisioned as lasting multiple years; and frankly, many independent outlets would not be comfortable with a project resting at one of the partner outlets. What most outlets need is an infrastructure ready to support one-off collaborative projects. That infrastructure can best be provided by mission-driven assocaitions.

The Media Consortium has developed a particular expertise in creating collective impact collaborations. In 2014, we created eight such projects, involving over twenty outlets, ranging from pop culture takes on abortion to fiscal accountability at charter schools to profiles of immigrant food-truck workers. In each case, outlets with very different platforms or areas of expertise worked together in order to create multifaceted reporting on complex topics.

For these collaborations, the Media Consortium supplied the connective tissue—we brought the parties together, organized calls for their editors to share ideas and data, organized a social media publicity campaign, and solicited social media support from the Consortium as a whole when the collaboration launched. In cases where we had funding, we were even able to provide mini-grants to cover the reporting costs in order to incentivize the outlets to work together.

Collective Impact Done Collectively by Associations

While the Media Consortium has developed this expertise, we would like to share it across the independent news spectrum. Imagine if we could do stories on immigrant participation in elections that drew on the ethnic press, the local press, and national outlets! We’d be able to combine direct interviews with immigrant voters and explanatory reporting and analysis of local barriers to immigrant voting with national analysis and data visualization, creating a full picture of barriers to immigrant participation in elections.

Or consider an in-depth report on fracking that could include a call-in radio component, in which we would ask individuals to report what effect fracking has had on their lives via community radio. Combining that with the analysis of national beat reporters who have followed fracking and we’d get a great picture of the impact fracking has had across the country.

To create these large collaborations, a number of different associations would have to come together. The two examples above would require coordination between NAM, AAN and TMC or INN in the first case, and between NFCB and either TMC or INN in the second case.

That kind of coordination is possible. The Media Consortium and the Association of Alternative Newsmedia worked together in 2013 to create a collaborative set of stories on the rollout of Plan B contraceptive. Four local outlets looked at the rollout in local pharmacies, while three national outlets provided background on the issues behind Plan B and ran a crowdsourcing campaign. The effort was so successful that the Princeton-based Office of Population Research asked for our data.

There is enormous reporting potential lying latent in the independent news sector. To harness it, we need to bring together associations, and then bring together outlets, to create collective impact.

**Conclusion**

Precisely because independent outlets are so different from each other, it is easy to focus in on one outlet for attention, or to believe that it would be possible to create an outlet that would finally scale and do everything all the other outlets can do. Frankly, those of us in the independent world have watched as, time and again, money is poured into one outlet, or an outlet is created, and then goes bankrupt, unable to sustain the vision poured into it.

The aim of this report has been to redirect that attention. We love all of our outlets; all of them are worthy of individual support. However, to really create an alternative to corporate media in this country; to speak truth to power; to provide an outlet for those without a voice—to support, in other words, the true work of the Fourth Estate in a democracy—allies of independent news must support the sector as a whole as well as its parts. We need strategic planning and attention paid to independent news associations.

This report further suggests that one goal of such attention should be to imagine ways of bringing current associations together. Associations based on legacy platforms and business models are not able to provide as much support for their members as they once did. However, if they can combine forces—whether that be via a federation, coalition, or even mergers—then we will increase the power of the associations to be the backbone that independent news outlets need.

**Appendix of Associations (Alphabetical)**

**Alliance for Community Media (ACM)**

Type: 501c6

Legacy: Public, Educational and Governmental (PEG) Media Access Centers

Founded: 1976

Members: 3,000

Director: Michael Wassenar

# Staff: 4

URL: <http://www.allcommunitymedia.org>

The Alliance for Community Media represents Public, Educational, and Governmental (PEG) media access centers. It offers members an annual conference and extensive DC-based lobbying. It is supported by member dues.

From 2012-2014 ACM underwent a leadership transition and strategic plan, and is emerging now with a renewed focus on federal lobbying for guaranteed money for existing PEGS. Meanwhile, some of the more innovative PEGS have discovered that they can exist without federal funds by adopting the revenue models more common to independents—individual donations, membership and fee for service. SPNN in Minneapolis, PhillyMedia in Philadelphia, Chicago Public Media, and others are leading the way.

