



2021 RETROSPECTIVE

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Irving Washington

MISSION STATEMENT

Inspire and support innovation
and excellence in digital journalism

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About the 2021 Retrospective

The Online News Association (ONA) is on a mission to inspire and support innovation and excellence in digital journalism. This retrospective tells the story of the work and impact we accomplished in 2021.

For a second year, the pandemic continued to rule how we convene, work, learn, hope and rest. To the people in our community who have lost loved ones, we express our deepest condolences.

The team at ONA spent the year always listening — then, delivering programs that responded to the actual needs of our community members during a time of continued uncertainty. Amazing partners collaborated on virtual and in-person offerings and trusted us with new ways of doing things. And throughout the year, ONA members stepped up to support our mission.

In 2021, we saw more than 3,200 people engage in programs beyond the annual membership. Our activities focused on:

- Innovation training in ONA's signature way
- Advancing diversity, equity and inclusion in the industry
- Meaningful networking opportunities and connections
- Building skills to forecast and navigate industry trends
- Expanding career development resources.

We were also pleased to honor finalists and winners in the 2021 Online Journalism Awards during a ceremony in Philadelphia. The awards — a defining moment in any year — was extra special this year as an opportunity for reunions and celebrations in person for the first time since 2019.

From facilitating workshops on accessibility to swapping ideas for news revenue and volunteering to review resumes — thank you for being close to us in 2021. The last section of this retrospective highlights some of our plans for what's next. We look forward to seeing how you get involved in 2022. ■

Highlights by the Numbers



3,278

People engaging with ONA programs beyond annual membership, including cohorts, volunteer opportunities, fellowships and events

2,591

People who received training through ONA's programs



29%

Program participants who contributed to feedback surveys (Target: 20%)



92%

Survey respondents reporting a valuable connection made at a meetup or event (Target: 75%)

95%

Survey respondents reporting plans to apply to their work something they learned at ONA21 and ONA Insights (Target: 75%)



67%

Survey respondents reporting increased leadership skills for Women in Leadership Speaker Series



Innovation Training and Resources

01



ONA21: Delivering inspiration, training and meaningful connections



The 2021 [Online News Association Conference](#) (ONA21) took place June 22–25, drawing over 1,200 participants.

We hosted the conference several months earlier in the year than our usual timeline, in recognition of the many uncertainties posed by the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Over the four conference days, we delivered 58 sessions focused on five areas:

- audience development and metrics,
- emerging technology,
- innovative news storytelling,
- leadership development, and
- revenue or content strategy, including news products.



“Especially after 18 months of working remotely, ONA felt even more like ‘being with my people’ than usual. Aside from all the fantastic sessions, insights, and networking, there was a layer of feeling connected that I really hadn’t anticipated or realised I desperately needed.”



Top Screenshot: [Audit Your Source Diversity to Better Reflect the Communities You Serve](#) – featuring speaker Caroline Bauman, Community Engagement Strategist at ChalkBeat and 2021 MJ Bear Fellow

Bottom Screenshot: [ONA Book Club: Masuma Ahuja’s GIRLHOOD: Teenagers Around the World in Their Own Voices](#) – Dani Kwateng, Executive Editor at Teen Vogue, and Masuma Ahuja, Founder (and author), Girlhood*



ONA21 marked our second virtual annual conference, and continued to set forth our trademark learning, networking and inspirational moments. The conference featured several first-of-its-kind offerings, including kicking off the week with a Career Day event, which attracted more than 200 job seekers, sponsors and fellowship and graduate school program leaders.

The opening featured session beamed a wide range of news executives sharing their vision for the evolving news landscape. We adapted the Table Talks format to deliver a featured session with six critical conversations on [systemic factors that lead to burnout](#). We also hosted a series of “Book Club” Q&A sessions with authors who had published recent books related to digital journalism.

Beyond the programming, we improved upon our virtual networking space through the Grip platform, which uses AI to match individuals and encourage 1:1 networking conversations. ■



Above: [Fireside Chat with Kevin Merida and Versha Sharma](#) – Shazna Nessa, Global Head of Visuals at the Wall Street Journal and ONA Board President, in conversation with newly installed top editors Kevin Merida, Executive Editor for Los Angeles Times, and Versha Sharma, Editor in Chief at Teen Vogue.

