

# **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 independent journalism 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 7 associations representing news outlets. Most were based primarily on serving a particular media platform or revenue model—even though in the 21<sup>st</sup> 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 networking 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.

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Note: While the views and opinions expressed here are solely those of the author, each of the following association leaders has supported in principle the publication of this report: Brant Houston, INN; Tiffany Shackelford, AAN; Sally Kane, NFCB; Mike Wassenar, ACM; Sandy Close, NAM.

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## Chapter One: Planning a Better Independent News Sector

Independent news is a critical component of the news sector in the United States.

Independent news outlets are outlets that are free of influence by corporate shareholders or governments, prioritizing mission above all else. Independents give voice to individuals who are underrepresented in our society; push investigations that may question values, people, or positions many hold dear; and publish stories on topics that may not attract large audiences but that are critical for the public to know. Independents are the canaries of our democracy.

Critical to keeping the independent news sector vital and robust is a strong infrastructure to support that sector. That is the role played by independent news associations. The core independent news associations are<sup>1</sup>:

- AAN (the Association of Alternative Newsmedia) is a 501c6 serving 118 weekly alternative papers and their digital sites;
- ACM (the Alliance for Community Media) is a 501c6 serving over 3000 public, educational, and government access channels and community media centers;
- NFCB (the National Federation of Community Broadcasters) is a 501c3 serving 140 community radio stations;
- NAM (New America Media) is a 501c3 dedicated to bringing voices of the marginalized into the national discourse. It is the association for over 3000 ethnic newspapers and sites;
- TMC (The Media Consortium) is a 501c3 dedicated to growing the impact of its 75 progressive independent news outlets;
- INN (The Institute for Nonprofit News) is a 501c3 supporting 100 mission-driven nonprofit journalism;
- LION (Local Independent Online News) is a 501c3 supporting 114 hyperlocal online journalism outlets.

In many respects, the independent news sector is like any other sector of our economy—like other businesses, independent news outlets need trade associations.

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<sup>1</sup> The one association not listed here that may spring to mind is the Online News Association. ONA was founded by many in independent media, but now increasingly is composed of and represents the interests of corporate media. In addition, ONA is organized to represent journalists rather than outlets. Thus ONA, along with the many organizations representing journalists (like SPJ), is not a featured player in this paper. A paper remains to be written that ties together the issues impacting independent outlets and those impacting the journalists who work for those outlets.

Such associations provide their members rich opportunities to network, offer members discounted services, and often provide lobbying, public relations, and other support for the sector as a whole.

However, independents need more from their associations than help with their “trade.” Like many small or regional nonprofits, independents also need help amplifying their mission. Because independents are almost always niche publications, they have trouble reaching beyond their core audience. A well-run independent often finds itself “preaching to the choir.” This paper argues that the best way for an independent to sustain a mission based on a niche and at the same time get beyond that niche to have more impact is to work collectively with other independents.

The current landscape of independent associations reflects both these needs. Half of the independent news associations are organized as 501c6 trade associations, designed to provide networking (via conferences), discounted services, and public relations support to their sector. The other half are organized as 501c3s, designed to amplify the mission of their members. In fact, almost all the associations in this sector attempt to fulfill both roles at once.

While the portmanteau of independent news associations is larger than that of other trade or mission-based membership organizations, independent news associations tend to be under-resourced, a trend that is only accelerating. One simple reason for this lack of resources is that the members of these associations--independent news outlets—are themselves under-resourced, and so have little to give to their supporting associations.

Likewise, because the sector is not rich, associations have difficulty attracting the corporate sponsorships that are the manna of most trade associations. It doesn't help that independent news outlets are very likely to publish content attacking the kinds of corporations (banks, telecom) and organizations (unions, political groups) that often fund trade and membership associations.

