



# LION PUBLISHERS

2020 ANNUAL REPORT

Independent. Together.

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

LION Publishers had grand plans for 2020, piloting a number of new programs. I, for one, was most excited about a plan to test three regional gatherings, ahead of the first time the annual LION Summit went West, with Seattle as our destination in October. Alas, 2020 had other plans for all of us. We watched the first modern pandemic snuff out all those gatherings, and rapidly reevaluated what we could do to serve our members as the same disruptive force spread insidiously throughout everyone's communities.

Our New England members rallied to form a mutual aid society, even as Covid would eventually sicken publisher members and their families. Of course, this pandemic affected our members directly — some have lost family members and friends, or were sickened themselves. Through all of this, the community of fellow publishers stepped up to help them serve their readers by providing editing capacity and financial and emotional support during their illnesses.

Our programming went virtual. The first webinar in this new era, from Tim Griggs and Ryan Tuck, provided advice on steering news businesses through a pandemic. We opened up this production to everyone, including members of the National Newspaper Publishers Association (the Black Press); the National Hispanic Publishers Association, the Association of Alternative Newsmedia, the Local Media Association, and the Institute for Nonprofit News.

We helped Facebook distribute tens of millions of dollars in relief money, \$2.5 million of which went to LION Publishers members. Google's Journalism Emergency Relief Fund sent \$900,000 in funding to our members, as well. We would go on to forge deep partnerships with both platforms, to rapidly expand our work around sustainability solutions for emerging and existing members. And though it wasn't quite the same as an in-person gala, we celebrated some of the best work of the last year during our second-ever Local Journalism Awards — with time for virtual networking and catching up, a stellar keynote presentation from some of the best and the brightest working in independent journalism, and the crucial handing-out of hardware, complete with live speeches from our winners.

We did all that even as our staff grew, adding Kelsey Ryan in March, and Lisa Heyamoto and Ben DeJarnette in September. More growth and change is on the horizon at LION Publishers — because while we might all have been stuck at home since March, we certainly haven't been sitting still. There's too much work to do.

Best,

Chris Krewson

Executive Director

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## 1 Who We Are

Staff, Board of Directors and Advisory Council

## 2 How we built momentum in 2020

## 3 Impact: Members-only Programs

Skills Series

LION Lessons

Expert Network

LION Awards

## 4 Impact: Signature Programs

Project Oasis

Google News Initiative Startups Program

Tiny News Collective

## 5 By the Numbers

Growing LION members

Promoting LION members

Making LION a more sustainable organization

# OUR MISSION & VALUES



## Independent media

Independent media is the most promising pathway for the long-term sustainability of the news ecosystem.



## Entrepreneurialism

Successful news entrepreneurs take calculated risks; can anticipate a changing landscape to grow their businesses and better serve their communities; and believe that experimentation is imperative to the survival of journalism.



## Anti-racism

We acknowledge and condemn the ongoing legacy of racism in U.S. and Canadian-based newsrooms, and stand against business and editorial practices that oppress historically marginalized communities.



## Inclusive and equitable representation

News businesses should be led by and/or staffed by people inclusive of diverse perspectives, backgrounds and experiences, who are representative of their communities.



## Useful journalism

Successful independent news publishers create stories that serve their audiences; build a sense of place; and solve problems within their community, leading to a more informed and engaged society.



## Peer-learning

Communities, including the LION membership, are strongest when we recognize we're in this together.

Meet the team

# LION Publishers Staff

We doubled in size in 2020.



**Chris Krewson**  
Executive Director



**Anika Anand**  
Deputy Director



**Phayvanh Luekhamhan**  
Director of Operations



**Kelsey Ryan**  
Membership Manager



**Lisa Heyamoto**  
GNI Startups Lab Senior  
Program Manager



**Ben DeJarnette**  
Community Manager

# BOARD OF DIRECTORS

LION Publishers' governing body underwent some changes in 2020:

- Jan Schaffer, Scott Brodbeck, Teresa Wippel and Glenn Burkins left their Board seats
- Jiquanda Johnson, Cierra Hinton and Rebekah Monson joined as new Board members
- Jay Allred, Kelly Gilfillan, Alvaro Gurdian, Rosemary Hoban, Charlotte-Anne Lucas and Dylan Smith remain on the Board



**Kelly Gilfillan, Past Chair**

Homepage Media Group



**Jay Allred, Chair**

Richland Source



**Tracie Powell, Vice Chair**

Borealis Philanthropy

# ADVISORY COUNCIL

We created our first-ever advisory council to help guide LION's early thinking around programming and other initiatives. We decided that we'd select a new Advisory Council each year, and we thank our [inaugural members](#) for their service.



