



### **RJI STUDENT INNOVATION FELLOWSHIPS**

Emily Lytle, RJI Innovation in Focus editor, meets with students about RJI Student Innovation Fellowships. Lytle coordinates with newsrooms all over the country to identify opportunities for partnering on innovative industry solutions. With the help of innovation fellows and other student staffers, she puts practical resources and strategies into the hands of journalists. To learn more, follow the QR code to subscribe to the Innovation in Focus newsletter. Photo: Nate Brown

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# rji

INSIGHT

**In a state with no anti-SLAPP law? Read this**

**Portico's news preservation pilot sees early success**

**RJI: Real Joint Impacts in 2024**



# Note from the Director

**Randy Picht**  
RJI Executive Director



**WELCOME TO RJI INSIGHT**, winter 2025 edition.

This seems like good timing. Community-centered newsrooms all over the country have finished (or mostly finished) covering one of the wildest presidential election cycles in recent memory, freeing up some time and space to consider some newsroom needs that might have been shelved in the interim.

As always, you'll find tips, tricks and resources in this issue (and on our website) intended to be applicable to newsrooms of all sizes at low or no expense. If you're low on manpower or think you don't have the budget for state-of-the-art technology, don't worry: RJI is about realistic, tested and innovative solutions designed with local news in mind.

If you're looking for new ways to engage and inform audiences, for example, read about our partnership with the Buckeye Flame to develop an efficient, cost-effective interactive mapping tool (pp. 2–3). And if you want to jumpstart or expand your use of AI in the newsroom, it might be worth considering the benefits of a consultant (pp. 16–18).

At the same time, we have some exciting updates to share. We've expanded our team (p. 5), pursued grant-funded research (pp. 8–11) and development (pp. 22–23) and redoubled our efforts in addressing the necessity of digital news preservation (pp. 12–14).

A few ongoing programs are also rounding the corner into the new year. The 2024–2025 class of RJI Fellows (p. 19) are nearing the finish line with some of the most creative-yet-practical projects the program has produced. Competitors in the annual Student Innovation Competition are likewise just a few months away from their final presentations as they build solutions for tackling the issue of news avoidance (p.6).

Finally, if you would like a small sneak peek at our forthcoming 2024 Impact Report, take a look at p.15, where we break down the year's highlights.

Speaking of impact: If you have an idea for addressing a need or issue in the industry, reach out at [rji@rjionline.org](mailto:rji@rjionline.org) or follow the QR code. We thrive on collaboration, and we never tire of finding a new angle from which to tackle a challenge. Let's make it happen.

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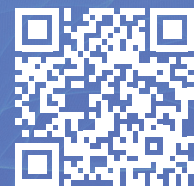
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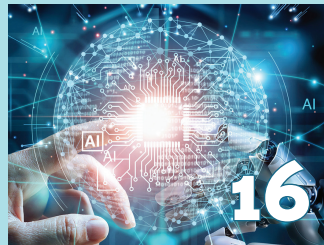
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## Weekend



[rjionline.org/newsletters](https://rjionline.org/newsletters)





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The Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI) works with the news industry, professors, students and others to make sure journalism has a long and bright future. As a “think-and-do” tank that opened its doors in 2008, RJI uses its guaranteed funding to work exclusively to strengthen journalism in the service of democracy. It’s part of the Missouri School of Journalism.



## ON THE COVER

In the RJI studio, located at the Missouri School of Journalism, RJI Project Manager Sriya Reddy steps in for a quick camera test. From Q&As on cutting-edge projects to interviews with key players and video production, this space brings ideas to life.



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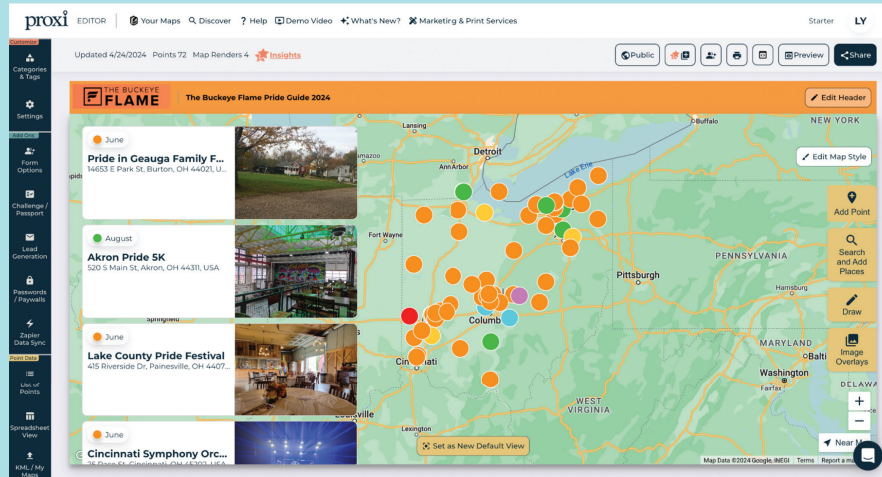
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# Innovation in Focus

## Four interactive mapping tools and how they stack up

RJI's Innovation in Focus explores new tech, tools and methods of storytelling for newsrooms worldwide. The team interviews experts, tests ideas and provides findings to help media organizations.



The final product! 2024 Buckeye Flame Pride Guide page

**RJI PARTNERED WITH** The Buckeye Flame, a nonprofit news organization in Ohio dedicated to reporting on LGBTQ+ news, to take a new, audience-focused approach to their annual Pride Guide.

For the past two years, The Flame has published a guide with a growing list of Pride events throughout the state. Unfortunately, the Pride Guide was not in a format that made it easy for readers to find events near them, especially as the list expanded each year.

Initially, the Flame sorted the events by date in a list. The hyper-linked dates at the top of the article jumped readers to the related events lower on the page with the time, location and a brief description of each. This format required too much scrolling.

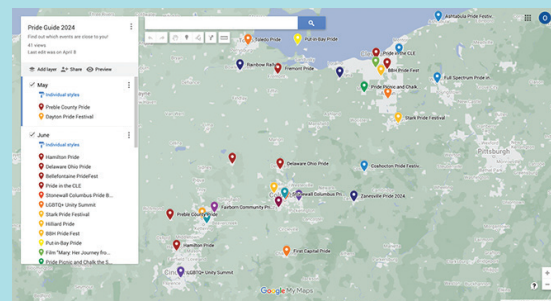
Another approach featured a calendar view. This design was

simple, and readers could add events to their personal calendars. However, not all the events were listed on one page, past events seemed more difficult to find and there was a desire for more visual flair.

RJI sought to combine the benefits of each design into something more user-friendly for both the readers and the Flame.

### Creating the map

RJI tested four different interactive map tools to compare how each one fit the goals of the project.



The Google My Maps test run, sorting each point by month

### Google My Maps

Uploading points, either by searching the address directly or by uploading several points at once via Google Sheets, is easy. Google My Maps allowed for customization, such as changing the color of the pinpoints or adding pictures and extra information to each point. There is also an option to create layers within the map, which can filter the points by categories. In this case, layers filtered the points by month.

While this was straightforward to use, especially when already working within the Google suite, it wasn't the most visually appealing option when embedded into WordPress.

### StoryMaps

As with Google My Maps, it took around 2 hours to manually upload 75 points. There was no option to batch upload points. While this tool would be visually appealing for a map with fewer points and more multimedia elements like video,

photos or audio, photos were not available to use for each Pride event, so the map looked a little empty and bland.