ONA Insights: Returning to in-person events, with a virtual component



We held this year's [ONA Insights conference](#) in Philadelphia and online from Oct. 14-15. More than 270 people joined the event, with the majority identifying as senior-level professionals in journalism, technology companies, academic institutions and support-based organizations such as associations and foundations.

Programming focused on helping newsrooms plan for 2022 in engagement, product and newsroom culture. Hosting the first community event with an in-person component since 2019 meant incorporating many new practices around hospitality, health and safety, session design, networking opportunities and overall schedule structure.

ONA
Insights



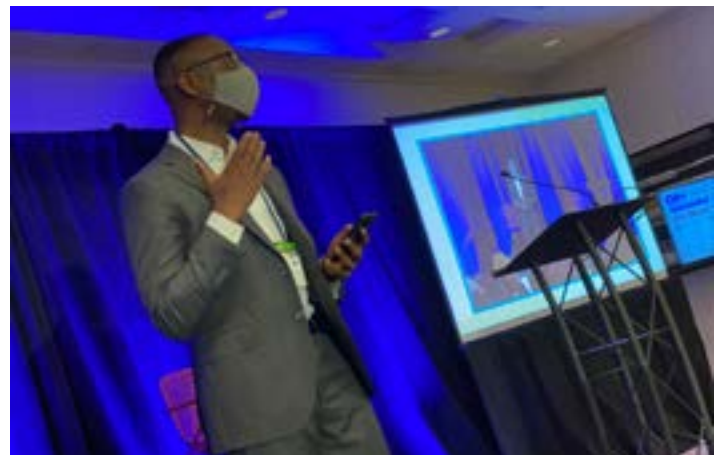
“I liked that this was smaller and more intimate than the annual ONA conference. It helped me get to know more people better because I ran into the same people often, and we had the opportunity to pick up conversation.”

“I was energized by the opportunity to reconnect with my peers and fellow journalists.”



The in-person experience concluded with a ceremony and reception honoring the winners and finalists of the 2021 Online Journalism Awards.

This event offered a tremendous learning opportunity for ONA, both in terms of implementing our safety protocols and providing a valuable experience for both on-site and virtual participants. We plan to apply what we have learned to expand opportunities for 2022. ■



“It was great to connect with people in person again after over a year of virtual events. I did like the hybrid nature of the event though to make it more accessible to a wider audience.”



Resources from Community Circles



Two groups that connected and mobilized through ONA Community Circles produced guides for digital journalists.

Information Equity Database

ONA Board Member **Anita Li** and Free Press' **Vanessa Maria Graber** led 25 other ONA community members in a collaboration to create the [Information Equity Database](#). The database is aimed at newsrooms working toward information access equity in their communities and offers a step-by-step guide to implementing an information equity strategy within a news organization. The group brainstormed, vetted and curated a database of resources for journalists to engage communities that are typically under- or misrepresented in their reporting, and to ensure equitable access to information.

COVID-19 Misinformation Playbook

ONA Board Member **Fergus Bell** and **Smitha Khorana**, formerly of Data & Society, led a team of 13 ONA community members to a [playbook with guidance on combating misinformation around the COVID-19 vaccine](#). ■

Promoting Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in Journalism

02



Strengthening internal structures and culture



ONA has an explicit goal to advance diversity, equity and inclusion in journalism. This emphasis is embedded in all aspects of our work.

It shapes how we grow or launch programs and how we collaborate as a team and with our partners. That means we engage in tough conversations about power, ethics, cultural competency and how we practice our [staff values](#). We also take concrete steps to improve our internal structures, including staff recruitment, onboarding and career advancement. In 2021, we partnered with external consultants to evaluate staff compensation, benefits and pay equity, and announced promotions and adjustments informed by the study results. ■

Expanding scholarship opportunities for underrepresented groups



Every journalist deserves access to high-quality training and networking.

As part of our efforts to make conferences as inclusive and accessible as possible, we worked with 12 sponsoring organizations to provide nearly 100 scholarships to join ONA21 and ONA Insights. Scholarship recipients included students and new professionals, local news staff, journalists from communities historically underrepresented in the industry, professionals who indicated financial hardship and — new for 2021 — caregivers. ■

Women's Leadership Accelerator



The 2021 Women's Leadership Accelerator featured a year of practical, targeted guidance and personal coaching on individual challenges for a cohort of women in digital journalism.