**Madeleine Bair**  
El Tímpano



**Aron Pilhofer**  
News Catalyst



**Jiquanda Johnson**  
Flint Beat



**Meghan Murphy**  
Online News Association

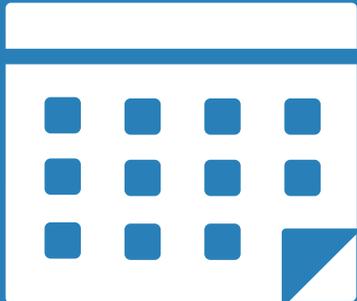


**Mazin Sidhamed**  
Documented



**Phillip Smith**  
Consultant

# HOW WE BUILT MOMENTUM



- **January**

We [added](#) a new vice chair, secretary and treasurer to our board of directors, and launched our LION Lessons for members.

- **February**

We [announced](#) LION's first advisory council.

- **March**

We [advocated](#) for our members amidst a growing pandemic, [introduced](#) Project Oasis, and [hired](#) a membership and communication manager.

- **April**

We [launched](#) the LION Expert Network, distributed Covid relief grants through Facebook and [organized](#) a webinar on how to navigate your news business during the pandemic.

- **May**

We [joined](#) a coalition to support locally-owned news.

- **June**

We [created](#) our aspiring entrepreneur membership tier and launched a member dues forgiveness campaign.

- **July**

We [launched](#) our Entrepreneurial Skills Series and [announced](#) the Google News Initiative Startups Boot Camp.

- **August**

We [hosted](#) our first Skills Series, "Managing money for news entrepreneurs," and [shared](#) our plans to make LION the destination for news entrepreneurs.

- **September**

We [hired](#) more staff, [welcomed](#) new board members, [announced](#) our selected Boot Camp participants and [hosted](#) our second Skills Series, "Designing products with your audiences."

- **October**

We [announced](#) LION Awards winners at our first-ever virtual LION Awards ceremony, our board [voted](#) to select a new chair and vice chair, and we [hosted](#) our third Skills Series, "Building an equitable and inclusive newsroom."

- **November**

We [launched](#) our News Entrepreneur Community.

- **December**

We [announced](#) the launch of the Tiny News Collective, in partnership with News Catalyst, [opened](#) applications for our first-ever Google News Initiative Startups Lab and [shared](#) our Startups Boot Camp participants' next steps.

# IMPACT BY PROGRAM

MEMBERS-ONLY PROGRAMS



When I launched **Flint Beat**, I felt like I was out there on an island all by myself.

LION let me know that I wasn't. There were other **publishers** going through some of the same things I was going through.

So to me, **LION is family**.

JIQUANDA JOHNSON, FOUNDER & PUBLISHER, *FLINT BEAT*



## MEMBERS-ONLY PROGRAMMING

# SKILLS SERIES

Our Entrepreneurial Skills Series was an experiment in developing curriculum and training for our LION members and taught by three topic-area experts. Over the course of four weeks, members attended four lectures and four office hours about a specific skill needed to run a news business. A total of 42 LION member organizations participated in at least one Skills Series and on average all participants indicated they improved across proficiencies for each series. With support from the Texas Tribune's RevLab, we paid out a total of \$17,150 in stipends so participants could execute on what they learned in the Series.



**Harry Backlund, City Bureau**

“Managing money for news entrepreneurs”



**Rebekah Monson, WhereBy.Us**

“Designing products with your audiences”



**Emma Carew Grovum, Consultant**

“Building an equitable and inclusive news business”