### PamPam

This mapping tool was definitely one of the most visually appealing





The StoryMaps test

options, but it didn't meet all the needs for this specific project. It was easy to batch upload the points by uploading a previously made Google My Maps, and it automatically assigned some points emojis, which were fun and sort of accurate.

One can click and drag the points on the map, and it is difficult to get them back in place if they are moved by mistake. But one perk: PamPam and Proxi were the only tools tested that encouraged collaboration with the option to invite people to edit the map.

PamPam would likely be a useful tool to create a walking guide because it's easy to create different routes connecting points in the map, but it wasn't the best fit for the Pride Guide.

## Proxi

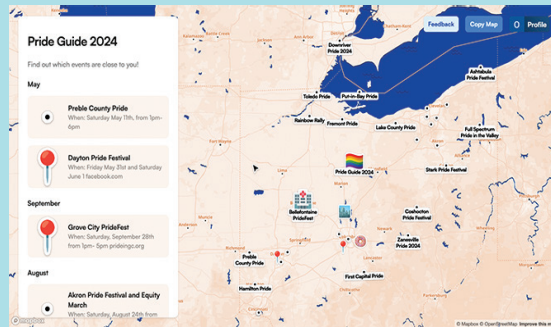
Proxi was by far the favorite and ended up being the choice for this project. Along with visual appeal and different design options for the background map and points, it was easy to batch upload points, either from Google Maps or from copying and pasting a spreadsheet. The tool also required the least amount of editing, providing two options to edit your points: a spreadsheet view and directly in the map.

The software requires each point to have a category, and it allows the

map viewers to filter the points by those categories. For the Pride Guide, this allowed for filtering the events by month. The viewer can also filter points by distance from their location.

One of the biggest interactive benefits is the tool's built-in forms to crowdsource for additional points. The editor of the map receives email alerts when readers suggest new points and can approve them to make them live on the map.

Within 24 hours of sharing the map, readers added 10 events through Proxi and the map received more than 1,500 views.



The test map on PamPam

However, it was the only tool that required payment in order to include all the events needed. With the free version, the map could only upload fewer than 25 points from Google My Maps. The choice was made to pay for the starter plan, which was \$9 per month for a year or \$18 for one month. The starter plan includes the crowdsourcing feature along with the ability to include up to 500 map points per map.

More expensive plans are available if analytics or access for multiple users are needed, and Proxi

offers a 50% discount for nonprofits and educators on annual plans.

## Moving forward

The Flame will continue their membership with the Proxi starter plan for the year. They plan to create other maps with it, such as a map of all LGBTQ+ nonprofits in the area.

The experience has also benefited more than the event guide. Flame staff also noticed that during their experience in creating the map, they were able to note which Pride events have been canceled or haven't been scheduled yet. This has led to future story ideas they might otherwise have missed.

**Olivia Dolan** is an Innovation Student Staffer for the Fall 2024 semester. She works on the Innovation in Focus series.



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# RJI News in Brief

## Charting new paths with KC Defender



**IN PARTNERSHIP WITH RJI**, the Kansas City Defender has launched The Defender Handbook, a practical guide to creating a community-centric and digital-first media organization.

As a Black nonprofit community media platform, the KC Defender sought to develop strategies that would not only help news organizations connect more deeply with Gen Z audiences, but would help journalists choose a more equitable array of sources and contribute to an inclusive organizational culture.

“This initiative is more than a mere guide; we hope it will be a beacon for those who aspire to challenge the status quo and courageously chart new paths in media as a tool for radical social change,” wrote Ryan Sorrell, founder and publisher of the KC Defender, in an article on [rjionline.org](http://rjionline.org).

The handbook is divided into sections that address very different aspects of that mission. A section on “reporting on policing and public safety,” for instance, emphasizes the need to seek out additional sources and information beyond what is provided by police departments for public safety and crime reporting, as

well as the importance of language in perpetuating or breaking down stereotypes and overused narratives.

There is also a step-by-step process for using social media and other digital platforms to reach younger audiences, in addition to a school curriculum, a tip sheet for reporting on violence and many other actionable resources.

Fittingly for a collaboration with RJI’s Innovation Team, Sorrell hopes the handbook will inspire other news organizations to depart from the status quo and find new ways to bridge journalism with the communities it serves.

“Together, we can redefine the norms of media, celebrate our diverse narratives, and build a more equitable landscape,” Sorrell wrote.

**FOLLOW THE QR CODE TO  
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## Student Innovation Competition 2025

Be a part of our live awards ceremony from the RJI Studio when we announce the winners

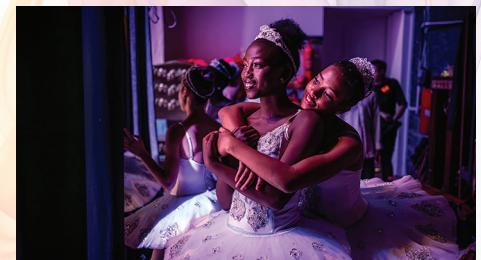
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## Do you have an idea to work with RJI?

Send us an email outlining your proposal for a project to enhance journalism in the service of democracy

[rji@rjionline.org](mailto:rji@rjionline.org)



## Tune in to POY 82 judging live

Watch the livestream of some of the most renowned photojournalists in the industry judging entries in the 2025 Pictures of the Year competition

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## An expanding team



Marie D. De Jesús



Matt MacVey



Sriya Reddy

**THREE NEW STAFF** members joined the RJI team this year. Marie D. De Jesús, Matt MacVey and Sriya Reddy serve in very different roles at the institute, but each brings valuable experiences and perspectives to their work.

De Jesús is the new director of Pictures of the Year and College Photographer of the Year, the prestigious photojournalism competitions that wrapped up their 81st and 79th iterations this year, respectively. With more than 15 years of photojournalism and leadership experience at organizations like the Houston Landing and the National Press Photographers Association, she will work to strengthen the competitions as forces of education and empowerment in the industry.

“These contests are exercises to improve our work and understand ourselves as journalists,” De Jesús said. “It’s about identifying where we can go and where we can grow.”

MacVey joins RJI as the impact producer, a brand-new role that will help maximize the reach and benefits of RJI’s work with community-centered news organizations and journalists. Previously, he ran the

AI & Local News Challenge at NYC Media Lab to help startups and industry teams create AI-driven solutions for local news needs.

“News sources are really important to the fabric of a community, and they’re an essential part of democracy,” MacVey said. “I’m excited to work with a great group of colleagues to help support that vision.”

Finally, Reddy is now the project manager for RJI’s Innovation Team, which administers a series of programs, fellowships and workshops centered around experimentation and the practical development of resources for news organizations. Coming to RJI after a stint at Dallas Morning News as part of the Report for America Corps, Reddy will work to leverage RJI’s collaborative relationships with newsrooms all over the country for projects that tackle industry issues in creative ways.

“I wanted to be in a space where a lot of innovation was happening, and RJI is one of the few spaces where I felt like I could really be in the know about the newest things occurring in journalism right now,” Reddy said.

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# Finalists chosen in innovation competition

**TEN STUDENT TEAMS** from universities across the nation have been selected as finalists for the 2025 Student Innovation Competition. The teams are developing open-source solutions that community news organizations can use to combat the growing issue of audiences avoiding the news.

Teams representing universities in California, Georgia, Missouri, Mississippi and New York are competing for the grand prize of \$10,000, with projects ranging from an AI-powered news app and a custom-curated news homepage to a “hopecore” podcast that focuses on positive news.