Associations have relied on non-member revenue to cover their costs. However, such revenue is either drying up or is unpredictable<sup>2</sup>. Legacy associations that once gained revenue via advertising syndicates or distribution deals are finding that their revenues are decreasing in the digital era. Foundations are funding newer 501c3

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<sup>2</sup> Revenue has become a problem for nonprofit associations generally. See <http://www.nxtbook.com/nxtbooks/associationnews/201306/#/34>. Even at large associations dues only equal 32% of revenue. The rest comes from advertising, meeting sponsorships and grants. For news organizations, the same movement of advertisers from news to social media (see <http://www.journalism.org/2015/04/29/state-of-the-news-media-2015/>) is affecting news organizations.

associations, but without any guarantees of long-term general support, making such funding an uncertain basis for sustainability.

Finally, the very identity of many associations is being put to question by changes again wrought by the digital revolution. Most independent news associations are organized by news platform—radio, print magazine, print newspaper, TV—or by funding mechanism—advertising or non-profit funding. Yet as I will show below, in the digital era most independent news outlets are embracing multiple platforms and revenue hybridity.

For example, AAN, an association that once focused on weekly newsprint, now must offer a “digital conference” and provide both an ad syndicate and advice on membership models (typically a nonprofit revenue source). Even a newer organization like INN that is dedicated to serving non-profits finds it needs to talk to its members about event and other external revenue sources more typical of for-profits. Each association is asked to provide an entire sector’s worth of service to its specific niche.

Simply from a perspective of efficiency, associations need to consider ways to share this burden. Recently, several associations have co-located or merged conferences for that reason:

- 2012: NFCB (community radio) and ACM (community media)
- 2014: NAMAC (media arts and culture) and ACM
- 2015: TMC (progressive media) and AAN (alternative media)

The time is thus ripe to consider whether the associations might also benefit from sharing other trade association functions.

The even bigger opportunity for the sector may lie in the possibility of joining forces around impact. New theories of collective impact suggest that combining groups with different core expertise can lead not just to greater reach but to significant improvements in the type of impact made. The Media Consortium has already begun experimenting around such collective impact with some intriguing results.

What the sector needs now is an intense period of strategic planning to better understand how we can leverage our combined resources to provide independent news outlets the support they need to strengthen their businesses—and their missions.

The rest of this paper is devoted to supporting the following arguments:

1. Both the trade association function and the mission-support function of independent news associations are necessary for the sector.
2. For reasons of scale, efficiency, and program, it makes sense to pool many of the trade association functions of existing associations.
3. For strategic reasons, it makes sense to encourage the existing associations to work together in order to realize collective impact.

To make these arguments, this paper takes a deeper look at both independent news outlets and their associations.

In Chapter Two, I explore the business model of independent outlets, demonstrating how and why they have moved towards hybrid models. I also look at how moving to multiple platforms has influenced the business model. Understanding the business model of the sector is critical to understanding the benefit of combining trade association functions.

In Chapter Three, I provide an overview of the current independent news associations, and make an argument for the benefit to them as trade associations of sharing the work of serving the sector.

In Chapter Four, I discuss the theory of collective impact, and show why current associations could create much deeper impact if they worked together.

This paper also includes two long appendixes.

Appendix I provides a detailed look and explanation of the different types of business in which independent news outlets engage.

Appendix II provides a history and brief description of each of the independent news associations.

## **Chapter Two: The Independent News Business Model**

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 is free of any influence by government or by corporate shareholders. Public outlets like PBS or NPR, which are primarily government funded, are thus not considered independent. One important exception is made for public, educational and government access channels (known as “PEGs”) that are funded largely through local franchise taxes on cable operators—these channels, often organized into community media centers—are considered independent.

Independents are often defined in opposition to corporate media such as ABC, CNN, USA Today, etc. In general, if an outlet is considered “mainstream” media it is not independent. The New York Times, for example, is generally not considered to be independent media even though it is not owned by a major corporate conglomerate.

Independents, however, can be for-profit as well as non-profit. Generally, to be considered independents, for-profits must not only be free of corporate shareholders, but must also put mission before profit (as in B-corps). Examples of for-profit independents include The Nation, Grist, and most of the alt-weeklies. Some of these independents cite the desire to be free of control by foundation funders and large donors as one reason that they are not organized as non-profits.

