

**Innovation and Incubation Lab**A project of The Media Consortium

**Introduction**

*“The stakes are very high for independent media. Will it change or will it atrophy? Independent media can become the dominant media in society. Who would have dreamed that 30 years ago?"*

—Don Tapscott, author of *Wikinomics*

*The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future of Journalism* (The Media Consortium, September, 2009)

Independent media is facing broad opportunities and challenges. Business models are broken by the migration of audiences and ad dollars to the digital space and a complicated online ecosystem that includes new competitors. The digital revolution has also given birth to many new independent media organizations and created unprecedented opportunities for the entire sector.

The cost of reaching new audiences has dropped radically and the emerging media sphere includes a welcome emphasis on independent, critical, diverse news and opinion. Media Consortium members like The Young Turks, Salon and Talking Points Memo are proving that you can reach audiences of hundreds of thousands, even millions of people each day using new media. These organizations are building web-native editorial products and web-native business models that are revolutionizing the business.

But many journalism outlets are having trouble bridging the gap between yesterday and tomorrow's media. Consortium members can shift their organizations out of crisis mode and take advantage of the tremendous opportunity the digital revolution provides—but only if they understand the tone, pace, technology, and unique editorial products that thrive on the web. And those who are succeeding can expand on the lessons they've learned and begin to build institutions that will sustain themselves for years to come. Through its Innovation and Incubation Lab (II Lab), The Media Consortium will create a dynamic program that offers consulting, expertise, and a strategic space to help its members understand, navigate and experiment to overcome crisis and move into opportunity.

In 2009, The Media Consortium produced a comprehensive look at the current and future media environment in a report called, *The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future for Journalism*, (to be released in late September 2009). The report lays out both the crisis and opportunities that media makers are fielding, and makes recommendations on how The Media Consortium can help move its members to more sustainable and robust models. Broad recommendations include:

1. **Change internally:** The first and deepest change is to rethink how media organizations and formal networks are structured. By integrating technologists, entrepreneurs and individual media-makers, independent media will cultivate new competencies and strategies to change the journalism field.
2. **Increase experimentation:** Journalism organizations must increase their capacity to innovate with new technology, journalistic practices and business models. They can do this by pursuing “rapid, low-cost innovation” and pooling their experimental efforts. Funders must invest in the long-term sustainability of journalism’s truth-telling by investing in greater experimentation among both new and existing players.
3. **Leverage unique role of a consortium:** Since independent media will continue to grow more diverse and fragmented, it is critical that media-makers break out of organizational silos and work together. The more that independent media-makers leverage their collective power, the more they can negotiate deals, influence public policy and build journalism’s new ecosystem.
4. **Building audiences as communities:** Media organizations must create platforms for users to participate in the journalistic process, work with each other on projects and build their own online communities independent of publishers.

But time is running out. Corporate media is starting to regain its footing in the digital space and the crisis with old models is forcing some brands to scale back faster than they can scale up to a new approach.

It’s time to get to work. One of the most important recommendations from the report was for The Media Consortium to develop an Incubation and Innovation Lab that supports members in conducting rapid prototyping as a low-cost way to test new business, technology and content development models at a scale that they would not be able to achieve alone. The Media Consortium has developed a program that combines one-on-one consulting and organized and ongoing lab environments to accomplish this goal. This lab would also serve as a feedback and education system for members to build upon their experiments and experiences.

**About II Lab**

*“Publishers can fight it and cling to old, crumbling models, or they can get in the game themselves by offering content producers sophisticated ways to reach/observe/respond to reader behavior, directly."*

—Johanna Vondeling, Vice President, Editorial and Digital, Berrett-Kohler Publishers

*The Big Thaw: Charting a New Future of Journalism*(The Media Consortium, September, 2009)

The Media Consortium's Innovation and Incubation Lab (II Lab) will focus on helping members experiment with new business, publishing and editorial models that take advantage of the new, web-enabled reader/publisher relationships. Appropriate and effective models will vary depending on the outlet's individual editorial goals, resources and business needs. II lab will allow members to learn from outside experts and trade experiences, information, and ongoing questions with each other. Members will not only discover the best strategies for their organizations, but learn how to implement them—a critical component of ongoing success. At the end of the lab cycle, participating members will share experiences and lessons learned with MC members and allies, creating a ripple effect of in which education, deployment of practices and evolution of experiments moves outward to benefit the whole independent media sector. Experimentation will lead to successes, sometimes failures that will be lessons for the future, and create space for media outlets to identify and implement a long-term formula for ongoing sustainability and impact that will support their critical journalism.