Crucially, ideation is just the first step of the competition. The finalists must implement their projects and perform some sort of real-world testing to demonstrate their practical utility, often in partnership with a local news organization.

Learn more about the teams and their projects below before they make their final presentations to a panel of expert judges in April.

**TEAM HEADLINE HACKERS** (*California Polytechnic State University*): A custom news quiz that reporters can use to amplify the reach of their stories.

**TEAM NEWS ANCHOR** (*California Polytechnic State University*): An AI-powered news aggregation app, complete with virtual anchors reading the news.

**TEAM HERE TODAY** (*Columbia University*): A text-messaging service that sends audiences three top stories per day, along with a weather update.

**TEAM RAREFIERS** (*Columbia University*): A plug-in allowing news organizations to grant users a more curated homepage featuring only five stories.

**TEAM THE BRIGHTSIDE** (*University of Mississippi*): A podcast focused on positive news, based on the TikTok “hopecore” trend that emphasizes hope and human kindness.

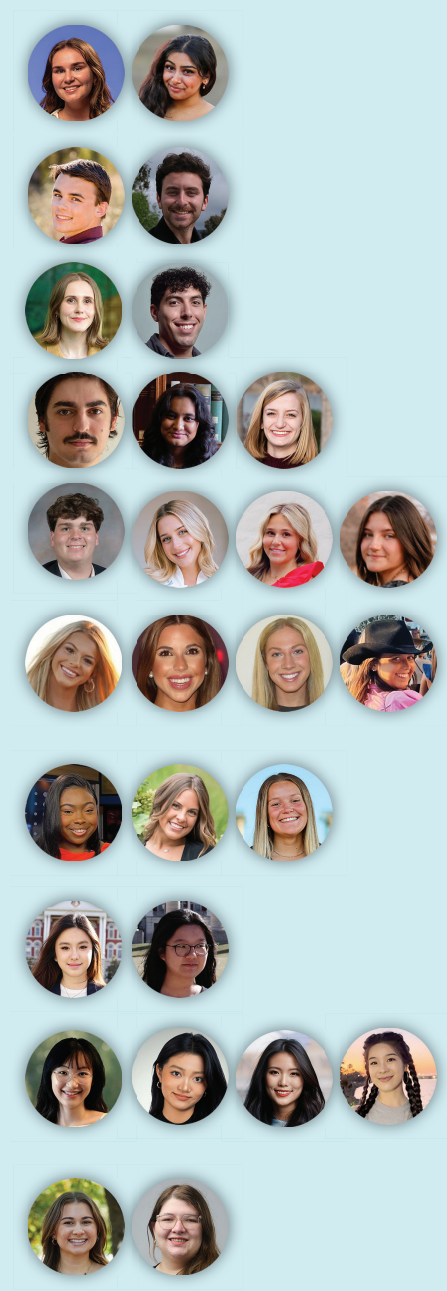
**TEAM NEWSFLASH** (*University of Mississippi*): AI-driven news videos catered toward a user’s preferences for subject matter and scale, incorporating local, national and global news.

**TEAM NEXT HEADLINE** (*University of Missouri*): A method of interactive news consumption that allows residents to vote on what they want to see covered or submit suggestions.

**TEAM NEW NEWS** (*University of Missouri*): A newsletter that emulates the casual and accessible style of social media posts to make the reading experience more comfortable.

**TEAM FLIPOP** (*University of Southern California*): A news reading widget that gamifies the experience of consuming the news, built around a self-developed framework known as Discover, Digest, Debrief.

**TEAM UGA** (*University of Georgia*): A widget users can connect to their favorite news websites and choose parameters for alerts about stories they might be interested in.





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# CARE & COLLABORATION TOOLKIT

## Care & Collaboration Toolkit launches

**NONPROFIT NEWS** organization The Appeal and RJI just announced a new resource for news leaders and entrepreneurs: The Care & Collaboration Toolkit. This toolkit serves as a practical resource for news organizations to include journalists in the decisions that impact their lives and work.

As a democratic, worker-led, care-centered newsroom, The Appeal set out to break down its practices and policies and make them adaptable to a variety of news organizations.

Whether newsrooms are looking to be fully worker-led (the toolkit includes a startup checklist for budding news entrepreneurs looking to build off the model from scratch) or are seeking guidance on a specific practice like setting better compensation policies or minimizing journalist burnout, The Care & Collaboration Toolkit is a resource for journalists and

newsroom leaders interested in putting new ideas into practice.

Each part of the toolkit provides in-depth guides with templates, checklists, draft language, and how-to guides, but the common themes are putting the values of equity, transparency and care into practice both with staff and external stakeholders.

The toolkit includes resources for:

1. **Practicing democratic decision-making:** Use decision-making frameworks like RACI (Responsible, Accountable, Consulted and Informed) to get input and sign off from journalists in our newsroom on big decisions that affect them.
2. **Setting a thriving compensation model:** The Appeal's compensation model is fully transparent with four tiers, each with a flat "thriving wage." This section is filled with

links to resources to find the best model that works for you.

3. **Minimizing burnout:** How to use Slack channels, time off policies, meeting-free time and biannual holiday shutdowns to encourage people to care for themselves. We also go into detail about how newsrooms can use reflection sessions to encourage teams to identify and resolve structural issues affecting morale.

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# RJI Research Focus

## In a state with no anti-SLAPP law? Read this

**REPORTER JARED STRONG** spent weeks investigating a police officer for alleged inappropriate relationships with teenage girls. He used more than 20 sources to compile his investigation.

The Carroll Daily Times Herald, the family-owned paper in Iowa where Strong worked, published his report in 2017 on the officer's resignation and the allegations behind it.

The next day, Strong learned that he and the Times Herald had been sued for defamation.

"Typically, with lawsuits like this there's some sort of demand for retraction or attraction," Strong said. "There was none of that. We just got the lawsuit immediately."

The officer's lawsuit is a textbook example of a SLAPP, which, according to the Reporter's Committee for Freedom of the Press, can have a "chilling" effect on free speech.

Seventeen states still don't have an anti-SLAPP law. Iowa, where the Times Herald was sued, is one of them. Anti-SLAPP laws protect free speech rights against meritless suits like the one Strong and the Times Herald faced.

Journalists in these states often fight uphill battles with little legal protection against expensive and trivial defamation lawsuits. Knowing the legal strategies available can minimize the time and money spent fighting a frivolous lawsuit.

### Legal strategies

Michael Giudicessi, the lawyer who represented the Times Herald and Strong, said there are three options a defendant can pursue when fighting a frivolous defamation suit. They include asking the plaintiff for clarification, pursuing a motion to dismiss and responding to the plaintiff's complaint.

A motion to dismiss seeks to strike down the case early in the legal

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***"Even though we were very aggressive in our reporting for years, getting sued kind of changes that. It makes you question 'is this going to be worth it? Is it going to be worth it to write the story and make people angry and potentially spawn a lawsuit?'"***

***— Jared Strong, reporter at The Carroll Daily Times Herald***

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process by arguing that a lawsuit could not possibly hold up in court. It is important that lawyers keep in mind how legal actions are frequently judged in their state. Giudicessi said that since state courts in Iowa don't commonly grant motions to dismiss, he doesn't always use them when defending publications against defamation suits. Skipping this step may reduce the costs a publication would incur because of a failed motion to dismiss.

However, Giudicessi said motions to dismiss are becoming more common because defamation suits appear to be increasing. He's seen more defamation suits since 2020 than in the ten years prior.

