

Annual Report 2020

LETTER FROM

our founders

2020 will go down in history as a year that made it abundantly clear that, if we are to solve the most urgent problems of our time, we have to learn from one another and work together.

It was a year when the news was just overwhelming — with the pandemic and the inequities it exacerbated, manifestations of systemic racism, the rise of

Even the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the World Health Organization advised limiting news consumption for the sake of mental health. How can we hope to build a better world together if the daily news is causing people to tune out and shut down rather than activating and empowering them? This is a question that more and more journalists have been asking themselves, concluding that news needs to tell the whole story — and that includes not just problems, but also how people are responding to them with ingenuity and generosity.

In 2020, SJN reached two major milestones, engaging with our 500th news organization and 20,000th journalist. As the solutions journalism practice continues to gain traction across the news industry, we are excited to see journalists chronicling problem-solving with more regularity. Many of our journalism partners told us in 2020 that they felt the deep fatigue of their audiences and recognized a need to circulate news that helped communities learn from one another and gain a sense of control. We have collected and shared thousands of their stories in our online database, the Solutions Story Tracker®.

There is so much to learn from reporting that examines what is promising or succeeding — or why a seemingly good idea fails to deliver results. Around the globe in 2020, many people tried and found ways to protect health care and essential workers, provide support to vulnerable individuals, make virtual



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authoritarianism and threats to democratic norms around the world, and the increasing severity of the climate crisis. Some people checked the news compulsively, but many others began regularly avoiding it because it made them feel demoralized and powerless.



learning work, protect and improve voting systems, mitigate climate risks, and advance badly needed policing reforms. What were the factors that contributed to success or failure? What are the lessons?

Information that helps people understand and solve problems in a timely manner has always been vital. But today, as the magnitude of problems reaches crisis proportions — whether it's the threat of a pandemic, climate change or wealth inequality — journalism needs to adapt its core operating premise.

It's no longer good enough to spend most of our time highlighting problems; journalism needs to devote far more energy to capturing useful ideas and sharing them widely and quickly. We all need to get smarter together. That is why it is hopeful

to see more and more journalists and newsrooms integrating rigorous solutions journalism into their daily reports.

The surge of interest in solutions journalism has brought us to a new chapter in SJN's story. In eight years, we have seen the field of journalism move from initial resistance to the solutions approach to slow-growing interest and now to widespread enthusiasm. Today, given the urgency of the moment, we believe we must take bolder action, which we describe briefly in the Looking Ahead section of this report.

Throughout our eight-year history, our success has been driven by you — the journalists, educators, philanthropists and allies who have believed in our mission and made this work your own.

We look forward to partnering with you on the road ahead.

DAVID BORNSTEIN AND TINA ROSENBERG

David Bornstein Tina Rosenberg

journalism

FOR A BETTER WORLD

“Solutions journalism can mean life or death for some communities. They suffer from a lack of clean and safe water, inadequate education, food deserts, gun violence, illiteracy and other mounting issues that disrupt their quality of life or prevent them from even having a semi-decent quality of life. They need us more than ever.”

Jiquanda Johnson
Founder and CEO, Flint Beat

Since its beginnings in 2013 in a small, fourth-floor, walk-up office in New York City, the Solutions Journalism Network (SJN) has grown from a handful of supporters into an international network of roughly 20,000 reporters, editors and newsroom leaders from Casper, Wyoming, to the Czech Republic.

The network has grown because solutions journalism — rigorous, in-depth reporting on responses to social problems — resonates deeply with journalists whose mission is to help their communities improve, journalists who know that their profession too often hardens divisions, intensifies anxieties, and contributes to the continued stigmatization of communities of color.

Solutions journalism continues to grow because it helps journalists illuminate a path that leads toward credible hope rather than despair, and shows audiences that their news sources actually care about helping their communities. This translates to trust, engagement and new revenue opportunities. This path includes vital coverage of problems but also, in equal measure, stories on who’s making progress in addressing them. Together, they tell the whole story.

Solutions journalism is a key disruption for our times — news that helps us envision and build a more equitable and sustainable world.