Cumulatively, these publishing and editorial strands represent a strong and strategic shift for independent media makers to move towards new opportunities that will encourage sustainability, long-term impact for their content, and a healthy transition into 21st century media models. II Lab will implement this strategy in two parts: The first being one-on-one consulting with a select group of MC members; the second, small-group labs that support education, collaboration and experimentation around specific business and journalism topics.

**The Program**

**PART ONE: Digital Refresh Workshop**

While many TMC members are eager to experiment and innovate, they do not have first-hand experience or capacity to make the first strides towards long-term sustainability. This deep thinking and experimentation requires funds many members do not have to hire the right consultants or staff to lead the process. In response to this problem, The Media Consortium is proud to debut our new Digital Refresh Workshop, a three-month turbo charge our members’ digital operations. This low-cost workshop will provide intensive hands-on support and training to help organizations analyze, understand and innovate around key digital strategies, including list/community building, revenue generation and how to harness new journalism production strategies.

By the end of the workshop, organizations will have completed an in-depth analysis of its current digital profile, determined future goals to revamp your digital strategy, and will take the first step towards launching an experiment to reach your goals. The Digital Refresh workshop will provide organizations with the cutting edge tools and smart guidance to achieve ongoing innovation for long-term sustainability and impact.

**What will the Digital Refresh Workshop look like?**

* Before the workshop begins, Media Consortium workshop leaders will engage in a deep dive analysis of an organization’s current digital profile and pinpoint potential growth areas.
* Once the analysis is completed, key members of the organization will attend a two-day strategic retreat lead by the Digital Refresh team. The goal of the retreat will be to craft a plan to launch a key experiment/innovation that your organization will undertake over the next few months.
* Following the strategic retreat, the Digital Refresh Workshop team will provide guidance, support and feedback on the experiment for three months.
* After three months, The Media Consortium will work with an organization to create a report on the results of the experiment to help set its next stage (support includes identifying next steps, fundraising, publicity, etc…). This report will be available as an open-source learning tool for other Media Consortium members.

**PART TWO: Digital Innovation Studio (small group labs)**

While some members receive intense one-on-one consulting, small group labs will run concurrently. Lab participants will focus on one particular business or journalism topic, such as experimenting with mobile delivery of content that they will research, explore and ultimately experiment around. Organized by Media Consortium staff, these small group sessions will include regular conference calls with participating members and outside experts, at least one in-person meeting for lab participants, online information sharing spaces (wikis, list servs, etc.) and more. This structure will provide lab members with the opportunity and space for self-education, peer knowledge sharing, access to outside experts, and collaborations that can scale up and improve the long-term sustainability of their outlets.

With these small-group labs, The Media Consortium's goals are to support deep learning and incremental shifts for TMC members to develop new models of revenue generation, audience expansion and new editorial opportunities. Cumulatively, these labs will catalyze a broad shift in how independent media outlets operate, survive and thrive in a 21st century landscape.

Through a members survey in August 2009, The Media Consortium has already identified the three main topics of interest for members to explore and experiment with during the next 12 months, including: Creating mobile content and cutting deals for revenue opportunities, experimenting with journalism and community building/engagement models, and developing new online revenue models.

Each lab will run for four to five months. The first lab will start in the first quarter of 2010. In addition to organizing the labs, The Media Consortium will provide seed money of $10,000-$15,000 to help incubate a collaborative experiment.

TMC is identifying potential project partners with other organizations, media networks and/or universities to identify and synthesize the most cutting edge research, experimentations already in place and lessons from non-traditional sources that can be applied to developing new opportunities for members to grow their audiences, develop new revenue generation opportunities and build their impact on the public debate.

**Conclusion**

As *The Big Thaw* 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?'"

The II Lab program will provide critical help to Media Consortium members seeking higher ground. Through experimentation and testing, we can create more opportunity and stability for the future of independent media.