Independent news outlets have operated as long as there has been distributed news. In the twentieth century, independents revelled in being the small guys. They survived and thrived primarily by being niche publications—Ms. magazine, for example, appealed to feminists; Orion magazine to environmentalists; the alt-weeklies to pot-smoking, polyamorous hipsters. 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.

## **1. Three Facts about Independents**

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

Being mission-driven rather than profit-driven affects everything about the independent business model, from its use of resources to its sources of revenue. While having a strong mission may limit independents' ability to grow revenue or expand their staff, their mission also keeps independents from going under when economic times get rough. The consequences of this mission focus are critical to any understanding of the sector:

**Limited 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 (although the definition of community may vary based on the station's programming); a progressive Jewish outlet can only serve progressive Jews (and allies); an environmental journal serves those who care passionately about the environment.

**Tightly-Budgeted.** 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. For most independents, any extra money goes to audience development.

In fact, independents are notorious for not funding basic operational business roles. This resource allocation is not necessarily a sign of poor management. Without great

content, independents lose their *raison d'être*. Without audience development, they cannot make impact. The problem independents face is that once they build out their content and marketing arms, they often cannot manage to locate the revenue sources necessary to build out their business operations. The revenue-to-expense ratio for that doesn't pencil out.

One benefit of being tightly budgeted is that independents rarely have much to lose when an economic slow-down hits. Their money usually flows directly from their audience, and thus they typically have a small, but relatively stable, economic base.

**Engaged audience.** Independents rely on engaged audiences. These audiences do not just read, listen or view the news. They actively agree with the independent's mission and are eager to support that mission.

Audiences of independents are very likely to support their favorite news source with dollars. A Pew report from 2013 shows that over 70% of nonprofit independents get money from individual donors.<sup>3</sup> That number understates the engagement of the audience: independent audiences not only donate to non-profit independents—they give money to for-profit independents like *The Nation* because they believe in their mission. Other for-profit independents, like the alternative newsweeklies, leverage their engaged audiences to bring in advertiser revenue.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that independents garner this kind of engagement—that, for example, an outlet like *Truthout* with a budget of close to \$1 million can get the majority of its revenue from small donors—is critical for understanding how independents can survive through tough times. It's also critical for understanding how independents can have outsized impact (an issue taken up in the final chapter of this report).

## 2. Built-in Hybridity

Of the three facts about independents, the most important for its business model is its engaged audience. An independent that can't raise at least some money from its audience should not be in business.

That doesn't mean that all independents do raise money from their audiences. In the pre-digital era, many independents never needed to come hat in hand to their readers, listeners or viewers. Alt-weeklies and community radio made money from advertisers; investigative centers were able to make money from syndication; a few outlets managed to get by for a while by selling print magazines on newsstand (*Bitch*, for one).

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<sup>3</sup> See the Pew Report on Independent Nonprofit News Sites:

<http://www.journalism.org/files/legacy/Nonprofit%20News%20Study.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.inma.org/blogs/value-content/post.cfm/what-newspapers-can-learn-from-alternative-weeklies>

In the digital era, however, making money by advertising, distribution, and syndication has become much more difficult, not just for independents but for corporate media as well. The advantage independents have is their engaged audience. Engaged audiences will give money to independents because they identify with the independents' mission.

When corporate news media like Time or Newsweek lose subscribers, they lose those dollars. When independents like Mother Jones or the Nation lose print subscribers, they often gain small donors (Mother Jones) or members (The Nation Associates). Even when other forms of revenue go down, an independent that has paid attention to its content and has developed its audience can be sustained by small dollars from individuals.

Different types of independents get these small dollars in different ways and sometimes in a number of ways. Even for-profit independents (Public News Service is one) have been successful at cultivating small donors who don't care if their gift is tax-free. Memberships have been a way to raise money for for-profits (the Arkansas Times is a good example) and additional money from non-profit donors who might give more (Tikkun pioneered this source). Independents generally don't have success with online subscriptions, but print-based independent magazines still make money from print subscriptions.