20,833

journalists in
our network

218

journalism educators trained
to teach solutions journalism

10,848

stories in our
Solutions Story Tracker

7

solutions-focused collaboratives (newsrooms and
other community and professional organizations)

IN THE vanguard



Reframing Milwaukee's problems as solvable

JAMES E. CAUSEY

Ideas Lab reporter

[Milwaukee Journal Sentinel](#)

“People can go to their smartphones and find out the latest shooting with ease,” says James E. Causey. “One thing they can’t find is well-vetted stories that show them how a problem can be addressed and fixed.” That’s why Causey is part of the Journal Sentinel’s Ideas Lab, which features solutions reporting as well as editorials and opinion pieces. [Read more.](#)

Embracing complexity in oil country

THE NARWHAL

Nonprofit, online magazine in British Columbia, Canada

The Narwhal, which grew “in the cracks of a broken relationship between ordinary people and the journalists who serve them,” is thriving by writing complex stories about the environment in Alberta, a largely conservative province in Western Canada that’s reliant on oil and gas revenue. One inspiration: SJN’s Complicating the Narratives, a set of interviewing practices rooted in conflict resolution techniques and solutions journalism. [Read more.](#)



A new path for local TV

KXAN-TV

NBC affiliate in Austin, Texas

A few years ago, KXAN decided to try solutions journalism when looking for a fresh angle on its back-to-school coverage. The staff didn’t want to rehash all the problems in education that they’d written about many times before. Instead they created a series of solutions-focused stories on student mental health, which led KXAN’s parent company — Nexstar Media Group, the largest local TV ownership company in the country — to spread solutions journalism throughout its network of 199 stations across the U.S. And the dozen national town halls organized for this series reached a cumulative total of 2.5 million viewers, a number usually seen only during breaking news events. [Read more.](#)



Stories that challenge power

OSCAR PERRY ABELLO

Senior economics correspondent, [Next City](#)

Oscar Abello sees solutions journalism as a way to give more power to the powerless. “For all of history, the powerful have routinely shut out others from the conversation over ‘what must be done,’” he said. “We can help change that.” He looks for stories that show how something usually works, how that excludes certain people or places, and how it can work differently. [Read more.](#)



Countering the mainstream narrative

AMADOU DIALLO

Author, [The Hechinger Report](#)

Amadou Diallo admits he used to write mostly about problems tied to greed, corruption and institutional biases. He found himself drawn to a solutions approach in part to recognize “the efforts of people on the ground who aren’t waiting for systemic changes to happen before they seek solutions for their immediate community.” Solutions stories, he says, can “serve as a counter to the mainstream narrative that poor people just sit around waiting on resources that never arrive.” [Read more.](#)

Solutions stories take on different issues and can be reported and presented in many ways. At the core, though, they embrace these qualities:

- 1** Feature not just a person or an organization, but a **response** to a problem
- 2** Provide available **evidence** of results, looking at effectiveness — not just intentions
- 3** Discuss **limitations**
- 4** Seek to provide **insights** that can help others respond — not just inspiration

READ MORE

THE moment

Like everyone else around the world, we had our lives and work upended by COVID-19. For us, the pandemic dramatically changed what our partners needed and how we could provide it. In-person training was, of course, out of the question. So was bringing journalists together to learn from one

“It took me — and many others — some time to realize that the pandemic would last for quite a while, and that we shouldn’t just sit back and watch everything go up in flames. Instead, we should try to help find a way out of it.”

Jonathan Widder, founder of [Squirrel News](#), a curated platform and app for solutions-focused news

another. To continue to write solutions stories — at a time when they were more important than ever — newsrooms wanted help with the immediate

challenges they faced, like how to report from their living rooms. They needed financial and moral support, too. That need only increased after the racial reckoning tied to police killings of unarmed Black people, and as the 2020 election approached.

So we stopped booking travel and quickly adapted our training for Zoom. We awarded emergency grants to newsrooms for their solutions reporting on COVID-19 and racial justice, expanded our efforts to live up to our equity and inclusion goals, and launched new initiatives focused on economic mobility, business and sustainability and how to raise revenue tied to solutions work. We redesigned our first academy for journalism educators teaching at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) for the online environment. And our Solutions Story Tracker team quickly collected and shared more than [1,500 solutions stories](#) related to containing and coping with COVID-19, caring for one another during the pandemic, race relations and anti-racism, and elections.

2020 ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Created training and resources to meet the needs of the moment

- Solutions journalism on the coronavirus: How to get started
- How to report solutions journalism from your house
- How to assess evidence for COVID-19 solutions stories
- Are people of color hit harder by COVID-19 in your state or city?