**Association of Alternative News Media (AAN)**

Type: 501c6

Legacy: Print weeklies

Founded: 1978

Members: 115 members; over 250 individual papers

Director: Tiffany Shackelford

# Staff: 2

URL: <http://www.altweeklies.com>

One of the largest and oldest independent associations is that for alternative print weeklies, the most famous of which is probably the Village Voice. AAN supports members by offering annually a leadership conference, digital conference, and all-member conference; by running a national ad network; DC-based lobbying; and by offering a large variety of discounted services including legal and audit. AAN supports itself through dues and the ad network.

Alt-weeklies are in the midst of the digital transition right now; at least 18 weeklies have folded in the last three years. However, many print weeklies—especially in smaller urban areas like Colorado Springs and Little Rock, Arkansas—are thriving. In some cases, ironically, the primary challenge for the alt-weeklies is that the daily paper in their town has collapsed, leaving the “alternative” paper as the only paper. While the number of alts may diminish further, those that survive are likely to become the primary news providers in their communities, combining multiplatform content with hybrid business models based on membership, events and advertising.

**Institute for Nonprofit News (formerly Investigative News Network)**

Type: 501c3

Founded: 2009

Members: 100

Director: Kevin Davis

# Staff: 9

URL: <http://investigativenewsnetwork.org/>

INN was founded to support non-partisan investigative journalism. Its members are primarily text-driven, though some of the larger members have begun adding podcasts and video and partnering with radio stations. Many members are regional news centers affiliated with university journalism programs or serve a particular issue, such as health or environmental reporting, with funding models based in educational or foundation funding.

As it has grown, INN has developed a rich set of programs to support the business of journalism, including workshops co-sponsored with Poynter, grants offered in conjunction with the Knight Foundation that advance the sustainability of news outlets, best business practices guidelines and legal and technical support services.

INN has recently redefined its mission to focus more on impact. It has joined with IRE to provide access to data journalism and has supported collaborative projects. INN is the best-funded of the independent news associations. Though it currently is primarily supported by foundation dollars, it is working to diversify its own revenue via fee-for-service and membership dues.

**Local Independent Online News (LION) Publishers**

Type: 501c3

Founded: 2012

Members: 115

Director (Interim): Matt DiRienzo

# Staff: 1

URL: <http://www.lionpublishers.com/>

LION Publishers represents the publishers and editors of local independent online news websites, both for-profit and non-profit. In short, they are the bloggers of the HuffPo/ Daily Kos era, now focused on making money from their digital day jobs. LION offers its dues paying members a national conference, mentoring, and discounted services.

LION’s primary challenge is that its members often not only don’t have the resources to fully support the organization, but may also be unable to afford conference attendance or discounted services without additional financial support. The organization received significant seed funding, but has had a difficult time developing into a mature association.

**The Media Consortium**

Type: 501c3

Founded: 2005

Members: 75

Director: Jo Ellen Green Kaiser

# Staff: 1.5

URL: <http://www.themediaconsortium.com>

The Media Consortium was founded to support and grow the impact of the progressive independent news sector. Arising in part in response to the digital revolution, it was created as an explicitly multiplatform organization. Its current members include TV, radio, print magazines, print books, digital-only, and mobile-only outlets.

Media Consortium members are niche news outlets with an intimate understanding of their audiences. Some serve particular demographics, such as LGBT, immigrants, or Catholics; others focus on issue areas such as reproductive health or the environment; still others have a very strong voice. Their business models reflect the deep engagement of their audiences, with 40-60% of their revenue based primarily on small donors, members, and subscribers.

The Media Consortium offers an annual conference; discounted services; site visits and one-on-one consulting; an innovation lab that runs experiments on growing and measuring impact; a robust media policy program, and an ongoing program of editorial collaboration. The Media Consortium is funded primarily by foundations and member dues.