The 26 leaders who joined the cohort were selected from a pool of nearly 300 applicants. The program kicked off with a virtual week of hands-on personal and professional work; candid discussions about leadership, work-life balance and problem-solving in the newsroom. Members of the cohort also received free registration to the ONA21 conference, and the program culminated with a closing workshop in October. ■

Leadership conversations with women in journalism



We hosted a three-part series of leadership conversations to bring inspiring, high-quality training to more women in journalism and other leaders motivated to empower women on their teams.

This year's series, [available to view on-demand](#), focused on strategies for making the case for your ideas and team, systemic factors in the notion of imposter syndrome and how to lay the foundation for the career you want. Twelve alums from the Women's Leadership Accelerator shared their insights throughout these conversations. The series culminated in a facilitated networking meetup for women in journalism and allies. ■

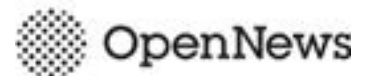
"I really appreciate that you recorded the talks so that we could watch them at our own time if need be. I enjoyed the meet-up. I always seem to just want more time to talk with and get to know the other participants!"

"There is so much to be gained by creating – and then holding – space for journalists to share how they lead. The ONA women's leadership speaker series is that exact kind of space."

Vision25: Building racial equity in newsrooms



With our Vision25 partners, The Maynard Institute and OpenNews, we continue to engage leaders in the industry to take steps towards building anti-racist news organizations that are institutions of belonging.



Led by The Maynard Institute, we co-hosted five community events on Belonging in the News featuring:

- **Wesley Lowery**, Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, author and correspondent for CBS News
- **Lewis Wallace and Manolia Charlotin**, Co-Founders and Co-directors of Press On
- **Soleil Ho**, Podcast Host and Restaurant Critic for the San Francisco Chronicle
- **Jeff Chang**, Award-winning author, journalist and Race Forward's Vice President of Narrative, Arts, and Culture
- **Ashley Alvarado**, Vice President of Community Engagement and Strategic Initiatives at Southern California Public Radio

Our partnership has informed collaborations and programming at SRCCON, ONA21 and ONA Insights. And we amplified the launch of OpenNews' DEI Coalition for Anti-Racist, Equitable, and Just Newsrooms. The coalition aims to create spaces to focus on organizing, collective action and knowledge sharing in the service of a more equitable journalism industry. ■

Capacity support to kickstart The Pivot Fund's mission



We invested several months in 2021 exploring potential models to support the mission of The Pivot Fund, a new venture philanthropy organization that aims to channel \$500 million into community news outlets led by Black, Indigenous and other journalists of color.

[The Pivot Fund](#) was founded by **Tracie Powell**, a longtime ONA member, participant in the inaugural Women's Leadership Accelerator Cohort and a leader in philanthropic initiatives for journalism.

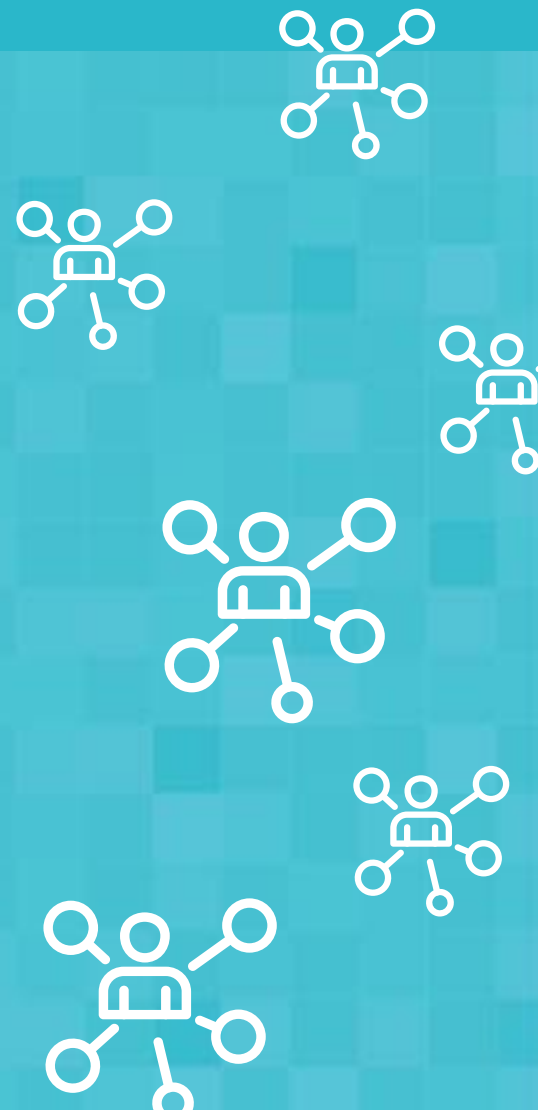
This effort led to a board-approved investment in capacity support for The Pivot Fund, which includes fiscal sponsorship, financial management and consulting on grants administration consulting. The partnership contributes to our goals of promoting racial equity in journalism and building out the ecosystem of journalism support organizations. Learning from this pilot program, we will establish an innovative model of fiscal sponsorship available to ONA members. ■