Responded to the urgent financial need in journalism by increasing our support for solutions reporting

- Our first 20 grants for solutions-focused COVID-19 coverage
- What's next in New England? Covering the responses to COVID-19
- Election 2020: A new opportunity for innovative coverage

Launched new initiatives and expanded others in the U.S. and abroad. Some highlights:

- The Solutions Journalism Africa Initiative
- Changing the narrative of poverty
- Businesses' role in environmental sustainability
- A dozen newsrooms work to raise revenue from solutions journalism
- Announcing the Solutions Journalism Story Exchange
- Solutions Journalism Educator Academy for Historically Black Colleges and Universities



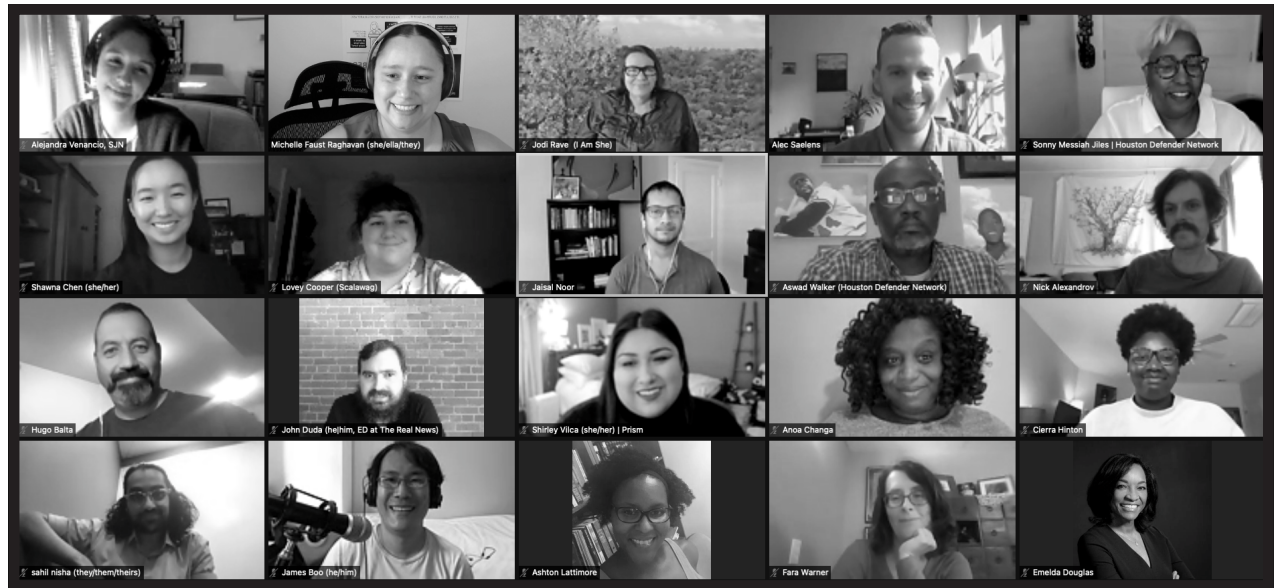
Putting our equity values into action

In 2020, we heightened our investment in diversity, equity and inclusion. We created the new role of equity initiative manager, with the mandate of ensuring that we center equity in all our work with journalists and newsrooms. We launched partnerships with [Resolve Philly](#) and [BMe Community](#) to help journalists tell more accurate narratives with less stigmatizing language. We expanded the number of newsrooms in our network led by and serving people from excluded communities, including those in rural areas, and deployed grants for reporting projects by diverse-led news organizations. We also overhauled how we select and work with partners. This includes measuring our progress across a number of diversity metrics, including race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, ability and socioeconomic status.

As our co-founder David Bornstein said [in this letter](#) to staff: We know we can — and need to — do better.

“By practicing solutions journalism, we also redefine the role and understanding of what journalism is for so many people. For years, communities of color have expressed that news reporters are only interested in reporting on the negative things that happen in their community. I dare us to change that. I dare us to change and challenge their experience of what news is.”

Erica Edwards, freelance journalist and LEDE fellow



THE impact

Unlike the grabby headlines of negative news, solutions journalism often produces deep impact over time. In 2020, an important piece of research added to the evidence we have that solutions reporting is moving the needle in communities around the world.

In that research, which we commissioned, media research company SmithGeiger explored how people react to solutions-focused stories by interviewing roughly 600 local news consumers across the country after showing them traditional problem-focused stories as well as solutions stories on the same topic.

The results were unequivocal: Regardless of gender, geography or political affiliation, the respondents strongly preferred stories that helped them understand how people are working to confront society's challenges. They rated solutions journalism much

higher in trust, interest and potential impact. They also told the researchers they would be more likely to stick with a news organization that offers solutions journalism. "Once you're exposed to solutions journalism, you've actually unleashed a new set of expectations of how much better local news can be," said Seth Geiger, SmithGeiger's co-founder and president. "You could use this data to persuade every newsroom that they need to do at least one story every day that has a significant solutions component."