## MEMBERS-ONLY PROGRAMMING

# LION LESSONS

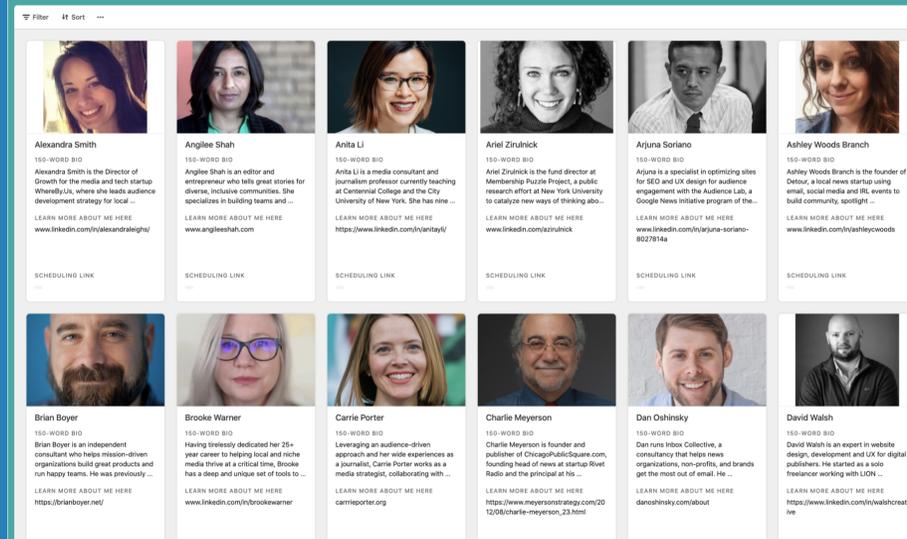
We created LION Lessons to encourage peer learning, and the majority of these one-hour webinars were taught by existing members. More than 300 members signed up to attend these events.

- **How to earn and keep new audiences**  
Alexandra Smith, WhereBy.Us
- **Exploring member services portals**  
Stacey Peters, VTDigger
- **How to get philanthropic dollars to do the journalism you want to do**  
Maria Archangelo, Chalkbeat
- **Best practices and insider tips for getting grants**  
Ashley Woods Branch, Detour Detroit; Sarah Hartley, Google News Initiative; Lizzy Hazeltine, North Carolina Local News Lab Fund
- **How to build sponsorable content verticals for underrepresented communities**  
Sherrell Dorsey, The Plug
- **Building mission-oriented revenue offerings for clients**  
Chris Horne, The Devil Strip
- **How you can improve trust with your community**  
Joy Mayer, Trusting News
- **Practical Airtable for publishers**  
Anika Anand & Kelsey Ryan, LION Publishers

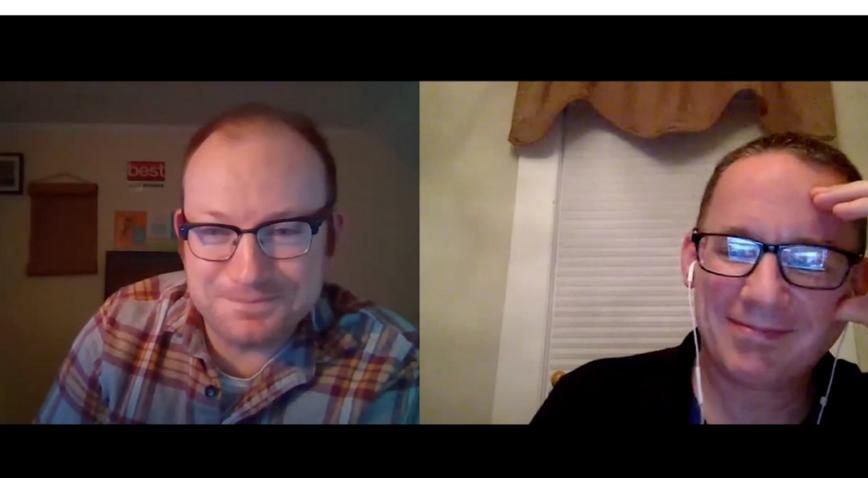
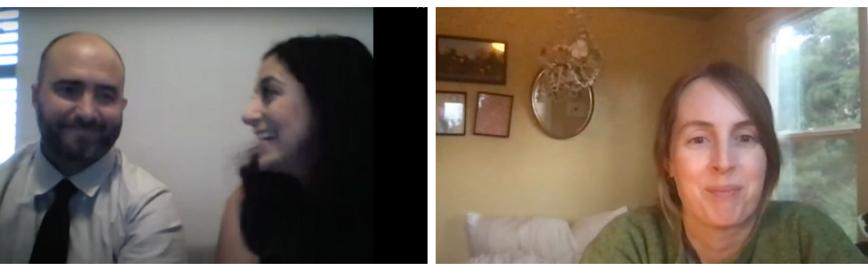
## MEMBERS-ONLY PROGRAMMING

# EXPERT NETWORK

It can be difficult for our members to find the right kind of consulting help for their businesses. So we launched the LION Expert Network, a public database of independent news consultants who could consult on product, operations and revenue challenges. LION members accepted into the pilot could choose to book up to three 90-minute sessions with any consultant. All members who booked time with consultants told us it was a very useful program for them.