Tracie Powell

Networking & Community Engagement

03



Networking meetups



More than 200 people attended at least one of six virtual meetups for the ONA community in 2021.

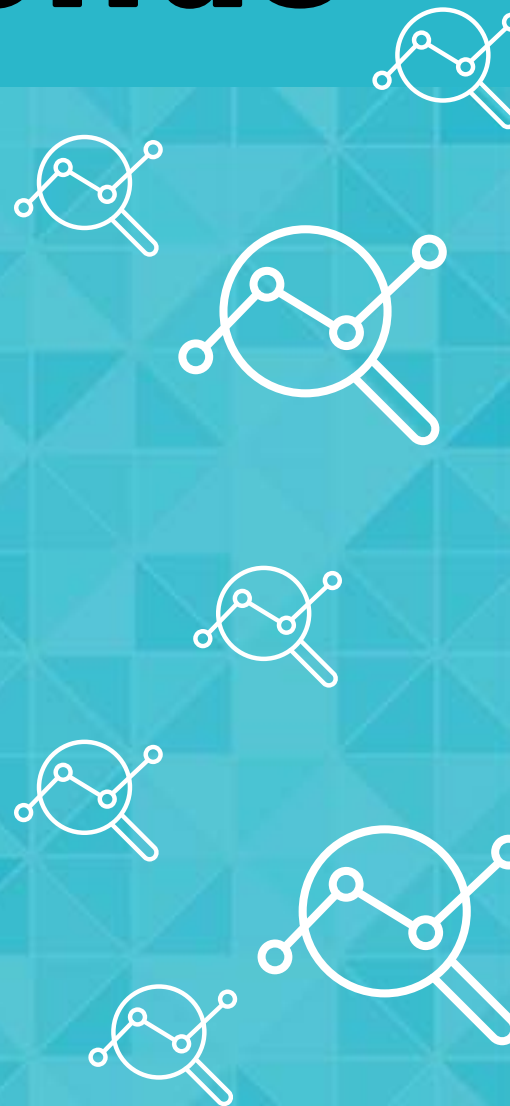
The meetups were fast-paced events designed to spur idea sharing, meaningful connections and inspiration.

- **March 29:** Women in News Product Meetup
- **May 14:** Community Engagement Professionals in Small to Midsize Newsrooms Meetup
- **May 25:** Independent News Startup Leaders & Aspiring Founders Idea Swap
- **June 10:** News Revenue and Sustainability Idea Swap
- **Nov. 19:** Women in Leadership Community Meetup
- **Dec. 9:** ONA XR Community Meetup ■

“It was a refreshing set of topics and the timing is critical. It’s worth doing similar sessions as the sustainability of journalism everywhere is very much a work in progress.”

Building Futurists and Forecasting Business Trends

04



Highlighting industry trends



Forecasting like a futurist

In collaboration with **Amy Webb** and the Future Today Institute, we hosted three workshops for dozens of community members to build forecasting skills.

Participants represented various roles in newsrooms around the world. Amy discussed how to evaluate and analyze industry trends, and created exercises that journalists and newsroom leaders could apply to their work.



Amy Webb

Addressing the impact of emerging technology for disinformation

ONA co-organized the half-day policy conference [Deepfakes, Disinformation and Democracy](#). The event marked a first-time collaboration between ONA and the other organizers, the Information Technology and Innovation Foundation (ITIF) and the Association of Computing Machinery (ACM). It was also the largest event ONA participated in this year outside our annual conference.