"We do a lot of these [studies]," added Andrew Finlayson, SmithGeiger's executive vice president of digital media strategies. "This is about as good as it gets, in terms of defining the efficacy of a particular approach."

Read more [here](#), and watch a short video [here](#).

OTHER IMPACT HIGHLIGHTS FROM 2020



USA Today Network

After the USA Today Network published a [four-part series](#) that exposed a “predator pipeline” in which athletes who were suspended or expelled for sexual assault at one college were accepted at other institutions, two schools immediately pledged to change how they vet athletes who seek transfers and

adopted policies similar to those featured in [the solutions story in the series](#). Reporter Kenny Jacoby, who studied solutions journalism at the University of Oregon, said the series wouldn’t have had the impact he wanted unless he showed readers a possible path forward.

Fort Worth Star-Telegram

After Nichole Manna, an investigative reporter, wrote about [a program in Richmond, California, dedicated to ending retaliatory gun violence](#), Fort Worth established a similar effort. Both programs use ex-convicts instead of police to mediate conflicts. And in its first few months, the new Fort Worth effort [may have prevented at least 18 shootings](#).





Montgomery Advertiser

A series of solutions stories focused on the Black community in Montgomery, Alabama, [built trust that has resulted in better reporting and an increase in subscriptions among Black residents](#) for the Montgomery Advertiser, which previously had served mostly white readers in a city where the majority of residents are Black.



Nice-Matin

Employees of Nice-Matin saved the newspaper from bankruptcy in 2015 by becoming cooperative owners and launching a solutions journalism desk. In 2019, [subscriptions had climbed 600% in three years](#), with solutions articles [driving twice the number of subscriber conversions](#) and keeping readers engaged three times longer compared with other content. Journalist Sophie Casals told the [Membership Puzzle Project](#) that solutions journalism led people “back to news” and increased reader trust.

The Laconia Daily Sun

The Daily Sun invited some of its most frequent writers of letters to the editor [to learn a deep listening technique](#) that is part of SJN’s Complicating the Narratives initiative. As a result of that event, plus other efforts to reduce vitriol and name-calling on the opinion pages, Julie Hirshan Hart, digital editor, estimates the number of letters to the editor with personal attacks has dropped by half, engagement is up, and the Sun’s audience has expanded.



[READ MORE IMPACT HERE](#)

LOOKING

ahead

When we began this work in 2013, one of our first key goals was to legitimize solutions journalism as strong and important reporting. We've now reached that milestone. Today, journalists around the world view solutions journalism as a vital and valuable part of their coverage. And yet, the game is far from

take away excuses for inaction. They also find audiences trust them more and engage more constructively around important issues, outcomes they can leverage to earn new revenue.

Moving forward, we plan to invest more deeply in building a much larger, even more diverse network of journalists, news organizations, educators and allies whose extraordinary collective power can bring about a true rebalancing of the news. Our role will be to help connect, support and inspire them as they bring about a new era of journalism that helps us all meet the critical and complex challenges of our day.

We are grateful to our partners who have been a part of this journey so far, including our financial supporters and so many newsroom leaders and journalists who have built the solutions journalism ecosystem. We look forward to continuing to work with all of you — and to welcoming many new partners — who share the vision that, one day, every person will have access to the ideas, inspiration and intelligence needed to envision and build a more equitable and sustainable world.

The result: SJN has catalyzed a robust and diverse ecosystem of journalists and news organizations with extraordinary collective power.

won: A narrative of brokenness still dominates our news feeds, based on journalism's flawed operating premise that if we just focus long and hard enough on the world's corruption, greed and violence, things will change. We know that is not true.

What is true is that when newsrooms and journalists build solutions journalism into daily coverage, they inspire hope, challenge the status quo, and

leadership



David Bornstein

co-founder & CEO, is a journalist and author who focuses on social innovation. He co-authored the “Fixes” column in the Opinionator section of The New York Times for a decade. His books include “How to Change the World: Social Entrepreneurs and the Power of New Ideas,” “The Price of a Dream: The Story of the Grameen Bank,” and “Social Entrepreneurship: What Everyone Needs to Know.”



Tina Rosenberg

co-founder & vice president for innovation, is a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist and author. Her books include “Children of Cain: Violence and the Violent in Latin America,” and “The Haunted Land: Facing Europe’s Ghosts After Communism,” which won the Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award. She has written for dozens of magazines, including The New Yorker, Rolling Stone, Foreign Policy and The Atlantic. She is the author, most recently, of “Join the Club: How Peer Pressure Can Transform the World.”