In many states, a defendant can file for a more definite statement if they believed the plaintiff was too ambiguous in their pleading, such as if they didn't specify what false statements were made. This motion delays discovery, giving a defendant more time to prepare, and it may also demonstrate that the plaintiff has no standing legal argument and create grounds for a motion to dismiss.

However, Giudicessi said that, in some jurisdictions, a motion for a more definite statement is filed at the same time as a motion to dismiss. He said this can make it risky for those using it as a tool to delay discovery, as a motion to dismiss might not be available if a motion for a more definite statement is denied.

If a lawyer chooses not to pursue a motion to dismiss, or if it fails, they can file a motion for a summary judgment. Also called a summary disposition, cases dismissed at this stage have often already been subject to discovery but have not gone to trial yet.

The officer's lawsuit against the Times Herald went on for about nine months before it was dismissed in a summary judgment. Despite their success, Strong said the case



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generated an estimated \$150,000 in legal expenses. He said that amount would have doubled if the lawsuit went to trial.

“It makes you a lot more careful,” Strong said. “Even though we were very aggressive in our reporting for years, getting sued kind of changes that. It makes you question ‘is this going to be worth it? Is it going to be worth it to write the story and make people angry and potentially spawn a lawsuit?’”

### **Deadline Detroit’s fight for sanctions**

In an attempt to reduce costs and fight SLAPPS, defendants might also look for state statutes specific to early dismissals of frivolous or meritless lawsuits. Some states also offer opportunities to recover court fees. For example, under the South Carolina Frivolous Proceedings Sanctions Act, an attorney may be sanctioned for filing a “frivolous pleading, motion, or document.”

When faced with a defamation suit, Deadline Detroit pursued sanctions through a Michigan law that provided sanctions for cases “devoid of arguable legal merit.”

The publication was sued after publishing a story in 2021 about a participant at a school board meeting who performed a Nazi salute and yelled “heil hitler” in response to a discussion regarding mask mandates.

Six months later, Allan Lengel, the co-founder of Deadline Detroit, heard a knock on his door. When he opened it, he learned that the publication had been sued over the story on multiple counts, including defamation.

“It was such a routine story,” Lengel said. “I was kind of shocked

that someone would file such a frivolous lawsuit.”

Lengel said that the paper sometimes receives letters threatening to sue. Before this case, none had resulted in actual lawsuits.

The legal representation for Deadline Detroit sent a letter to the plaintiff’s legal counsel, arguing that they had no case. Despite the letter, the case continued.

The case was dismissed in a summary disposition. The plaintiff had failed to allege a specific, false statement in the article. However, the court did not award frivolous litigation sanctions. Even with libel insurance, the paper ended up paying around \$5,000 in out-of-pocket expenses.

Lengel said that sanctions would have sent a “strong message” to the lawyer who agreed to pursue a frivolous case.

“There’s nothing to stop him from doing this again,” Lengel said.

When faced with steep legal costs, many papers reach out for public support. The Times Herald set up a GoFundMe. Deadline Detroit asked readers to contribute to help pay the “sizable legal fees.”

Yet, it often isn’t enough to rely on readers to fund the legal fees for frivolous lawsuits. In some cases, a lawsuit could bankrupt a paper. In others, it could prevent a journalist from publishing a story in fear of facing a lawsuit.

“This type of litigation could kill a newspaper,” Strong said.

### **Anti-SLAPP law privileges**

Although lawyers have options they can use to confront SLAPPs, they often aren’t as strong as

the options granted through anti-SLAPP laws.

There has been a push in recent years to expand anti-SLAPP legislation. The Times Herald was cited in a 2023 anti-SLAPP bill brought before the state house of representatives. The bill passed the house but later died in committee.

The language of anti-SLAPP laws differ, but common strengths include an expedited legal process and a reclamation of legal fees.

For example, in many states without anti-SLAPP legislation, a plaintiff can request discovery before a summary judgment is ruled on.

“That could mean a couple of different things,” said David Keating, the president at the Institute for Free Speech. “They could ask for your records. Your records might include things like your emails, maybe your text messages. Obviously, this would be very intrusive and it’s a lot of work to compile all of the messages.”

Discovery can be an expensive and time-consuming process. Many anti-SLAPP laws delay this process until after the anti-SLAPP motion is resolved.

Anti-SLAPP legislation also often requires the plaintiff to pay for the defendant’s legal fees. Because of this provision, anti-SLAPP legislation can increase the amount of lawyers willing to take on clients that can’t afford legal fees. It also discourages clients from filing frivolous lawsuits and lawyers from taking up cases they can’t win.

Keating said that in states without anti-SLAPP legislation, it can be difficult to recover legal fees. As exemplified by the Deadline Detroit



case, attempts to recover court fees aren't always successful.

Several initiatives are advocating for anti-SLAPP laws in states without them. The Uniform Law Commission has drafted anti-SLAPP legislation that has been enacted in eight states in the last five years. In addition, the Society of Professional Journalists has highlighted strategies to use when advocating for anti-SLAPP laws. Their recommendations are guided by past examples, both successful and unsuccessful.

Until an anti-SLAPP law is implemented, publications will have to rely on other strategies to fight SLAPPs.

Whether your state has an anti-SLAPP law or not, all journalists can take preemptive steps that will increase their likelihood of early success in court. Giudicessi recommends journalists think carefully about how their news reports are worded. When possible, he said journalists should consult with attorneys or newspaper hotlines in the state. He also recommends reporters ensure they are involved in each part of how a report is presented, including cutlines and headlines.

Careful reading can be the difference between a successful summary judgment motion and having to spend the time and money required to go to trial.

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**Sara George** is a recent graduate from the Missouri School of Journalism. She began her graduate work at the London School of Economics and Political Science this fall.



## Research takes aim at SLAPP lawsuits

**JARED SCHROEDER**, an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism, received a \$5,000 grant from the Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) earlier this year to support a project that would help journalists and publishers navigate the risk of SLAPP lawsuits. SLAPPs are “strategic lawsuits against public participation” meant to discourage or punish certain news coverage.

The project, supported by RJI, used insights from research performed by Schroeder with the help of three graduate students to update and expand an anti-SLAPP legal guide hosted by the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press. Schroeder and his team finished submitting the entries for the guide in September.

“Jared’s research offers practical information that can help news organizations respond to these lawsuits,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “Tools that enable us to fight intimidation and preserve a free press are vital, especially for community newsrooms that don’t have the budget for a team of lawyers or a long court battle.”

Anti-SLAPP statutes vary widely from state to state, with 17 states lacking them entirely and others featuring laws that only apply in a narrow set of circumstances. This can allow litigants with nefarious motives to wield the legal system to their advantage.

“In the end, they will lose a defamation lawsuit, but they’re not trying to win a legal victory,” Schroeder said. “They’re trying to drain resources from a news organization. They’re trying to make people afraid to publish about them.”

In the course of providing up-to-date information for all 50 states, a key goal was to add detailed entries even for those states with no specific laws related to SLAPP, given that journalism in these states could be most vulnerable to the impacts of intimidation.

“Each entry includes cases that have happened in that state, and if there’s no anti-SLAPP law, we’re looking at what people in that state have tried to do to protect themselves,” Schroeder added. “Some states have anti-frivolous lawsuit laws, malicious lawsuit laws that you can call upon. Or just rules and procedures.”

Schroeder’s research team consisted of doctoral student Živilė Raškauskaitė, currently a foreign news editor for non-profit news network Lithuanian National Radio and Television; master’s student Skye Lucas, who won Top Student Paper at the AEJMC Southeast Colloquium in March for her case studies on anti-SLAPP laws in 10 states; and Sara George, who graduated in May and plans to pursue a master’s degree at the London School of Economics starting in the fall.