A third important revenue stream for non-profit independents is institutional giving, whether that giving comes from large foundations, personal foundations, or via in-kind support from educational institutions. In these cases, the institution either values the independent's mission enough to provide support for its activities or receives a service from the independent (such as training journalism students).

Finally, the independents' mission may provide them with a built-in means to create what is often termed "external" or non-media related revenue, such as revenue from events, merchandise, or services. In essence, independents with a clear mission often can create businesses that draw on their editorial expertise.

In sum, revenue in this sector is hybrid and can come from four different sources:

- Revenue from advertising, distribution and syndication (traditional revenue streams)
- Revenue from individuals: subscribers, members, small donors
- Revenue from nonprofit sources: foundations, large donors, universities
- Revenue from other sources (often termed external revenue)

For a detailed look at these different revenue streams, see Appendix I. [Also covered in Appendix I are the PEGS, which come into being via a franchising agreement between the franchise authority and the regional cable operator.]

A stable independent news business will have funding from individuals plus funding from at least one or more 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.

### **3. The Platform Challenge**

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. That is because independents thrive by being niche publications, and the publishing platform is often central to their niche. In fact, independents traditionally have embraced their platform in a way that can seem a bit obsessive to those more familiar with 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](#). Community radio stations in the past thrived by literally being the voice of specific sub-communities with popular dj's and ethnic music (think of an hour of Lithuanian wedding songs, for example).

For independent news outlets (as for many other legacy outlets), platform 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.

That said, 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.

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. And new independent outlets are emerging that are digital radio (Rivet) and mobile-only (Small World News). In fact, independents are often the first adopters of new technology.

The false impression that independents are not digital natives may arise from the fact that established 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 independents wait for corporate media to try and fail with new products (remember News Corps' various [attempts at tablet-based news?](#)). Once a new technology is proven to be economical and effective—like responsive design—independents quickly add it to their repertoire.

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 response. 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 publishes stories both online and in print, sometimes first online, sometimes first in print, sometimes simultaneously on both. On top of its print subscribers, Mother Jones has dramatically grown its online readership, with the result that since 2007-8, 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 online video to watching longer documentaries in theaters. In response, BNF changed their production methods, creating a series of short videos on the way to producing a [full-length documentary](#). Now, viewers can choose to watch a short online 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. What holds these outlets back is not a reluctance to move forward; what holds them back is a lack of capacity to pursue and evaluate these opportunities.

## Chapter Three: Independent News Associations

From looking at the revenue and platforms of the outlets of the independent news sector, we can deduce a few basic truths about how they function, and in turn, what they need from their associations:

1. Because mission is king of revenue as well as their *raison d'être*, independent news operations 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 cousins.

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. That history self-perpetuates, so that even as independents gain more resources, they lack the training and leadership to plan strategically. More than their corporate peers, independent outlets require outside help to support them in these areas.

Essentially, independent news associations fill the role that large corporations would assign to managers with titles like Director, Learning and Development (HR) or Financial Analyst or Project Coordinator. Those kinds of positions that would be considered "corporate" rather than "editorial" are filled in large part by independent news associations educating and offering free or discounted services to their member organizations.

Without trade associations to provide such core business infrastructure for independents, independents cannot survive long term.<sup>5</sup> Supporting independent news means supporting independent news associations.

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<sup>5</sup> Evidence of this is not only the current proliferation of associations, but the response of members when their association closes. It was the bankruptcy of the Independent Press Association that led to the founding of The Media Consortium, for example, by members who did not want to be left without an association.

## 1. What Associations Offer

Let's consider independent news associations, in aggregate, as trade associations. What kind of support do they provide to their members?

**Networking.** All of the associations provide rich networking opportunities.

- Conferences. AAN, ACM, NFCB and TMC hold a regular annual conference; INN and LION meet at conferences held by others;
- Regional Meetings. AAN, ACM, NAM, NFCB hold regional meetings;
- Listserves. All the associations provide dedicated member-only listservs (or similar tools) to share knowledge and information;
- Dedicated Membership Staff. AAN, ACM, INN, NAM, NFCB, and TMC (part-time) have a dedicated staffer to focus on member organizations;
- Job Board. AAN, ACM, and NFCB post jobs.
- Member Directory. All associations have a member directory.
- Email Newsletter. All associations put out an email newsletter.