29 consultants worked with 25 newsrooms to book over 70 consulting sessions.



## MEMBERS-ONLY PROGRAMMING

# LION AWARDS

Celebrating the best of independent online media across the U.S. and Canada, from solopreneurs to large newsrooms.

- 29 judges evaluated 169 total entries — more than double the previous year's entries.
- We created new tiers based on newsroom size.
- And we added new awards categories:
  - Public Service
  - Emerging Publisher
  - Member of the Year
  - Coronavirus Coverage
  - Collaboration of the Year
- More than 130 people attended our first ever virtual awards ceremony.
- [Watch the awards video](#)
- [Meet the winners](#)



VTDigger was the very fortunate recipient of **four LION awards** in 2020. We were delighted to win.

And then something else in the hugely fantastic realm happened. Sen. Patrick Leahy read a **commendation of VTDigger** into the congressional record based on the LION awards. **Major street cred** and acknowledgment of the **hard work** of our reporters and business staff!

Thanks, LION.

ANNE GALLOWAY, FOUNDER & EDITOR, *VTDIGGER*



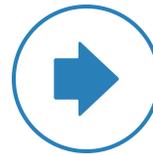
# MEMBER MEETING

In November, we held our annual member meeting virtually with more than 50 members. LION staff and our board chair talked about our strategy for 2021, board priorities, our updated member standards and how LION members could contribute to LION's future growth and development.



### **We updated member standards and a created a new member tier.**

- The new membership application will help us better understand who is in our membership and how to best support them.
- The new “aspiring entrepreneur” tier will allow us to support those just starting out.
- Our new membership criteria helps raise the standards of who a LION member is, so that all LION members can be recognized as credible news organizations in their communities.



### **We shared how members can help shape LION in 2021.**

- Serve on a committee.
- Complete our Stakeholder Survey.



### **We shared the board's 2021 priorities.**

- Create LION's first strategic plan.
- Center and strengthen diversity, equity and inclusion policies and practices for the board, staff and members.
- Develop strong and active board committees.

IN THEIR WORDS

# MEMBER TESTIMONIALS

“We’ve easily received 5x the value of our initial membership fee... Moreover, it’s a space where I may feel less alone about the struggles of running a local news organization – that human element, especially during these trying times, gives me the courage to keep going.”



— Judith Kim, Avant Youth

“Joining the LION community has been one of the best investments our organization has entered into in recent years. The network connections, shared resources, industry support and strategic opportunities afforded to LION members has been considerable... We've seen firsthand LION advocate for its members and the communities we serve. Thank you, LION!”



— Victor Hernandez, Crosscut

# COMMUNICATIONS

## News Entrepreneur Community

We received **more than 1,000 inquiries and applications** for our GNI Startups Program. While we couldn't accept every deserving news entrepreneur into our inaugural Boot Camp, we did invite all of them to join our News Entrepreneur Community. Since November, this peer learning community has grown to **nearly 400 participants**, and we've seen existing and aspiring entrepreneurs get answers to their questions about everything from funding to newsletters to marketing.

## Promoting our members' work

As our members adapted and innovated their way through 2020, we helped identify **key insights from their successes** and shared those lessons within and beyond our LION community. We wrote about how our members **responded to the Black Lives Matter demonstrations, covered the 2020 election** and **developed new revenue streams and tech solutions** amid the pandemic.

# IMPACT BY PROGRAM

SIGNATURE PROGRAMS

## SIGNATURE PROGRAM

# PROJECT OASIS



**We partnered with the Google News Initiative, Douglas K. Smith and the UNC Hussman School of Journalism and Media's Center for Innovation and Sustainability to gather data to map and showcase the growing number of local digital news publications in the U.S. and Canada.**

We collected the publication names and URLs of more than 700 digitally-native independent local news publications across the U.S. and Canada and surveyed them about their news businesses. We received more than 250 responses and in early 2021 will share that data in the Oasis database and our analysis in a research report.