# Portico's news preservation pilot sees early success

**FOR NEARLY TWO DECADES**, digital preservation service Portico has archived content from academic journals, books and other online media. The value of such a service is clear: if a journal should shut down for any reason, Portico will preserve its content for the benefit of future generations, distributing it to libraries or other organizations to ensure it remains publicly available.

Now, the service is looking to expand into a new frontier: news preservation. In a groundbreaking pilot program, Portico has partnered with the Columbia Missourian at the Missouri School of Journalism, Leader Publications in Jefferson County, Missouri, and nonprofit regional news network The Beacon in Kansas and Missouri to test its news preservation process.

“Our mission is to ensure knowledge stays available for the long term; we’re talking hundreds and hundreds of years,” said Karen Hanson, lead research developer at Portico. “Obviously, news is an important part of understanding our society and educating ourselves about how things work, and we want to preserve it.”

Portico is a not-for-profit subsidiary of ITHAKA, which also owns JSTOR, a major digital repository for academic journals. And since news articles largely



Karen Hanson

contain the same basic elements as journal articles — text, images and other multimedia elements — there is little difference in approach. Whether academic or news-related, Portico regularly scrapes content from the website in question, placing it in an archive that can be

accessed and searched by the client at any time.

If certain conditions are met, such as a newspaper going out of business, the content can then be accessed through Portico, ensuring it remains available. And if Portico itself should go under, extensive contingency plans are in place, including a fund that will allow operations to continue until a successor is found to take over management of the archives.

## Set it and forget it

So far, a key selling point for news organizations (though the service is free for the pilot participants) is that the service requires very little effort from its clients. Using the export function built into the outlets’ content management systems, Portico is able to gather content without requiring much in the way of time or attention from the newsroom.

In fact, Katelyn Mary Skaggs, the digital marketing manager at Leader Publications, said she has only logged into Portico’s archive once since it was established.





“I cruised around for about 20-30 minutes and I haven’t signed in again — but that’s a good thing,” Skaggs said. “I haven’t needed the safety net of Portico yet, but I’m glad it’s there if I need it.”

Elizabeth Stephens, executive editor of the Columbia Missourian, said the element of convenience also made it easy to help Portico pitch the concept to other news organizations, including Leader Publications.

“It’s really not that complicated; you just have to make the connection, say OK, do the paperwork and you’re done,” Stephens said. “It doesn’t take much work on the newsroom side.”

Challenges, on the other hand, have been relatively minor. The Missourian can’t archive the wire stories it publishes from the Associated Press, which must leave the Missourian’s website after two weeks, and content posted from other news outlets within the Missouri School of Journalism’s Missouri News Network is also left out. Similarly, Leader Publications does not archive the small amount of national news it publishes through Blox Digital, its content management system, and Skaggs said she also has no interest in archiving videos posted on YouTube that are occasionally embedded in news stories. But Skaggs and Stephens agree that nothing in need of archiving is falling through the cracks.

## A persistent problem

News preservation is an issue that RJI has long strived to address, with former digital curator Ed McCain working for more than a decade to identify the barriers that have kept the industry from adopting an organized approach to archiving their digital news.

“If news content doesn’t make it beyond the life of the news outlet or



Ed McCain

if it doesn’t make it to the scholarly record, then all of our efforts are lost,” McCain said in 2019 after receiving a \$250,000 grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to study what happens to digital news after it is posted online. “It doesn’t matter how many libraries and archives are there to help. If

the content disappears before the memory institutions get it, there’s nothing they can do. That historical record is gone.”

McCain’s work ultimately convinced Portico to reach out to RJI, which put them in touch with Stephens and the Missourian.

In news, of course, it’s the barriers to preservation — not the benefits — that are most evident to many publishers. Small local news organizations are focused on stretching their budgets to better engage their communities, keep their technology updated and maintain adequate staffing, concerns that can make spending money on a permanent archive seem like a luxury.

And to those for whom the possibility of financial catastrophe or some other reason for closure is not a distant hypothetical but an imminent reality, the focus is on finding a buyer to take over the business — an increasingly difficult proposition for many community news publications with aging owners and meager revenues.

But despite these potential roadblocks, Hanson is optimistic that the value proposition of news preservation is self-evident, particularly at a time when the precariousness of the industry’s relationship with public trust and other institutions is more evident than ever.





Skaggs said that while the choice to take part in the pilot was a no-brainer, it didn't hurt that the shocking police raid on a newspaper in Marion County, Kansas, in August 2023 — in which the publication's computers and servers were among the items seized — drove home how quickly and suddenly news operations can be disrupted.

"We were like, what happens if our server goes?" Skaggs said. "That's a question every newspaper should consider and figure out an answer to. If I don't ever need Portico, awesome. But oh my God, what would happen if we need it and it isn't there?"

The *Missourian*, too, had a special interest in participating. In 2002, the publication lost 15 years' worth of content in a server crash, an event that brought an important truth into sharp relief: despite the initial promise of the internet as an infinite repository of information, a website is not an archive.

"When Portico came to me, I said, 'look, we are the poster child of losing archives,'" Stephens said. "We want to do whatever we can. We have some systems in place, but I'm always all for more backups."

The 2002 incident, worsened by the use of outdated systems

that blocked any practical path to content recovery, also speaks to what Hanson considers a potential benefit of Portico's approach — the way it stores the articles as a set of component parts.

"As systems change over the decades, it's easier to adapt because we've got the basic elements," Hanson said. "We're not depending



Elizabeth Stephens

on huge, underlying software infrastructure — we're not going to recreate a WordPress website, for example. It's very basic. It's text, it's images, sometimes video. Put a template over that, and you can put it back into some kind of structured form quite quickly."

Going to the *Missourian* first also allowed Portico to diversify the range of content management systems it has experience with. While many news organizations (and more than a third of websites globally) use WordPress, the *Missourian* — like Leader Publications — uses Blox Digital. After successful launches at both publications, Portico is now looking to add WordPress to its repertoire in its work with the *The Beacon*, which uses Newspaper, a WordPress platform.

As for the news organizations themselves, Portico — much like RJI — remains focused on small, community-centered news organizations. After all, the question of how to make a news preservation product sustainable for a typical local newspaper needs solving.

"What we're hearing is a lot of them are not going to be able to pay for preservation because they're too small," Hanson said. "If you look at the way we do journals, we spread the cost so that the smallest are not paying very much compared to the very biggest. But we still need to see who is willing to contribute to funding this and see how we can form a business model around that. This is just about learning right now."





# RJI: Real Joint Impacts in 2024

**Collaboration with journalists, news organizations and other innovators fueled remarkable strides forward in 2024. Read on to find out more**

**2024 AT THE** Reynolds Journalism Institute saw the practical impacts of RJI's work continue to grow.

In February, RJI and research firm SmithGeiger completed one of the largest surveys ever conducted on burnout in the journalism industry, and while a number of conclusions were apparent immediately — including the importance of flexible or hybrid scheduling and a supportive workplace — research drawing from the enormous body of data is ongoing.

Bookending the year was another major initiative:

a \$2.5 million grant from the Knight Foundation to expand the Digital on Demand Services program in partnership with the Local Media Consortium. In part, the grant will fund the creation of the RJI Learning Center, which will guide community news organizations through content, training and best practices for online journalism and digital news products.