Nearly 450 participants from the public and private sectors joined to learn more about institutional roles in identifying and limiting the spread of deepfake videos. ONA's general counsel **Alison Schary** moderated a panel on improving online trust in media with **Vint Cerf**, Vice President and Chief Internet Evangelist at Google; **Joan Donovan**, Research Director, Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy, at Harvard Kennedy School; and **Dana Rao**, Executive Vice President and General Counsel at Adobe. ■

Career Development

05



Introducing a virtual Career Day



The [ONA21 Career Day](#) engaged 17 recruiters – including media companies, fellowship programs and grad school programs – and more than 200 job seekers who attended live programming, scheduled meetings and uploaded resumes to our database.

Building on the success of this event, we plan to host a stand-alone event dedicated to career services and development in early 2022. ■



A screencapture of the session "Leading a Newsroom with Trust at the Center" with moderator Alexandria Burris, Business Reporter at Indianapolis Star (top left), Lorie Hearn, CEO and Editor at inewsourc (top right), and Jenny Uechi, Operations Manager at Canada's National Observer (bottom row)

Career Center



ONA's [Career Center](#) continues to be a leading destination for employers, fellowship directors and graduate school programs to connect with journalism talent.

We saw a 68% increase in new employers on the platform and double the number of jobs in 2021 compared to 2020. To reach more great candidates, we promote all opportunities from the Career Center in the ONA Weekly newsletter, social media channels and ONA-affiliated Facebook groups, Slack workspaces and other online communities. ■

Fellowships for emerging journalism talent



The [MJ Bear Fellowship](#) and [HBCU Digital Media Fellowship](#) returned in a virtual capacity in 2021, following a one-year pause due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

MJ Bear Fellowship

The MJ Bear Fellowship honors stand-out journalists under age 30 who are pushing digital innovation. Six fellows participated in three online workshops tailored to provide guidance on their digital journalism projects and career interests. The topics covered included community engagement, media entrepreneurship and news metrics. Fellows also received complimentary registration to ONA Insights. ■



**Adriana
Lacy**



**Beena
Raghavendran**



**Canela
López**



**Caroline
Bauman**



**Jasmine
Lee**



**Natalie
Van Hoozer**

HBCU Digital Media Fellowship

Six students were selected to participate in the HBCU Digital Media Fellowship. They worked with lead mentor **Michael Grant** to produce content focused on product thinking. All fellows received complimentary ONA memberships and all-access passes to ONA21, where they had the opportunity to connect with industry leaders, as well as peers in a dedicated meetup for early-career journalists. ■