**Services.** Many of the associations provide free or discounted services. These services include:

- Legal Advice. AAN has an on-staff lawyer who provides legal advice.
- Insurance Coverage (D&O). AAN, INN, and NFCB have offered discounted plans in the past.
- Technical Assistance. INN offers members free website development, low-cost web hosting and online support. INN also offers multimedia training.
- Standards Development. ACM works to develop field standards with vendors.
- Business Consulting. INN, NFCB, and TMC all provide consulting to members. NFCB and TMC provide site visits.
- Fiscal Sponsorship. INN serves as a fiscal sponsor.
- Software. Software deals include the Cxense marketing tool (AAN), discounts on TechSoup products (INN), multilingual polling services (NAM), the ENCO sound playback device (NFCB), a low-cost Cision PR database subscription (TMC)

**Revenue Opportunities.** Some associations offer members ways to leverage their audiences to increase traditional media revenue.

- Ad network. AAN offers a robust ad network that includes both print display and mobile ads, vendor vetting, circ audits and customer service.
- Syndication Services. INN offers a syndication deal via NewsTex.
- Free Content. AAN and NAM have deals to provide member outlets with free content. NFCB stations share content via PRX and Pacifica's audioport.

**Advocacy.** All associations promise their members higher visibility. Some also work to provide more concrete support.

- Lobbyist. AAN and ACM both employ paid lobbyists in DC.

- Briefings. NAM holds briefings on ethnic media for elected officials.
- Editorial Awards. AAN, ACM, NFCB, and TMC all offer awards for the best journalism among their members.

Spend some time with this list, and differences between the associations become clearer. For example, the Alliance for Community Media, whose members rely for revenue on an FCC ruling, offers members a paid lobbyist in DC. The Association for Alternative Newsmedia, the only group that still makes money primarily from advertising, offers a robust ad network. The Institute for Nonprofit News has made a niche for itself as a resource for non-profit business and technical services, while the Media Consortium has focused more on audience development and marketing.

## **2. Better Together: Revenue Hybridity**

The historical reasons for the differences in association offerings are clear. Yet, do these offerings still reflect the expanding needs of each association's members?

In the past, associations have supported members by helping them adopt the revenue model specific to the members of that association. In a hybrid revenue environment, however, 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. All independent outlets should be interested in gaining grants for business planning or attending a leadership institute, or learning how to obtain money from small donors.

Why not find a way for associations to work together so that any member of an association could take advantage of these kinds of programs?

Right now, many of these programs are technically open to any outlet, but, in fact, non-member outlets rarely hear about these opportunities and often feel dissuaded from applying for them. Associations that devote staff time and effort to put together such programs have a vested interest in keeping them for their own members.

If all the associations agreed to share their programs with each other, however, that atmosphere of competition would turn into one of cooperation. Associations would be able to promote the programs offered by the entire sector to their members. That sharing economy also would allow individual associations to develop a strong area of expertise in the knowledge that they would still be able to offer their members a wide range of services.



For member outlets, a shared set of revenue programs would do more than simply provide them more opportunities. Such a rich slate of programs would also educate these outlets about the benefit of adopting a hybrid business model. It would have strategic power in moving all outlets away from an attachment to one revenue model and create an atmosphere of experimentation and innovation.

For-profit outlets might begin to understand that they also can 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 might begin (finally!) to think of themselves as businesses, and learn from the entrepreneurial attitude of for-profits.

In short, finding a way to share services among associations would strengthen the infrastructure of the independent news sector as a whole.

### **3. Better Together: Multiple Platforms**

One reason there are so many different associations in the independent news sector is that many 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) all needed separate associations before 2005 because their business models, audiences, and types of content were so very different.

In the era when having a unique platform mattered, independent outlets had to learn from their platform peers, as only their peers shared both their platform and their revenue model. For example, documentarians shared advice on film festivals; print weeklies gave tips on where to distribute their papers; and PEGs held sessions on teaching the public how to use video and audio equipment.