Keith Hammonds

president, came to SJN from Ashoka, where he started and led the News & Knowledge Initiative, advancing the work of hundreds of social entrepreneurs in media around the world. He also has been Executive Editor at Fast Company magazine; a bureau chief and editor for BusinessWeek in Boston and New York; a writer for The New York Times in London and Johannesburg; a consultant to New Nation in Johannesburg; and director of an emergency food distribution program in Namibia.



Maurisse Johnson

chief financial officer, has held a number of finance and financial systems roles and came to SJN from New York City Housing Authority, where he managed the capital planning and environmental review process. Maurisse was previously director of financial planning and reporting at Burson-Marsteller, manager of reporting and systems at Parsons Brinckerhoff, and director of financial systems at J.Crew.



Samantha McCann

chief operating officer, has worked with SJN since 2013, the organization’s founding year. Previously, she did environmental and fiscal policy research at Seattle University. She has published in the Journal of International Affairs, Scholastic, The Guardian, PRI (Public Radio International), and others, and authored the text of an award-winning book of photography, “Columbia University in Pictures.”

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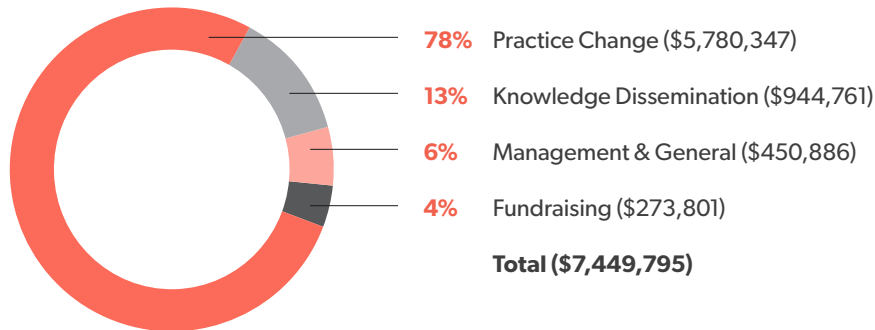
Tina Rosenberg, *secretary and co-founder*

Trabian Shorters

MEET OUR STAFF

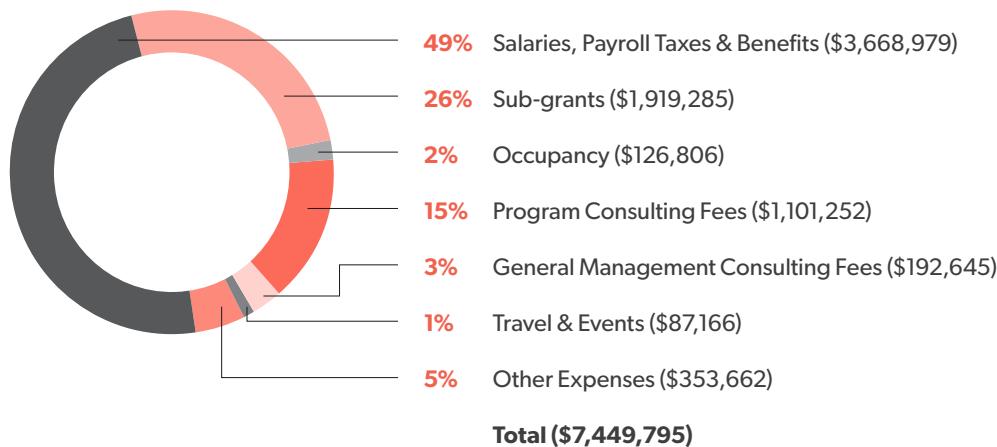
financials

2020 Expenses by Program Area



As a nonprofit, Solutions Journalism Network is grateful to the individuals and organizations that provide philanthropic support for our work. A list of our foundation supporters can be found [here](#).

2020 Expenses by Category



Total revenue for 2020 was \$14,753,615—an increase of 56% from \$9,437,090 in 2019. The increase was primarily due to a one-time \$5M contribution from the National Philanthropic Trust which will be allocated over at least the next three years.

Total expenses of \$7,449,795 in 2020 increased by 29% from \$5,766,354 in 2019. Most of the increase was concentrated among salaries, sub-grants and program consulting, and much

of this was related to restricted project grants. SJN committed to re-grant approximately \$1.9 million to newsroom partners — an increase of 218% from \$856,362 in 2019.

Total programmatic expenses associated with Practice Change and Knowledge Dissemination accounted for 90% of SJN's total expenses. The overhead ratio, inclusive of fundraising, was 10%.

[LINK TO FINANCIALS](#)



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JOURNALISM
NETWORK

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