# Google News Initiative Startups Program

This year we partnered with the Google News Initiative to create programs and resources to support existing and aspiring independent news entrepreneurs.

## GNI Startups Playbook

After conducting dozens of interviews with existing independent news entrepreneurs, we've compiled an extensive Playbook for those who are considering launching a startup. The Playbook, which will **launch in early 2021**, will cover the steps for news entrepreneurs to validate their idea through audience and market research; build and measure a minimum viable product; make a business plan; define metrics of success; grow their audience; and set up their operations. We'll use this Playbook to **inform future LION programming**.

## GNI Startups Boot Camp

This eight-week program, led by Phillip Smith, helped journalism entrepreneurs develop their ideas for independent news organizations. We received **259 applications** and selected a **cohort of 24, 70% of whom were founders of color**. We delivered 31 hours of programming, booked 157 one-on-one coaching sessions with a 100% completion rate. Participants graduated with a strong community of like-minded founders, access to ongoing coaching, a **pool of funding** and an experience many described as "life-changing."

## GNI Startups Lab

Designed for news startups with demonstrated traction around product, audience or revenue, this six-month program will help put them on the path to sustainability. It will provide participants with a **sustainability audit** to diagnose financial, journalistic and operational health; **strategic and tactical consulting**; one-on-one **coaching** to learn, build and measure a revenue-generating experiment; and a **pool of direct funding** for founders to execute that experiment. The program will launch in early 2021.

# GNI Startups Boot Camp Participants



Google News Initiative

**LION**  
PUBLISHERS

IN THEIR WORDS

# GNI STARTUPS BOOT CAMP TESTIMONIALS

“I feel so much more confident in my abilities. Truly priceless.”



— Camille Padilla Dalmau, 9 Millones

“The GNI/LION boot camp was the most enriching journalism training program I've participated in.”



— Stacy Feldman, Boulder Reporting Lab

“I have been pushed to embrace my own vision and passions in a way that I expect will propel me forward with strength and clarity.”