Now, platform no longer divides outlets from each other. All outlets must be digital. So why do we hold separate conferences attended by the same set of consultants (including the usual suspects from Facebook and Google) when associations could join together to put on one (well-funded) digital conference at which independents could learn tips from each other?

In 2015, the Media Consortium and the Association of Alternative Newsmedia did hold a joint “digital” conference. Our members were delighted. Even sessions that conference planners had anticipated might be attended by one group or the other ended up having a mixed audience.

At the same time, the fact that all outlets are digital does not mean that only digital matters or that members only need to learn about digital innovation. Just the opposite.

Outlets are now increasingly multiplatform. Radio and TV programs have found that they must not only transcribe shows, but accompany audio-visual content with original text content on the web. Meanwhile, as mobile news becomes increasingly important, a growing number of text-based news outlets are seeking to add podcasting, youtube channels, and other audio and visual platforms.

A tremendous opportunity presents itself for outlets from different legacy platforms to learn from each other's expertise. Imagine what community radio outlets could teach alt-weeklies, for example, about podcasting—or the partnerships they could create! Imagine the connections that could be made between documentary filmmakers and nonprofit investigative centers, both of which spend months or even years researching the same kinds of stories. Think about how much the ethnic media could tell PEGS and community media centers about reaching new immigrants, and how much in turn community media centers could help ethnic newspapers in moving onto the mobile platform where most immigrants now get their news.

In some cases, outlets will chose to create their own multiplatform content (e.g. Dissent's podcasts). In others, they will form new partnerships (CIR's partnership with Univision, or PEG operators forming partnerships with LPFMs, print, and radio outlets). In either cases, networking with other independent outlets that specialize in a particular platform will help each outlet decide how to shape its own future.

These kinds of connections will only be possible, however, if associations see themselves as part of one shared community, and if members of one association are easily able (and invited) to access the special expertise held by other associations.

## **Chapter Four: Building One Independent News Sector**

This report has focused largely on the business side of the independent news 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 their 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.

The question independents wrestle with is how to ensure that stories can be heard beyond an outlet's niche without forcing an 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.

### **1. 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 a topic that 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. Even these reporters are unlikely to have the range of reporting skills just described, or be able access to a broad enough swath of communities to study, especially as corporate travel budgets have been cut. How, then, will we as a country be able to understand complex issues that require local and national, investigative and synthetic reporting?

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](#) 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 and Truthout, which offer in-depth reporting on policy change movements; and PRWatch, which tracks how corporate spending influences local politics. (Making Contact additionally provided print, radio, photo and infographics, along with a collective website). 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](#). 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.

## **2. 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](#)

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, about a year after Grist, Mother Jones, The Atlantic, CIR, Slate and Wired decided to collaborate on climate reporting (joined later by Huffington Post, the Guardian and CityLab), they realized they needed project management staff. This project team produces original content that is made available to the nine partner organizations, and ensures that the partners' own content is easily shared with the others.

The Climate Desk is unusual in its structure and longevity. 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 associations.

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.

## **3. 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; 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: Next Steps**

Precisely because independent outlets are so different from each other, it is easy to focus 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 which 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 the primary goal of that strategic planning 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. Most associations are losing money, or have very unstable funding mechanisms. The sector has not been able to seize the opportunities offered by the digital revolution.

However, there is no need to start from scratch. Current associations offer a wide array of services rich expertise in different business models and platforms. The challenge is to find a way to share this expertise within the sector.

That is why strategic planning is so necessary. There are real differences between the associations. For example, the Media Consortium represents news outlets with a progressive point-of-view; many INN members would not be comfortable in such an association! On the other hand, Media Consortium members might not be comfortable being in the same association with the government access channels represented by ACM (but might actively work with its public access/community media center members).

Geography also plays an important role for these associations. Community radio and television, LION's hyperlocal sites, and the alt-weeklies all define their mission in terms of their locality, and may be uncomfortable in the same association as big national outlets. Ethnic media want their own association to give a focus to the issues of race and class. And so on.

