**What is your project? \***

**Explain what you propose to build as a result of this grant.**

We intend to build a prototype circulation database as an app on the Force.com platform, the “software as a service” cloud-based application environment created by Salesforce.com. News organizations increasingly are (re)turning to online subscription models, from digital paywalls to paid premium “memberships.” As they innovate around revenue, news organizations need a tool that will flex to their demands.

Our product will be the first online circulation database that has all the bells and whistles of a legacy circulation database and yet can also seamlessly link to just about any customer relationship management (CRM) database available. The database will be an installable package on an Enterprise Salesforce account, configurable to suit any publication. Most critically, it will be responsive to publishers’ needs because it will be built via an innovative collaborative process by the customers it is designed to serve.

**Who is the audience/user of this project? How will they be impacted? \***

We have conducted a preliminary market analysis demonstrating a wider than expected need for this project. We began this project because legacy print Media Consortium members asked us to do so—they told us they need a new type of circulation database that can communicate with cloud-based CRM databases.

When we launched a wider market analysis, we discovered that there is a growing universe of online-only publishers who have implemented subscription-type services. We found that they have been frustrated with their current customer management systems precisely because those systems cannot handle traditional circulation functions. By building a circulation database on Force.com, with its excellent APIs, we will be able to add that extra and new functionality they need to their current CRM.

What’s truly remarkable is that news organizations have asked us to implement this project on their behalf, even though they will ultimately have to pay extra to customize it. Why? Because these savvy publishers understand that business models are changing incredibly fast—faster than their team can keep up. They want the benefit of a think tank of like-minded peers to work together in order to build a database flexible enough for any exigency.

**What challenge/need are you addressing? Why do you believe this approach will work?**

Digital publishers experimenting with paid subscription models (whatever they may call them) are finding that their current CRM can’t handle this revenue source. That’s because even CRM databases designed for membership management (like CiviCRM, Neon CRM, etc) don’t have the detailed reporting and renewal series capability of a true circulation database. At the same time, existing circulation software systems are notoriously inflexible, based on proprietary software and developed for a highly segmented print publishing marketplace. Legacy print publications tell us that it is their need to use this old-fashioned circulation software has led to database silos that can’t talk to each other.

Every publisher we’ve interviewed  in the last six months -- no matter their frequency, or print vs. digital equation --  described the same dream scenario: one master database for their subscribers from which they could build a data-driven relationship across mediums (email, social, phone, etc.) and products (print subscriptions, digital subscriptions, memberships, products, etc.). Currently, each publisher has at minimum 2-3 separate databases -- often circulation, development (donors), and marketing (email, social) -- and they do not talk to each other. More than that, larger publishers struggle with the task of syncing and reconciling their in-house data with external data shared with fulfillment companies, direct mail agencies, and so on. This project would that problem.

We believe our approach will work specifically because it will be built with more contemporary circulation and revenue concepts at the core.. Just as critically, our approach is designed to sync seamlessly with constituent or customer management systems publishers may already use. Finally, we believe the database will allow publishers to innovate around revenue precisely because it is being built by and for publishers via an innovative think-tank process.

**Describe your team members' background and experience.**

Mike Maxwell, Lead, Project Developer

Mike served at the award-winning, independent non-profit publication High Country News for 5 years as Director of Operations and Associate Publisher where he managed circulation, sales, marketing, HR, facilities and IT. Previously, he was Team Manager and Director of Product Development at True Credit, a provider of personal credit products.

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser, Project Manager

Jo Ellen is the Executive Director of the Media Consortium. She will be responsible for maintaining the “think tank” nature of this project. Jo Ellen has conducted over 15 editorial collaborations and collaborative “labs” over the past three years. You can find her thoughts on editorial collaboration in PBS MediaShift, Journalism Accelerator, and elsewhere.

Project Advisors:

Phillip Smith, Consultant

Almost two decades of software development and IT consulting experience directly focused on the publishing industry. Has worked with publishers across the globe. Intimately understands the nature of circulation management, online marketing & sales, and fundraising.

Kate Lesniak, Development Director, Bitch Media  
Bitch Media is a nonprofit feminist media organization best known for publishing the magazine Bitch: Feminist Response to Pop Culture. Kate has served as Bitch Media’s Development Director for two years. Before Bitch, Kate held similar roles at Corporate Accountability International and Democracy for America.

Rod Arakaki, Audience Development Director, Yes! magazine

Rod has been Audience Development Director at Yes! for over 15 years.

Steve Katz, Publisher, Mother Jones

Steven Katz is Publisher for Mother Jones and its non-profit publisher, the Foundation for National Progress. He joined MoJo in 2003 after several years as Vice President of Development for Earthjustice, the nation's leading non-profit environmental law firm.

Plus, a brain trust including:

Kim Elliott, Publisher, Rabble.ca

Joe Macare, Publisher, Truthout

Kim-Jenna Juriaans, Interpress News Service

Art Stupar, Associate Publisher, The Nation

Jane Jansen, Associate Publisher, In These Times

Madeline Cantwell, Publisher, Orion

**What assumptions will you test? How will you know if the project worked or not?**

The primary assumption that will be tested is: will a “software as a service” offering for print and digital circulation start to address some of the problems previously described by news publishers.

Short-term success will be measured first by use. Is the prototype attractive enough that each of the pilot organizations commit to implementing it? Have we met the business need the organizations in our focus groups have expressed? Have we created a system better than the CRMs already out there for circulation or membership management?

Mid-term success will be measured by circulation metrics. Has implementing this database resulted in improved subscription/ membership and retention rates? Has it reduced overhead time needed to service subscribers/members? Has it resulted in a net revenue increase?

Long-term success will be based on the database project itself becoming a sustainable nonprofit spin-off, taking in enough revenue (from for-profit customers paying market rate to nonprofit customers paying a deeply discounted rate) to enable us to continually maintain and improve the tool.

**What part of this project have you already built?**

In March 2013 we began the process of surveying the pilot group, as well as a broader network of publishers and media producers, including print, online, radio, and broadcast organizations. Since that time, we have conducted more than a dozen detailed, phone-based interviews with staff at those organizations to more fully document their current challenges with “database silos” and to better understand the potential for a solution that was developed collaboratively and shared across organizations. In Spring 2014, we conducted an analysis of the marketplace, looking at donor, membership and circulation databases already on the market. From the sum of this research, we have now developed a business requirements document for a new product that would meet the needs of the pilot organizations specifically, and the sector more broadly.

All of the publishers believe that a jointly-undertaken solution would be the best possible outcome. Three publishers—Bitch Media, High Country News, and Yes! magazine—have committed to testing the prototype. Should this prototype fund grant be approved, each publisher would contribute their work to date and put their energy, staff, and financial resources behind this prototype project.