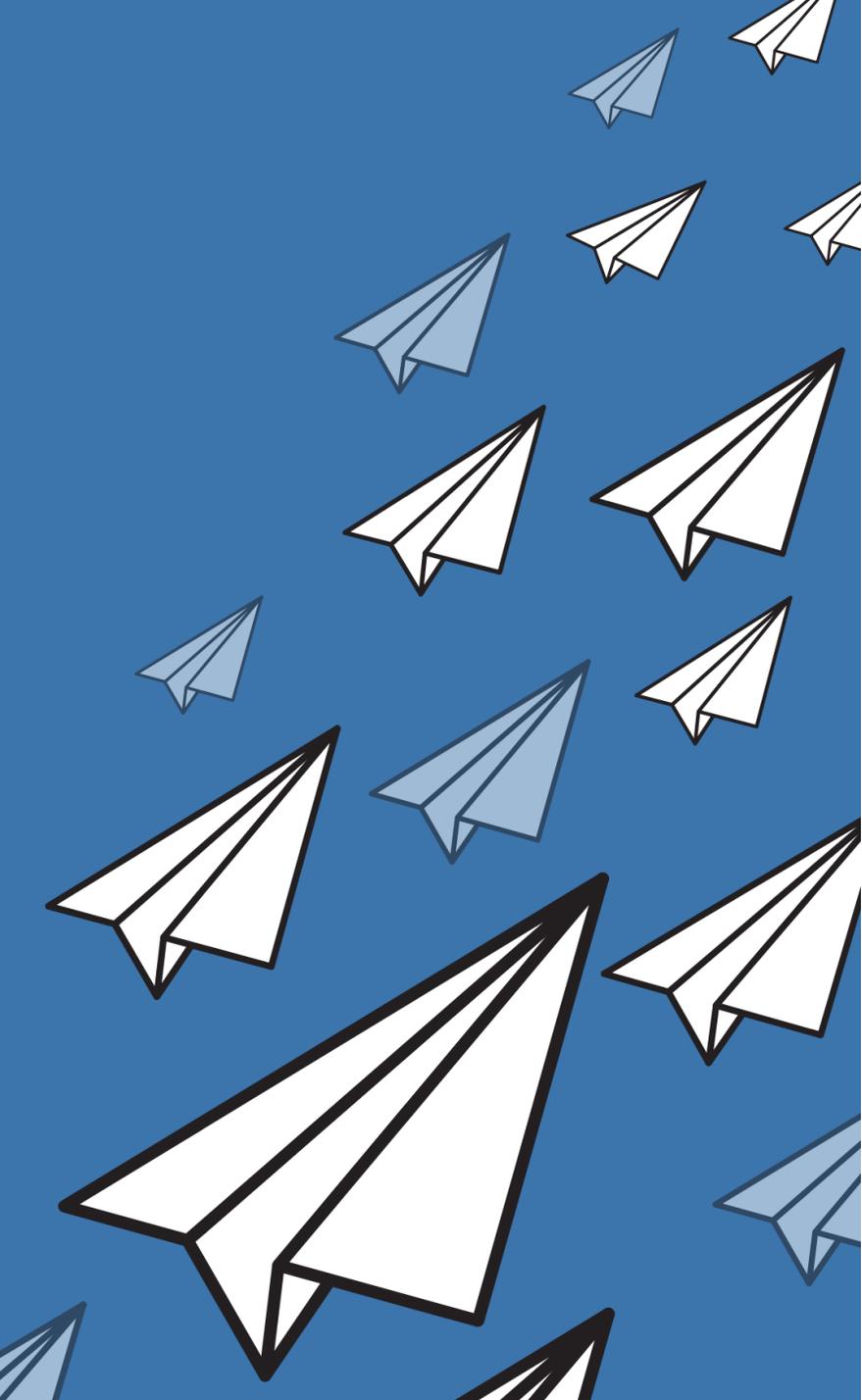


— Filiberto Nolasco Gomez, Plexippus

“My company is better because of this boot camp — and so am I.”



— Travers Johnson, Queerency



SIGNATURE PROGRAM

# TINY NEWS COLLECTIVE

**Our mission: Help bring equity into the news and information ecosystem by democratizing the process of starting sustainable local news businesses and supporting people who have been historically excluded from media and media ownership.**

In partnership with **News Catalyst**, LION announced an initiative to provide the tools, resources and commonwealth of knowledge to help people build sustainable news organizations that reflect and serve their communities.

LION has hired Mariko Lochridge as product manager to work on the onboarding and training for Tiny News entrepreneurs, and the first cohort plans to **launch in Spring 2021**.

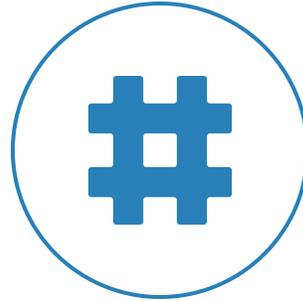
# LION BY THE NUMBERS

METRICS FOR GROWTH

## MEMBERSHIP

**We reached more current and potential independent news entrepreneurs.**

In a year, we doubled our membership, added a new tier for folks just starting out and tripled our Slack community.



339 total LION members



109% increase in memberships compared to 2019



402 members of the LION's Den Facebook group



Nearly 400 members of the News Entrepreneur Community on Slack (includes LION members and non-members)

## COMMUNICATIONS

# WE RAISED THE PROFILE OF INDEPENDENT NEWS ENTREPRENEURS AND THEIR WORK.

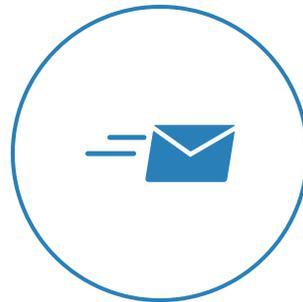
We showcased the exciting and innovative work of our members and grew our reach with new audiences.



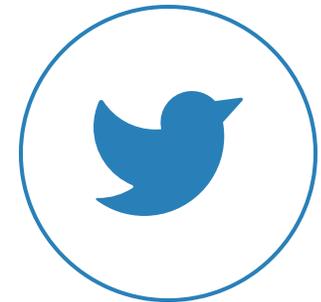
11 Medium posts promoting our members and their impact and innovation



29 volunteers judged 169 LION Awards entries — more than double last year's entries



1,422 new subscribers to the LION newsletter, a 101% increase from last year



884 new followers on Twitter, a 29% increase from last year

## REVENUE AND OPERATIONS

# WE HELPED LION BECOME A MORE FINANCIALLY SUSTAINABLE ORGANIZATION.

To help support independent news entrepreneurs, we received a combined total of \$1.2 million from these four major funders.