**National Alliance for Community Arts and Culture (NAMAC)**

Type: 501c3

Founded: 1980

Members: 64

Director: Wendy Levy

# Staff: 1

URL: <http://www.namac.org>

NAMAC represents organizations and individual leaders in the media arts. Their members include community media centers (like ACM), documentary filmmakers, and media arts organizations. Members are an eclectic mix of arts-focused and news-focused producers. NAMAC’s core programs have been its National Leadership Institute, which has trained a generation of media arts leaders; an annual conference; and a robust media policy program.

In 2014, NAMAC’s long-time Executive Director retired. Under new director Wendy Levy, the organization is refocusing on digital arts, youth media and global media partnerships. NAMAC’s core mission—and core constituency--will probably continue to evolve over the next several years.

**New American Media (NAM)**

Type: 501c3

Founded: 1996

Members: 3000

Director: Sandy Close

# Staff:

URL: <http://newamericamedia.org>

New America Media was founded to bring the voices of the marginalized--ethnic minorities, immigrants, young people, elderly--into the national discourse. NAM members are mainly hyperlocal print papers run by immigrants and written in languages other than English; African-American media on a number of platforms; and youth media. Most members face a challenge transitioning their content from print to mobile, which is the platform most used by new immigrants.

New America Media acts as a membership association, tranlsating and aggregating member content on the NAM site, providing national advocacy, offering training webinars, and infrequently putting on a national conference. In addition, New American Media acts as a news organization itself, employing journalists to create original content, especially on verticals based in elder issues and immigrant rights.

NAM faces some key challenges: the ongoing challenge that its members—mostly volunteer or very low budget—cannot support their organization; the fact that a once lucrative ad network may not survive the digital transition; and the need to transition from the founding director to new leadership.

**National Federation of Community Broadcasters (NFCB)**

Type: 501c3

Legacy: Community Radio and LPFM radio

Founded: 1975

Members: 150

Director: Sally Kane

# Staff: 1

URL: <http://www.nfcb.org/>

Along with NPR stations there have always been small community broadcasters, including community media centers and low-power FM radio stations. NFCB represents all of these stations. NFCB offers an annual conference, a national ad network, national advocacy, a regular training workshops.

Community radio once was primarily important in creating, reflecting and representing minority communities of all types (including white subcultures) through music programming. In that role, NFCB has been the key leader in diversifying the media landscape, helping create Native Public Radio, Latino Radio and African American radio stations and groups.

Today, community radio broadcasters, especially in rural communities that are losing their daily papers, are having to become primary local news providers. After a reorganization and a change in executive directors in 2014, the NFCB is now focusing on helping these small stations add digital text-based news to their radio programming.

**Related Organizations**

In addition to the organizations named above that are designed exclusively to serve independent news outlets, there are a number of other associations that serve individuals working at these outlets. These associations include:

**Association of Independents in Radio**

URL: <http://www.airmedia.org/>

AIR offers some programs, like Localore, designed for outlets rather than individuals, and thus intersects with the work of NAMAC and NFCB.

**Allied Media Project (AMP)**

URL: https://www.alliedmedia.org

Allied Media Project represents media-makers interested in sharing and developing models to transform themselves and their communities. It offers an annual conference as well as a sponsored projects program. It is probably the most radical of the media associations in terms of how it functions and who it serves.

**Investigative Reporters and Editors**

URL: www.ire.org

IRE’s main conference functions as the defacto annual conference for the INN organizations.

**Online News Association**

URL: www.journalists.org

Quickly overtaking legacy associations for mainstream journalism like the Magazine Publishers of America and Newspaper Association of America, ONA’s annual meeting has become the job and networking center for large news organizations. The conference is not geared, however, for niche, independent publications with budgets under $5 million. ONA is a 501c3.

**Society of Professional Journalists**

URL: <http://www.spj.org>

SPJ offers ethics and diversity training, FOIA assistance, and an annual conference that supplements what many of the associations provide.

There are many other similar organizations, of course, including ones for journalists in specialty areas (environmental journalists, health journalists, etc