But a lot happened between those landmark moments. The 2023-2024 class of RJI Fellows produced resources that have already been used in more than 150 newsrooms, and a new class is already approaching the finish line for their own set of projects, which you can read more about on page 19.

Innovation in Focus, a series in which RJI partners with community news organizations and other collaborators around the country to develop experimental and tech-driven solutions to common industry issues, built a

statewide election map with an easy-to-replicate, no-code strategy.

And a number of programs — and even organizations — that began with support from RJI matured into new stages of their work.

• Trusting News, which helps news organizations build stronger connections to their communities, went independent after nearly a decade of support from RJI and five years of support from the American Press Institute.

- YESEO, a free Slack app that guides journalists through search engine optimization with the help of AI, is now in hundreds of workspaces around the country (and the world) and has beefed up its security to become an attractive option in an industry that is often wary of the tech industry's data privacy promises.
- The Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting, which grew out of founder Jim MacMillan's 2019-2020 RJI Fellowship, is collaborating with experts in journalism, public health and trauma to showcase a documentary about the importance of trauma-informed journalism.

If you want to play a role in making next year even more successful, reach out with your own ideas for a project or partnership.

**SEND US AN EMAIL AT [RJI@RJI.ONLINE.ORG](mailto:RJI@RJI.ONLINE.ORG)**



**[bit.ly/3ClxM9z](https://bit.ly/3ClxM9z)**





## For newsrooms looking to bring AI into the fold, consultants are an attractive — maybe even necessary — choice

**IN JUST TWO YEARS**, AI has gone from a quietly influential luxury to a necessity for the news industry. But dedicated AI teams remain extremely rare in newsrooms at a time when contraction of staff is far more likely than expansion, leaving news organizations to turn to consultants and outside training to “onboard” AI into their workflows.

This move follows a trend of increasing use of consultants to develop (for example) more sensitive, trauma-informed newsrooms, but it also bucks a longer and more robust pattern of the industry evolving slowly, cautiously, and with a trademark distrust of the tech industry.

It’s clear, however, that news organizations have little choice in the matter. For technology so suddenly and intractably ubiquitous, failure to hop aboard the AI train would be tantamount in the medium-to-long term to abstaining from cell phones or computers. Consultants, then, make it possible for news organizations to board the

train even if they can’t afford to hire their own conductor.

Andrew Finlayson, executive vice president of digital media and AI strategies at research and



Andrew Finlayson

consultancy firm SmithGeiger, said reliance on consultants for the onboarding process need not limit newsrooms in the future. On the contrary, the foundational elements consultants can help put in place through training make self-reliance easier going forward.

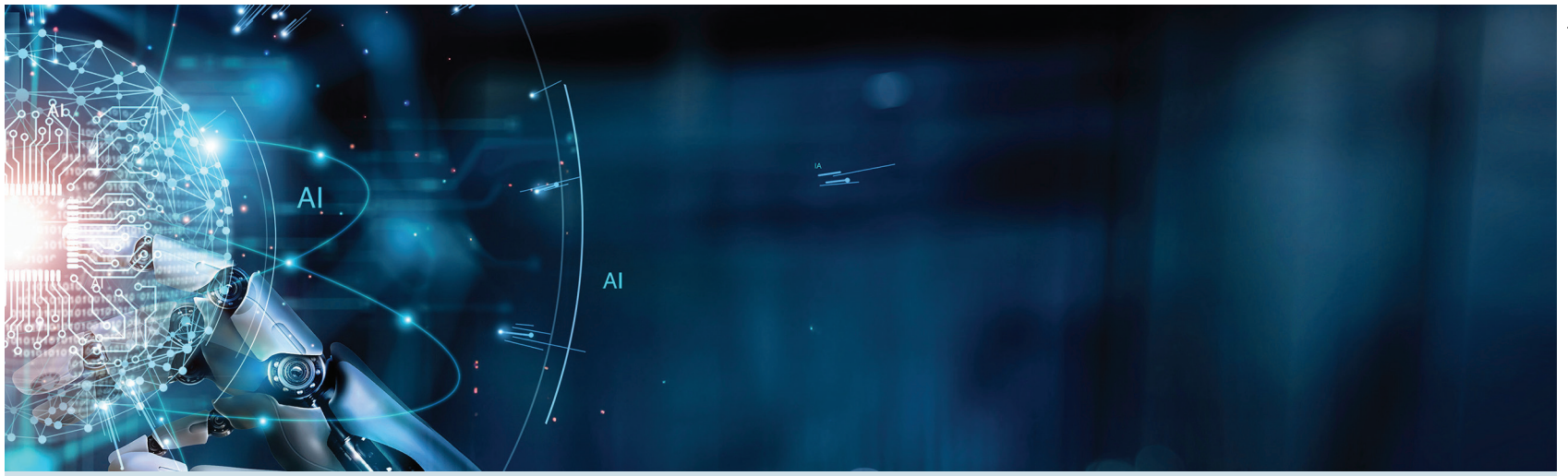
“When you set up a training system, you can train yourself to be able to train others in the organization,” Finlayson said. “Then you can start to communicate to staff where you are with AI, and frankly there is a lack of that at this time. A lot of companies have not fully developed guardrails and guidelines for using this technology.”

### Riding the seesaw

At least publicly, both in the tech industry and in journalism, AI guardrails have often emerged not as fully formed rules but as a somewhat clumsy process of trial and error in which prominent failures define the boundaries.

After Sports Illustrated, CNET and others posted error-ridden and mostly unlabeled stories written by AI, the industry largely retreated to using AI as an assistant, rather than a stand-in for staff writers. On the tech side, after companies quickly leapt from language models into image and video generation, that horizontal expansion has become more cautious after the software





first replicated existing racial biases, then overcompensated, sparking backlash each time.

In that seesaw environment, consultants say news organizations need to lay out some guiding principles and limits, even in broad strokes.

“Using AI to do content at scale is not a thing a serious media organization should be thinking about right now,” said Pete Pachal, founder of AI training resource The Media Copilot. “But there is certainly room for adopting platforms to create new experiences that they might not have used before.”

Such “experiences” seem almost limitless, and include assisting in the collection, organization and presentation of data, making it easier to archive and access old content or even aiding in the very coding that makes those applications possible.

Pachal — who, like Finlayson, worked in news before becoming a consultant — echoed others who said one of the quickest and easiest steps a newsroom can take is to start playing with generative AI chatbots to learn how they work. These tools often have a free version that can be used to great effect before one’s organization commits to a paid tool.

Yet hesitancy around how to present even the most unobtrusive uses of AI to the public continues to impede full-throated, public-facing adoption.

“There are a lot of people who recognize the utility of AI as an assistant to maybe make a passage more explanatory, but don’t want to label it as such,” Pachal said.

He pointed to a study released in late 2023 by MIT researchers that indicated labels identifying



Pete Pachal

AI-generated content do impact audience perceptions, leading readers to choose human-created stories over AI products. (In an interesting wrinkle, however, participants did prefer AI content to human-created versions when they didn’t know which was which.)

Finlayson said he recommends that news organizations always include a description of how they use AI in an easily accessible location on their website, lessening any perceived ambiguity.

### Privacy in an open-source era

Another common concern is privacy. Can an investigative reporter compiling information about the wrongdoings of a civil servant, for instance, trust that sensitive information typed into a chatbot or shared with a colleague in an AI-driven messaging platform won’t be subsumed into the tool’s algorithm? For some, it seems that no amount of assurance will overcome an innate distrust of the tech industry, which has a spotty record on the data privacy front.

