

## CASE STUDY

# RE-AMP & MIDWEST ENERGY NEWS

## COMMUNICATIONS STRATEGIES that FAST TRACK POLICY CHANGE



## HIGHLIGHTS

**Issue** Coal-fired power plant emissions in the Midwest negatively impact the health and economic well-being of its communities and contribute to climate change. Policies encouraging clean energy were not prioritized and a systems approach toward the complex issues was lacking.

**Strategy** A network of issue-driven nonprofits and foundations across eight states coordinated their communications strategy with audience and messaging research and created a new media outlet to comprehensively cover energy issues in the region.

**Who** Garfield Foundation, Joyce Foundation, George Gund Foundation, Charles Stewart Mott Foundation, Crown Family Philanthropies.

**How Much** *Approximately \$120,000 for messaging research and polling:* Joyce Foundation provides approximately \$125,000 dedicated to core support for Midwest Energy News annually; Charles Stuart Mott Foundation provides \$50,000 for support of reporting on Ohio; George Gund Foundation provides \$40,000 for reporting in Michigan.

**Biggest Result** Halted the development of 28 new coal plants and enabled passage of energy efficiency policies in six states.

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“...NOT A SINGLE COAL PLANT HAS BROKEN GROUND  
IN THE U.S. SINCE NOVEMBER 2008.” – BRUCE NILLES OF RE-AMP

## INTRODUCTION

In 2003 the Garfield Foundation began exploring new ways to accomplish social change. As a funder interested in environmental sustainability and community revitalization, they decided to use systems mapping to help coordinate action among nonprofits and funders. After some research, the Midwest was identified as an area ripe for environmental impact. “The Midwest was an outsize contributor to global warming through its use of coal, but nobody had tackled that yet,” said consultant to the Garfield Foundation, Rick Reed. After a year-long, systems-mapping process, the group began to understand the multiple forces at work in regional energy systems. They aligned on a single goal of reducing overall emissions in the region 80 percent by 2050. Hence, the RE-AMP network was born.

Network members quickly realized that “unless they coordinated to work on the identified four levers for change simultaneously, they wouldn’t make progress,” said RE-AMP consultant Ruth Rominger. “The interconnectedness of the issues, and the danger of potentially working against other advocates, was really the biggest ‘aha’ of it all.” For example, activists discovered that they could not scale up renewables without also shutting down coal.

Communicating the complex issue and how the elements of the solution worked together was a significant communications challenge. Thus, a Media Center was created as part of the core infrastructure of the network. Its purpose was to assist members with communications tasks and fund a series of messaging research efforts to coordinate and align the network campaigns. After seven years, frustration with the lack of coverage of energy issues spurred creation of a new media outlet dedicated to regional energy issues using RE-AMP funds, *Midwest Energy News*. It is now the premier source for regional energy news read by a growing audience of industry, utility, media and other energy stakeholders.

The Joyce Foundation became an early funder collaborator in RE-AMP because so many grantees were involved. The Foundation believed the network had real potential to create change in the region. The Joyce Foundation is now a core contributor supporting media strategies, the Media Center and operating costs for *Midwest Energy News*.

The story of RE-AMP and *Midwest Energy News* resonates for grantmakers who are supporting a cross-section of advocates on an issue and would like to increase coordination as well as ensure accurate and comprehensive coverage of complex issues to inform policy debates.

## IMPACTS

### New policies, standards and moratorium on coal plant construction

RE-AMP's media and communications efforts shifted the broader media narrative on energy policy and provided an educational resource for decision makers and partners.

When systems analysis showed that recent efficiency and renewables progress had been negated by the new construction of just one new coal plant, blocking construction of new coal plants (unless it incorporates near zero emissions technology for capturing CO<sub>2</sub> pollution) became the top priority. "Thanks in no small part to RE-AMP, not a single coal plant has broken ground in the U.S. since November 2008," states Bruce Nilles, a founding working-group leader in RE-AMP. Since 2004 approximately 30 coal plants have been defeated or their planned development abandoned within the RE-AMP states.

In addition, through the work of RE-AMP members over the last seven years, five states (Illinois, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio,

Wisconsin) have adopted State Renewable Energy Standards (RES) that require increased production from renewable energy sources, such as wind, solar, biomass and geothermal. Likewise, these same states plus Iowa have adopted Energy Efficiency Resource Standards (EERS) that created specific, long-term targets for energy savings that utilities or non-utility program administrators must meet through customer energy-efficiency programs.

On the legislative front, new transportation legislation designed to decrease emissions has passed in three states where RE-AMP focuses advocacy work: Illinois, Minnesota and Wisconsin. For example, in Minnesota, several of these bills secured support for intercity passenger rail planning, including high-speed rail and local light rail lines.