# HOW WE WORK

Here were two of our main revenue and operations priorities for 2020:

## Manage and grow our budget

Our senior leadership team worked to improve our financial analysis and reporting to increase transparency with our board and staff. We kept within budget on all our 2020 programs, and for our 2021 programming, we've so far raised \$1.3 million, an 82 percent increase from 2020.

## Implement new financial policies

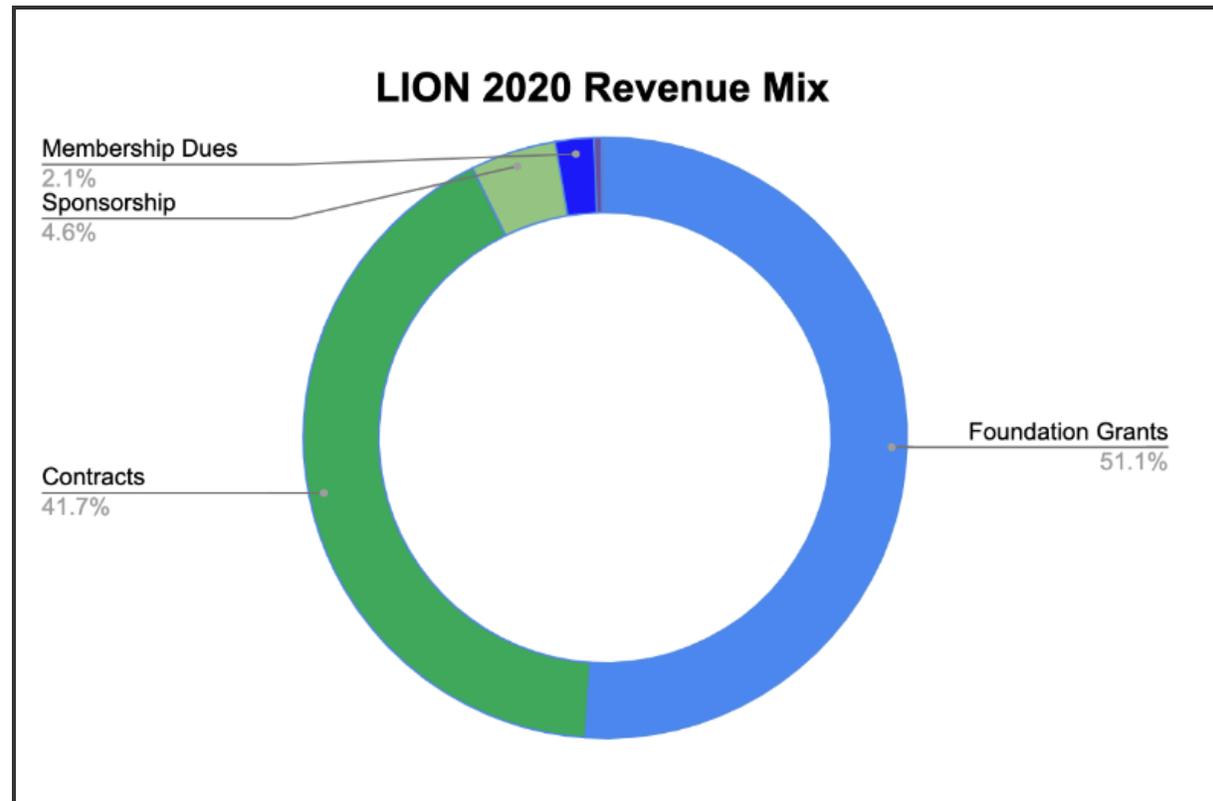
LION's finance team includes Abacus Hive, a bookkeeping firm, auditors and a CPA coach (provided by the Democracy Fund), with oversight from our board's finance committee. We'll adopt new accounting policies in early 2021 to reflect LION's financial controls.

## REVENUE AND OPERATIONS

# We diversified our funding

Cash on hand: 9 months (without restrictions)

Earned revenue: We raised \$51K in Program Sponsorship (5%)





# GET IN TOUCH



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Independent. Together.