“There are some relatively straightforward things you can do to keep data private, but who really knows?” Pachal said. “Even if OpenAI says use the API and then it’s private, do you trust that? Some people still don’t.”

One solution for those concerned about privacy is to use an AI model that runs on a newsroom’s local computer network, an approach that can also make it easier to create a more customized suite of tools that meet an organization’s individual needs. But it can be a



challenging, finicky proposition, once again highlighting the value of outside help.

“There is a ‘golden point’ where you have a fairly small model that’s good enough to do what you need it to do and is also cheaper than using a proprietary model,” said Sil Hamilton, who helps the nonprofit Hacks/Hackers hold educational AI workshops at universities and professional conferences as a researcher-in-residence. “But it’s difficult to do that without a lot of fine tuning. A lot of smaller models are not very good.”

The key to that balancing problem lies in the architecture that forms the foundation of modern AI models: the transformer, a type of neural network that is skilled at factoring context and complex meaning into the process of turning a prompt (“Give me an image of ice cream”) into an output (an image of ice cream).

Transformers scale quadratically, meaning that for every increase in the size of an AI-generated image or paragraph, the computational burden doesn’t simply rise in proportion: it is squared, quickly bringing the necessary computational power into the stratosphere for larger tasks.

“A decent small model, like Llama 3’s 8B version, can run on

a MacBook with maybe 16GB of RAM,” Hamilton said. “When you’re wanting to use the large-sized Llama 3 model, you’re going to need eight Nvidia H100 cards in a cluster, which costs around \$200,000. Your IT has to be equipped to handle that, which is not the easiest thing, and it’s going to cost a lot more in electricity.”

### Implement something fun

More important than these concerns, according to Hamilton,



Sil Hamilton

is the mindset from which news organizations approach their use of AI. As opposed to the development of word processors or the internet, innovations to which AI is often compared as a leap forward in journalism’s relationship with technology,

Hamilton’s view is that AI is not intended as a ready-made product that works as a “plug and play” solution for the complex and often widely differing needs of journalists.

“AI is really from the realm of research — it doesn’t belong to the realm of IT yet,” Hamilton said. “The way that large language models are continuing to be released is completely at odds with how any news organization wants to approach this. A news organization wants infrastructure, technical support, service-level contracts that they’re just not getting from these more research-minded organizations.”

In other words, organizations that want to onboard AI must first be open to experimentation — a view that perhaps throws the sometimes-embarrassing trial-and-error process of using AI into new light as more than a series of very public mistakes. Dead ends and failures, after all, are inevitable branches on the path to successful experimentation.

“It doesn’t cost too much to just have somebody play around with the technology for a few days and try to implement something fun,” Hamilton added. “And what you’re getting in the process is something a little bit closer to what the AI companies imagine when they release these technologies, because that’s exactly what they’re doing, too.”







## RJI Fellow Alex Partida: The article-as-homepage

**THE 2024-2025 RJI FELLOWS** are entering the homestretch for their projects, which aim to tackle various challenges in the news industry by building innovative, practical and open-source resources. One Fellow, Alex Partida, is redefining what an article page can look like in an era when fewer and fewer readers spend time on news organizations' homepages.

Partida, a web developer for the nonprofit Salt Lake Tribune, said the need for change is only accelerating as more audiences get their news from web searches and social media.

"Only 17% of our traffic at The Salt Lake Tribune goes through our homepage, with the rest coming on a story-by-story basis," Partida wrote in an [rjionline.org](#) column. "Due to constrained resources, many newsrooms our size and smaller have not been able to optimize the article page for it to be the readers' site entry."

The answer, in Partida's view, is to imbue pages featuring articles with the same functionality that was once reserved for the homepage: not only convenient navigation to additional content, but seamless integration with other forms of audience engagement, such as newsletters, donation campaigns and advertising.

To that end, she is creating a toolkit that will help others replicate the Salt Lake Tribune's design overhaul, allowing them to turn articles into effective entry points for new audiences and a more engaging experience for their base audience.

**FOLLOW THE QR CODE FOR  
MORE ON PARTIDA'S PROJECT AND  
THE REST OF THE 2024-2025 CLASS**



[bit.ly/3Zs4jcc](https://bit.ly/3Zs4jcc)





## How to build a board of directors that actually helps

**WHEN THE APPEAL**, a nonprofit news organization covering the criminal legal system, relaunched three years ago, the need for a Board of Directors was obvious, but those of us working to make it happen were wary. We'd all had bad experiences with external boards that either abused or neglected their power, but having the accountability and oversight of people we trusted felt important.

Here's how the team at The Appeal built a board that worked.

### **Step 1: Establish the board's role within your organization**

There is actually a lot more flexibility in determining a board's

responsibilities than you might think. As a worker-led newsroom, it was important for our staff to retain the power to participate in decisions that impact their work and their lives.

We started off by asking two key questions:

1. What board functions are important to support our team and our work?
2. What roles are most important on our board?

Based on input from our team, we determined that our board should function to:

- Offer support with fundraising and development.
- Help establish The Appeal as a model for worker-led newsrooms dedicated to collab-

orative decision-making and equitable organization building.

- Grow a newsroom that serves as a counternarrative force to legacy media, which prioritizes coverage that supports an expansion of the U.S. criminal legal system.

We also determined that we would seek board members who fill the following roles:

- Communications
- Development
- Finance/Treasurer
- Journalism
- Community
- Worker Governance
- The Appeal Team Liaison



## Step 2: Determine the board's powers

While board members are legally required to retain their fiduciary duties of care and loyalty, there is otherwise a lot of room to determine and delegate the board's responsibilities.

First, it's helpful to review a typical board's powers and responsibilities, such as:

- Strategic development and planning
- Raising funds
- Financial planning
- Practices for legal and ethical integrity
- Hiring and firing

Then, ask your team how they feel about this list and what they would change. We asked three key questions:

1. Which powers should the board delegate?
2. Which powers should the board not delegate?
3. Where the board has approval power, how should it incorporate staff recommendations?

Following a team discussion, we developed a board decision-making matrix and established the expectation that our board members would support The Appeal's development as a worker-led organization, support fundraising and adhere to principles of confidentiality and collaboration.

## Step 3: Figure out the nitty gritty

As unglamorous as they are, board logistics are important to figure out before you begin recruiting members. When it comes time to start building your board, you will likely want to focus on:

1. How many board members should we have?

2. How long should board members serve?
3. How often should board members meet?

The first question is important for you: What is the balance between putting too much pressure on a small group and inviting too much chaos from a big group? You might want to consider how many staff you have currently and expect to have over the next board term so there's not a significant imbalance.

The second two questions are important to candidates: these are basic questions potential members will ask about what kind of commitment they might be making.

When it came to board terms, we decided on two-year terms but left the number of terms a board member could serve open-ended. On board meetings, we determined that the board would meet once a month for the first year and then quarterly after that.

## Step 4: Decide who should be on your board and ask them

Once you've answered the big questions about how your Board of Directors will function within your newsroom's structure, you can begin the exciting process of figuring out recruitment.

It was important to us to make room for ideal candidates and not be constrained by who we thought would say yes—this helped us work through other factors, like who would show up, who would collaborate well with other members and who would champion our work. It was also important to consider the diversity of identity, experience, and expertise we were looking for.

From this "dream big list," start whittling down the names using these sorts of factors and begin designing your dream board.

When it came to recruiting, we spoke with each person (maybe several times if needed), making sure to express our appreciation for their work and answer any questions they had.