A number of efforts over the past five years have proven that associations are willing to work together for the sake of the sector as a whole. ACM, NFCB, TMC and AAN have all partnered with another association on a conference. NAM works closely with INN and TMC. LION works very closely with INN. AAN and TMC are currently exploring a merger. The time is ripe to explore how these different associations can work best with each other—either via a set of mergers, a federated structure, or a significant number of informal partnerships.

It is too much, however, to expect the associations to undertake this work on their own. Those who care about the independent news sector will have to support this work. We need innovative thinking from academics, media reformers, association leaders, and those in the member outlets themselves. Most of all, we need the support—intellectual but also monetary—from the key foundations that underwrite so much of the work of this sector.

In other fields where funders have stepped up, real change has happened. The many organizations of the environmental justice movement, for example, fought with each other until they were brought together in strategic discussions by that field's funders and thinkers. Nathan Cummings has done the same in the Jewish social justice field, bringing 12 different organizations into conversation at a quarterly "roundtable." And look what happened when media policy funders convinced activist organizations to work with each other—against all odds, the FCC passed a robust net neutrality bill!

Independent news is critically important for our democracy. Independent news outlets, more than many other types of news media, need associations to provide key elements of their business infrastructure and to act as their backbone for collective impact. Associations, in turn, need the ability to focus on their strengths, both for the sake of their mission and for their own bottom line.

We are at an inflection point in the independent news sector. We have an incredible opportunity to make lasting change. Let's get to work.



## **Appendix I: Independent News Outlets: Sources of Revenue**

Revenue sources can be broken down into five major categories:

1. Revenue from the news business—Advertising and Newsstand
2. Revenue from individuals—Subscriptions, Memberships, Small Donations
3. Revenue from non-profit sources—Foundations, Large Donors, Educational
4. Revenue from government\*
5. Revenue from non-news business—Events, Merchandise, etc.

### 1. 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 solely 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.

### 2. 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, visiting 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.

### 3. 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 20<sup>th</sup> 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.

#### 4. 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 recognized via the Cable Communications Act of 1984, which [allowed](#) local cable franchising 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, particularly those which define their mission more broadly beyond channel content.

#### 5. 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.

## **Appendix II List of Independent News Associations (Alphabetical)**

### **Alliance for Community Media (ACM)**

Type: 501c6 and 501c3

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

Founded: 1976

Members: 700

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, online training and mentoring services, and extensive DC-based lobbying. It is supported by member dues, education fees, and non-profit fundraising.

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 by supplementing local cable funds with the revenue models more common to independents—individual donations, membership and fee for service. SPNN in Saint Paul, PhillyCAM in Philadelphia, Chicago Access Network, 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.

### **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, translating 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

Founded: 1975

Members: 150

Director: Sally Kane (CEO)

# Staff: 2

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

Along with NPR stations there have always been small community broadcasters, including community media centers. NFCB represents these radio stations. NFCB offers an annual conference, 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 and Latino Radio. Now, a small but increasing number of these stations are beginning to air local news.

### **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](http://www.ire.org)

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

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

<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. 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.

### **Online News Association**

URL: [www.journalists.org](http://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.

### **Prometheus Radio Project**

Url: [www.prometheusradio.org](http://www.prometheusradio.org)

Prometheus radio represents low-power fm radio stations. They are a non-profit association dedicated to the democratization of the airwaves through the proliferation of non-commercial, community based, micropower stations.

### **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

## About the Author

Jo Ellen Green Kaiser is the Executive Director of the Media Consortium. She has a special interest in theories of change around collaboration, and has written on the topic in Journalism Accelerator and PBSMediaShift.

Before coming to the Media Consortium, Jo Ellen worked for a decade in the independent Jewish news sector. She served as managing editor and associate publisher at Tikkun, and as editor and publisher of Zeek.net. She has written for the Jewish Daily Forward, Interfaith.com, and Shalom, and is co-editor of Righteous Indignation: A Jewish Call for Justice.

Jo Ellen holds a PhD in English from U.C. Berkeley, and a BA from Yale.