**De'Vante
Martin**



**Jalondra
Jackson**



**Noella
Williams**



**Sherdell
Baker**



**Sierra
Lyons**



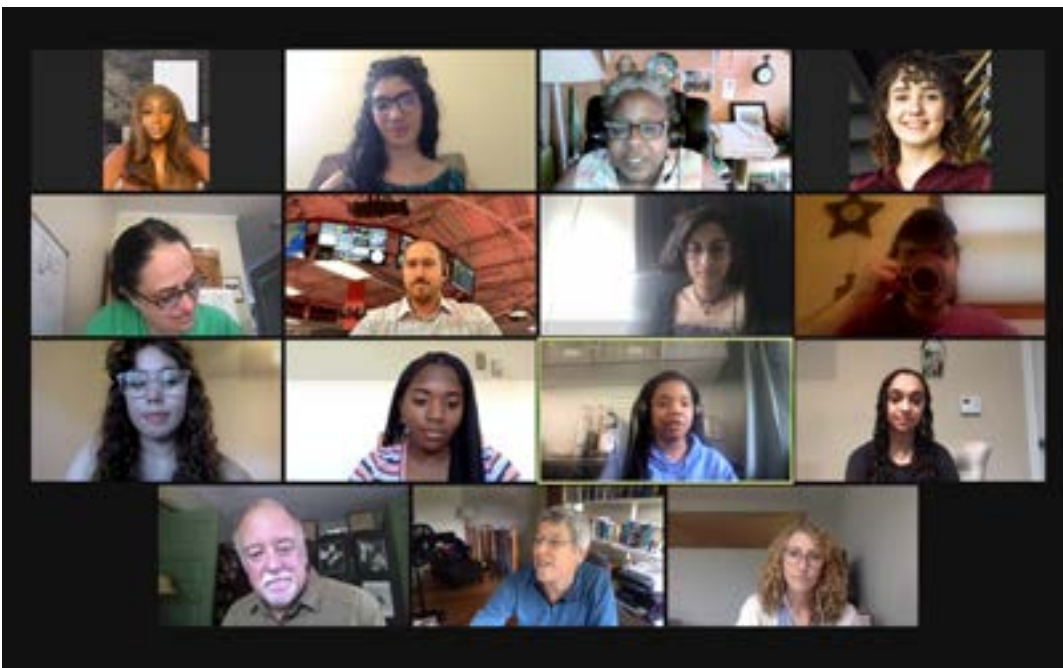
**Zanaria
Bowens**

ONA21 Student Newsroom and Innovation Lab



Five mentors worked with 10 undergraduate and graduate school students for the first virtual edition of the Student Newsroom and Innovation Lab.

The ONA21 newsroom produced a total of [17 stories](#), participated in a training hosted by mmhmm and joined a networking brunch hosted by Microsoft, Knight Foundation and News Break. Students also connected with MJ Bear Fellows, HBCU Fellows and other students and new professionals at the ONA21 Early Career Meetup. ■



Awards and Grants

06



Online Journalism Awards: Showcasing innovation and excellence



The 2021 Online Journalism Awards introduced two new categories, [Excellence in Social Justice Reporting](#) and [Topical Reporting: Pandemic Coverage](#). More than 175 volunteers completed a two-step review process, resulting in 137 finalists and 45 winners across 21 award categories.



The OJAs presented a total of \$40,000 to nine projects thanks to sponsors SmartNews, McKinsey Publishing, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and The University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication. Notably, The New York Times, ProPublica, PublicSource and Grist were recognized for [General Excellence in Online Journalism](#) — an award honoring newsrooms that demonstrated outstanding reporting and digital presentation throughout the year.

This year's James Foley Award for Conflict Reporting went to **Samar Abu Elouf**, a Palestinian photographer based in the Gaza strip.



**Samar Abu
Elouf**

The OJAs honored **Meredith Artley** with the Rich Jaroslovsky Founder Award for her contributions to ONA and its mission, while ICFJ Global Health Crisis Reporting Forum Managers received the ONA Community Award for building a global resource journalists can utilize to accurately report on the COVID-19 pandemic.



**Meredith
Artley**



ONA Board President Shazna Nessa welcomes attendees at the 2021 Online Journalism Awards Ceremony in Philadelphia.

Gina Chua was also honored as the inaugural recipient of the [Impact Award](#). This award was established to recognize trailblazing individuals whose work has exhibited substantial impact on the industry. The ONA Board of Directors selects honorees regardless of their tenure in journalism and involvement with ONA.



Gina Chua

The ONA Community Award recognized the community managers of the ICFJ (International Center for Journalists) Global Health Crisis Reporting Forum: **Paul Adepoju** (Nigeria), **Kossi Balao** (Togo), **Desiree Esquivel** (Paraguay), **Fadwa Kamal** (Morocco), **Alexandre Orrico** (Brazil) and **Stella Roque** (United States). ■



Paul Adepoju



Kossi Balao



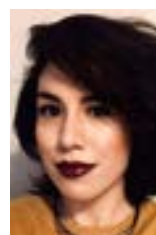
Desiree
Esquivel



Fadwa Kamal



Alexandre
Orrico



Stella Roque

Winners for the 2021 OJAs were announced during a ceremony at ONA21 Insights, with support from The Lenfest Institute for Journalism.

“Being asked to judge #OJA21 entries is not only an honour, but I found it’s also highly rewarding to meet and discuss with the other jury members and you get to take a very close look at la crème de la crème of the past year’s digital journalism.”

Journalism 360



The Journalism 360 initiative launched in 2016 as a partnership between ONA, Google News Lab and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

In that time, ONA has awarded 34 grants over three funding cycles for a total of \$580,000. The final group of grantees was selected in late 2020, with projects covering issues such as the COVID-19 pandemic, community engagement, race and cultural issues and climate change. We provided support throughout 2021 as they experimented with immersive media in order to advance best practices in the field.