The investigative reporting of *Midwest Energy News* also led to action by local policymakers. In October 2013, *Midwest Energy News* reporter Kari Lydersen broke the story that large piles of petroleum coke were stockpiled on Chicago's southeast side. The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) propelled the story to the pages of the *Chicago Tribune*, the *Sun-Times* and other local and national media. As a direct result of this media coverage and ensuing public backlash, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency issued notices of air pollution violations to the company within two weeks. Several weeks later, the Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan filed a lawsuit against one of the companies for creating huge mounds of refinery waste that sent black clouds of lung-damaging dust blowing into surrounding neighborhoods. Additionally, legislation was introduced by Congresswoman Robin Kelly,

whose Southeast district is home to the stockpile, calling for testing of the health and environmental effects of petroleum coke.

The impact of these policies has led to a decline in overall coal usage among all RE-AMP states. Net generation fell 5.8% since 2005. The decline is progress towards meeting the network's reduced pollution goal for 2050.



Putting the network into perspective, prior to RE-AMP, none of the member organizations managed to shut down multiple coal plants, or pass comprehensive energy efficiency or renewable energy legislation. Fragmented progress was being made on each of these issues, but in a lower-impact way. As a network, coordinated in their actions and communications, activists secured substantially more comprehensive policies by combining energy efficiency, carbon caps, and renewable energy standards in legislation.

## HOW IT HAPPENED

A common messaging platform, the creation of a new and influential trade media outlet and the resultant high-quality regional and national media coverage unified the voices and the work of 160 organizations in the RE-AMP network.

### Communications infrastructure and research

From the start, the network recognized the importance of communications and created the Media Center – a shared resource for all members. “The idea is to have coordinated messaging and media strategies across the region, as well as to add capacity,” explains network coordinator, Elizabeth Wheeler. Members spoke with their own voices, they used the same master narrative and a unifying language. Developed through an investment in messaging research, organizations working toward economic incentives for solar power or other aspects of clean energy vocalized the same overarching goals. “Through the messaging research and the training workshops, members had greater confidence in how to talk about the issues in a consistent way,” says Mike Noble, Executive Director of Fresh Energy.

### Creation of new media outlet

In 2010, after becoming frustrated with the lack of media coverage on energy issues, The Media Center took matters into its own hands and launched *Midwest Energy News* (*MwEN*). The new outlet acted as a daily online aggregator of all relevant media coverage – shaping a broader narrative than provided by politically-driven stories. After about a year, network members decided to dedicate some of the funds to journalism. Led by an experienced editor, credentialed journalists with knowledge of the energy beat produced an average of one original, high-quality energy story per week. *MwEN* had complete editorial independence from the start. Content was neither reviewed nor approved by RE-AMP. A clear editorial voice and transparency about the funding were fundamental tenets of *MwEN* that contributed to a level of credibility few advocacy-based publications can claim. As editor Ken Paulman states, “We have a diligent philosophy to let journalism be

journalism.” In a recent reader survey, 81% agreed that *Midwest Energy News* is accurate and 63% agreed or strongly agreed that *MwEN* is fair and unbiased. Impressive, when compared to a 2012 Harris Interactive poll that found only 48% of respondents felt that way about *The New York Times*.

Within a year, the *Minneapolis Star Tribune* was regularly re-running *MwEN* stories. Major national outlets such as *Huffington Post*, *Grist* and *Salon* have also reposted them. *MwEN* also has an ongoing relationship to republish articles from E&E publishing, a national subscription-based energy news service. E&E has expanded its coverage of the Midwest in a large part due to *MwEN*.

Today, after less than four years, *Midwest Energy News* is the premier source of regional news for people in agencies, companies, the legislature and advocacy organizations. *MwEN*’s aim is to resonate with the select group of influencers, thought leaders and decision makers, rather than a large general audience. Audience research indicates the largest proportion of their 2,900 daily email subscribers are from the energy industry with the site receiving over 30,000 unique visitors per month. *MwEN*’s goal is to publish 300 stories per year in the future, aided by the interest of funders to support reporting in specific states and regions. For example, The George Gund Foundation supports coverage by *MwEN* in Ohio and the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation in Michigan. *MwEN*’s success has led to interest in the strategy from other states.

### A resource for reporters

*Midwest Energy News* also served as a critical information resource and inspiration for mainstream journalists. This approach serves the greater purpose of ensuring a more comprehensive story is being told and the information reaches greater numbers of people. David Jakubiak, RE-AMP member from the Environmental Law & Policy Center states, “I have shared *MwEN* stories with reporters to interest them in covering topics. Additionally, several reporters have mentioned ‘seeing something’ on *MwEN* and then reaching out to me to learn more... the tremendous coverage is an asset that I have and will continue to use.” Another RE-AMP member, Brian Kaiser, from the Ohio Environmental Council adds, “*Midwest Energy News* covered the lame duck effort by



FirstEnergy to freeze Ohio's energy efficiency standard. This coverage precipitated a series of articles and editorials from local media sources that resulted in the eventual retreat by FirstEnergy."