Fortunately, everyone we asked said yes! In November 2022, we officially announced our inaugural Board of Directors. In September 2023, we added two more incredible advocates and allies to our board.

## Step 5: Onboard and engage

It's time to return to logistics for onboarding. We assembled one central Google Doc that included links to:

- Mission and values
- Concept note
- Bylaws
- Decision-making matrix
- Organizational chart
- Conflict of interest policy

We are so grateful to the folks who serve on our board of directors. Despite having full-time jobs, packed calendars, and busy lives, they show up for us in so many ways. Our organization is stronger because of, not in spite of, our Board of Directors.

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**Molly Greene** is *The Appeal's* strategy and legal director.



**Tara Francis Chan** is the publication's managing editor and operations director.







# Helping publishers accelerate digital growth

**THE LOCAL MEDIA** Consortium (LMC), in partnership with The Reynolds Journalism Institute (RJI), has received a \$2.5 million grant from the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation to expand the Digital on Demand Services (DODS) program.

DODS provides shared services for local newsrooms to access content, training and affordable, on-demand development and consulting resources to help build a more sustainable digital business.

The Knight grant will provide the opportunity to expand the DODS program, including the buildout of an Online Marketplace that will include a concierge help desk for publishers to get advice and recommended services; an RJI Learning Center with content, training and best practices; and expanded access to

vettted on-demand development and technical resources from the LMC.

Many local newsrooms do not have the technical resources needed to address the pace of change and complexities needed to accelerate their digital businesses. A 2022 survey of LMC members found 64% of local media companies have less than three internal digital development resources, and more than one-third (36%) have no internal digital development resources at all.

Launched in 2022 with funds for a pilot from the Google News Initiative, DODS provides local media companies with lower-cost access to developers and technical consulting services. The pilot project has helped provide local publishers with fractional services to tackle more than 50 digital projects from launching a newsletter program

to redesigning their website and implementing analytics tools. DODS has received positive feedback from local media companies, as well as requests for expansion.

“We are so grateful to have support from the Knight Foundation and RJI to continue offering this vital digital resource to help local media companies access the technical resources they need to grow their businesses,” said Fran Wills, CEO of the LMC. “The LMC’s digital business and technical expertise, combined with RJI’s content creation and curation skills, is ideal to lead this project.”

RJI will lead the buildout of the platform’s Learning Center to provide guidance and curated content to educate publishers on digital topics. Learnings will be shared through webinars, online





training curriculum, case studies, and peer-to-peer collaboration to expand program impact.

“This grant creates a new way for community news organizations to acquire the knowledge, skills and resources to not only survive but thrive in the digital world,” said Randy Picht, executive director of RJI. “It’s not enough to build great tools and programs — they need to be accessible, and that’s where the Learning Center comes in.”

Funds from the Knight Foundation will primarily be used for staffing, the buildout of the marketplace platform, and to help subsidize digital services for small and medium publishers. A portion of the funds will also be used to implement a pilot program to help independent newsrooms that are run by and/or primarily service communities of color to optimize their digital strategy and infrastructure.

The Knight Foundation investment will help fund the DODS project through 2027, with a goal to help grow DODS publisher

project volume to 300 projects annually by year three. The vision is that DODS will become a one-stop shop for local media to find the most relevant content, consulting resources, and technical implementation services to advance their digital business.

“DODS has been a valuable extension of our limited tech resources, offering a level of expertise and efficiency we couldn’t have managed on our own,” said Bruce Potter, publisher of Inside NoVa. “Their team provides fast and effective solutions that keep our operations running smoothly whenever we face digital challenges. In short, partnering with DODS has been a valuable resource for our business.”

### About the Local Media Consortium

The Local Media Consortium delivers more than \$50M in annual economic value through digital partnerships and strategic initiatives on behalf of more than 150 local media companies in top markets

across the United States, Canada, and Puerto Rico, and includes more than 5,000 newspaper, radio, TV and online-only news outlets. By harnessing the combined volume and scale of its members, the LMC reduces costs and increases revenue with technology and service providers like Google, Meta, Monster, and others. The aggregated LMC audience footprint spans 200 million unique monthly visitors, and its member companies serve more than nine billion pageviews to consumers. More information is available at [localmediaconsortium.com](http://localmediaconsortium.com).

### About the Knight Foundation

The Knight Foundation are social investors who support a more effective democracy by funding free expression and journalism, arts and culture in community, research in areas of media and democracy, and in the success of American cities and towns where the Knight brothers once published newspapers.



# RJI Program Spotlight

## RJI's impact from our people working with our partners

RJI'S FAR-REACHING IMPACT is created by our people, including staff members and students from the Missouri School of Journalism, who meet with our partners in their own communities. Here are a few examples of RJI's outreach.

RJI Director of Innovation Kat Duncan speaks at the LION Awards



Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting Director Jim MacMillan presented his group's documentary "The Second Trauma" at RJI and the Missouri School of Journalism



RJI Project partner and founder of the KC Defender Ryan Sorrell speaks about the Defender Handbook at the LION Summit



Innovation in Focus Editor Emily Lytle at Radically Rural 2024, in Keene, New Hampshire. Lytle co-led the event's community journalism track with Jack Rooney of the Keene Sentinel

Radically Rural 2024



Q&A session with Missouri School of Journalism students at RJI about the Philadelphia Center for Gun Violence Reporting's documentary "The Second Trauma," with PCGVR's Director Jim MacMillan



# Where are they now

## Krystal Knapp is pulling for push notifications

**KRYSTAL KNAPP** is the founder of two digital news organizations serving New Jersey: Planet Princeton, a hyperlocal news outlet serving the Princeton community since 2011, and new venture The Jersey Vindicator, a nonprofit startup featuring investigative journalism and other in-depth reporting about the state.

Knapp's 2019-2020 RJI Fellowship involved creating a guide to help local news organizations implement push notifications, a project she is now updating as she works to incorporate the notifications into The Jersey Vindicator's engagement strategy.

### You're refreshing your push notification guide. Why?

I feel like push notifications still are such an under-tapped resource. Planet Princeton has more than 13,000 push notification subscribers, and it's a small community. We have a highly engaged audience that likes breaking news, but we do use the notifications to push other things, like our membership program and important stories.

The technology is also more adaptable now; you can do more segmenting and customization. Let's say you click on a push notification about the train system going down. Since you clicked through to the story, you'll get another push for the next update about the train system.

The common response from publishers is still, "Yuck, I don't like



the idea of push notifications." But it's about what the reader and the community needs or wants, not what we like or want. It's a low-risk experiment: do a test with it!

### News products are in vogue right now. Where do push notifications fit in amid a sea of newsletters, podcasts and other ways of reaching audiences?

Different people want information in different ways. Some people love newsletters, others like push notifications. Students at the University of Missouri actually did a survey and found that younger people consume the information in the alert itself — they might not necessarily click over to the story, but they will go home later, get on social media and write something about it.

Publishers might say, "then why should I bother?" But it builds a connection and brand loyalty with the reader. We need to move

beyond clicks; that's not how you measure engagement or success.

### How does that square with something like the New Jersey Vindicator, which features more long-form, in-depth content?

There, unlike breaking news, I see it as more of a way to drive people to the website. With an investigative news site where you're not publishing content as frequently, push notifications can help drive people back.

We're working on getting it implemented at the Vindicator, but again, it's about engagement. I want it set up so that the push invite doesn't happen right away when someone goes to the website for the first time. That's like asking someone out on a second date when you've just started the first blind date. Maybe the third time they visit, the invite comes up. It will be interesting to see how it works out.