In December, ONA hosted a virtual idea-sharing and networking meetup for XR professionals working in journalism. The 57 attendees — who ranged from experts in the field to beginners and included several former Journalism 360 grantees — discussed what's coming up for XR in 2022 and dived into specific tools and technologies from 360 to photogrammetry to the metaverse. We wrapped up with demos of past XR projects and frameworks from seven groups where attendees could ask in-depth questions about the production. Of the attendees who responded to the event survey, 76 percent reported having met at least one new connection with whom they planned to follow up after the event. ■

Challenge Fund for Innovation in Journalism Education



The Challenge Fund for Innovation in Journalism Education began in 2014 with an unprecedented number of partnerships with educational institutions and funders.

In that time, ONA has awarded 48 grants over 5 funding cycles for a total of \$2 million. While needed and successful at its peak, many partners felt the time had come to wind down this program to focus on developing other initiatives for the community. The final group of grantees was awarded in late 2020, and we provided support as they navigated their project launches this year. ■

Legal Affairs

07



Legal Affairs



In 2021, ONA joined with the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press and other journalism support organizations and publishers to support numerous legal amicus and advocacy efforts in local, state, federal and international forums.

Some of the notable efforts this year include:

- Objecting to an unconstitutional prior restraint imposed by a New York court against the New York Times relating to its reporting about Project Veritas
- Objecting to the imposition of a significant fine against Bloomberg by a French court for violating EU regulations against disseminating false information, when Bloomberg published a news article about a press release that was later discovered to be fake
- Supporting New Yorker author Jill Lepore in seeking access to sealed grand jury records investigating the 1971 Pentagon Papers leak
- Asking the Justice Department to incorporate press freedom considerations into its probes of the Minneapolis and Louisville police departments
- Requesting public access to all papers, records and documents from disciplinary proceedings pending against Rudy Giuliani
- Objecting to the Nebraska governor's press credentialing process that excluded a local news outlet based on its perceived political leanings, leading the governor to amend the policy and grant credentials to the local outlet

- Advocating for expansive and timely access to public records under U.S. federal and state freedom of information laws
- Condemning prosecution of a local public radio journalist in Oregon who was arrested while covering the eviction of houseless campers from a public park
- Advocating for the broad application of state-level anti-SLAPP laws in the U.S. to protect journalists against the chilling effect of meritless lawsuits. ■

What's Next



08



The mission continues



There are many opportunities to get involved with ONA throughout the year. Here are some of the many ways we will serve the digital journalism community in 2022:

- Host the 2022 Online News Association Conference, Sept. 21–24, as an in-person experience in Los Angeles with virtual components for remote attendees
- Expand programming that advances women’s leadership in journalism
- Continue to champion racial equity in newsrooms, including through the Vision25 initiative
- Produce a virtual Career Day to connect journalism talent with meaningful opportunities and share resources for career development
- Design new, tailored programming for audience and product teams to gather and learn from each other
- Develop a model for fiscal sponsorship and investment in capacity support for ONA members, starting with pilot program supporting The Pivot Fund
- Showcase journalism excellence and impact through the Online Journalism Awards and other special honors.

To stay updated about the latest opportunities and resources from ONA, [subscribe to the ONA Weekly newsletter](#) and follow us on Twitter [@ONA](#). If you are interested in exploring partnerships and other ways to invest in ONA’s programs and events, contact Chief Strategic Partnerships Officer **Jessica Strelitz** at jessica@journalists.org. ■

Acknowledgements

ONA's work — and this retrospective — is possible through the contributions of a talented group of staff, consultants and board members who are fiercely dedicated to the mission.

Irving Washington, Executive Director/CEO

Trevor Knoblich, Chief Knowledge Officer

Jessica Strelitz, Chief Strategic Partnerships Officer

Bill Brady, Strategic Partnerships Coordinator

Liz Leith, Director of Finance and Administration

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Beth Davidz

Web Consultant

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Bridget Gallagher

Development

Tran Ha

Women's Leadership Accelerator

Susannah Brinkley Henry

Design

Joyce Rice

Design

Hanaa Rifaey

Partnerships Consultant

Leah Rush

Registration and Operations

Alison Schary

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Human Resources Consulting

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Susan Gonzalez

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Versha Sharma

Editor-in-Chief, Teen Vogue