## Media coverage as an advocacy tool

High-quality, in-depth journalism about complex energy issues is a powerful educational tool for RE-AMP network members. Sandy Buchanan, RE-AMP member from the Institute for Energy Economics and Financial Analysis shares, "*MwEN's* reporting has been useful in our work on the Prairie State coal plant — other media outlets have seen the reporting, which has reinforced the importance of the issue for them. *MwEN's* stories have helped educate local officials in small towns who are participants in the plant."

In another case, *Midwest Energy News* reporter Dan Haugen reported on the need to separate utility profits from sales (a process known as "decoupling"). NRDC expert Ralph Cavanagh called it "quite simply the best treatment of this complex issue that I've ever seen in any journal or newspaper, period." The article became a vital educational tool for advocates at Fresh Energy seeking to educate decision makers on the topic. Haugen's coverage was republished by *Grist* and *Greentech Media*. It was also promoted via Twitter by *Grist* policy blogger David Roberts and Associated Press energy writer Jonathan Fahey to a combined 45,000 followers.

In a recent RE-AMP network survey 88% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that *MwEN* is a strong asset to organizations' policy work and 20% say they have seen a *MwEN* story cited in a report, white paper, regulatory docket, hearing or other policy document/proceeding. Ed Miller, Environment Program Director at the Joyce Foundation states, "We think of *MwEN* as a supportive, common resource for all of our grantees." *MwEN's* aggregated daily digest has become an immensely valuable tool for grantees when speaking with journalists and policymakers.

## LESSONS LEARNED

- ▶ Niche, trade journalism that can establish subject-matter expertise plays a powerful role in informing the narrative used by mainstream media on complex issues. Don't ignore its potential to advance a cause.
- ▶ Trusted journalistic reputations and a commitment to transparency lend credibility and help jumpstart a new media outlet that can focus attention on under-the-radar issues.
- ▶ Funder collaboration increases efficiency of infrastructure efforts and supports specific advocacy efforts.



## 10 Elements of Success

Among the Fast Track case studies, we've identified the following 10 insights. The most critical elements of success for each case appear as symbols throughout the series.



### 1 SOLUTIONS

The majority of these initiatives contained messages not just about the problem, but about a range of potential solutions. The net effect is to give the public hope and give policymakers a call to action. This approach also speaks directly to the nexus of the nature of the Internet and journalism: to both ask questions and answer them.



### 2 POLICYMAKERS

Identifying policymakers explicitly as a target audience and devoting appropriate resources to outreach is key. Whenever possible, explicitly making it a bi-partisan effort can be very effective.



### 3 AGILITY

While a communications strategy is important, so is building in flexibility. The ability to respond quickly with resources to a changing landscape is critical to overcoming unforeseen challenges and leveraging unexpected opportunities. Often these initiatives can be a bit messy mid-stream; flexibility and agility makes navigation easier.



### 4 REPETITION

Continuity of coverage has a multiplier effect on awareness building. Journalistic series and paid-advertising campaigns keep issues top-of-mind during delays in the legislative process.



### 5 HUMANITY

Engaging community voices can be a powerful way to give an issue a human face. Emphasizing personal impact stories can also support journalistic efforts, assist with multi-media content, engage the constituents of lawmakers and provide testimonials for solutions.



### 6 PAID ADVERTISING

Having the ability to control the content and timing of messages through paid advertising can create awareness during key milestones. The ability to customize messages geographically or by target audience can also accelerate the speed of social change.



### 7 FOUNDATION BRANDING

Putting a foundation's name and "brand" on media or communications efforts lends credibility and gravitas to an issue, especially in smaller markets or rural areas. Stakeholders are more likely to take another look at an issue if it has become the priority of a philanthropic institution.



### 8 MEDIA START-UPS

Establishing digital outlets where in-depth coverage about an issue can be a cost-effective and efficient way of designating a "space" for the issue to live in. At their best, these sites also become media tools for expanded and sustained coverage over time.



### 9 PARTNER. PARTNER. PARTNER.

Whether it is funder partnerships or media partnerships, collaborative and in-kind efforts result in impact that is greater than the sum of its individual parts.



### 10 INTEGRATION FROM THE OUTSET

The combination of media, community and policy-maker engagement from the beginning of a strategic communications effort is key to success. The catalytic effect of coordinating and integrating these strategies far outweighs any one as a siloed or solo effort.