

SOCIETY OF ENVIRONMENTAL JOURNALISTS

STRATEGIC PLAN

2020 – 2023

{This Strategic Plan, which incorporated feedback from SEJ members and other consultants, was passed by SEJ's Board of Directors Nov. 7, 2020.}

Introduction

For three decades, the Society of Environmental Journalists (SEJ) has been committed to educating the public on environmental issues through the support of journalism. Today, SEJ stands out as the largest North American membership organization created by and for journalists covering the environment. It is also the only organization that supports both environmental journalists and journalism through a comprehensive suite of programs, including:

- An annual conference, organized by and for environmental journalists, that features workshops, field trips, plenaries, panels and more
- Funding for environmental journalism, including support for beat coverage and individual story grants
- Annual awards that recognize excellence in environmental reporting across media and markets
- A year-round mentoring program open to all members
- A professional magazine, tip sheets, and other reporting tools
- Seminars, webinars, trainings, and other events
- Members-only listservs and a professional directory
- A Freedom of Information (FOI) Task Force that regularly advocates for government transparency and press freedom

These activities create a vital sense of community among members. Yet as SEJ enters its fourth decade, its member-journalists face daunting challenges, among them the collapse of the advertising revenue model that kept many traditional news outlets afloat. Hundreds of newspapers and magazines and tens of thousands of journalism jobs have vanished. The COVID-19 pandemic has further magnified the financial pressures and accelerated the transformation of the industry. This Strategic Plan is a living, dynamic document that prioritizes the organization's goals and strategies through 2023.

SEJ Mission

The mission of the Society of Environmental Journalists is to strengthen the quality, reach and viability of journalism that advances public understanding of environmental issues.

SEJ Vision

The public is informed on and engaged in environmental issues thanks to coverage by journalists who are inspired, supported and connected through participation in SEJ.

SEJ Values

- Public understanding of environmental issues
- Editorial independence and transparency
- Rigorous and unbiased reporting
- Diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) within SEJ and across news media, including reporting on environmental injustice [Note: for questions about DEI terminology used in this plan, please refer to Racial Equity Tools: <https://www.racialequitytools.org/glossary>]
- Fiscal strength and financial sustainability
- Freedom of information and open government
- Safe and sustainable working conditions in journalism and within SEJ
- Environmental sustainability as an organization
- Accurate coverage of the environment, which is critically important to the future of humanity and the planet

External Context and Trends

Political Trends

- Science itself, and environmental issues such as climate change, have become politically polarized.
- Politicians are more frequently attacking the press as an "enemy," and police are increasingly using force against and impeding the work of journalists in the field, threatening journalists' ability to do their jobs safely.
- The rise of media that doesn't meet journalistic standards muddles reality and obscures the truth.
- Public mistrust of and confusion about the role of journalism is growing.
- Support for passing and enforcing transparency laws is eroding at all levels of government.

Economic Trends

- The advertising revenue business model that sustained most news budgets during the 20th century has collapsed, taking tens of thousands of journalism jobs with it.

- There has been a sharp decline in full-time, salaried news jobs, and many journalists now work independently.
- Many journalists must take on work outside the news industry to earn a living wage.
- Foundations, nonprofit news outlets, and other institutional funders are responding with new support initiatives.
- Entrepreneurs are trying to build viable for-profit news businesses, and these new models are evolving as they struggle to succeed.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated existing challenges and created new ones that will likely persist.

Socio-Demographic Trends

- U.S. census data show that demographics are shifting toward a majority of Americans being non-white, a trend not yet reflected among journalists or the stories they produce.
- Pay for women and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) in journalism continues to lag behind pay for white men. [Note: We use the term BIPOC to acknowledge these groups' unique experiences of racism in the United States. SEJ recognizes that this language is imprecise and evolving and is committed to constant improvement.]
- Racism in newsrooms limits the career options and reporting opportunities for BIPOC journalists.
- Many communities lack access to credible, comprehensive and consistent local news and now live in what are called “news deserts.”

Socio-Technological Trends

- The dominance of print and broadcast news has given way to on-demand digital formats, which have swiftly shifted from computer screens to mobile devices.
- The proliferation of digital platforms and smart devices allows information and ideas to be produced, distributed and consumed by most anyone, displacing and circumventing traditional journalism organizations as the primary gatekeepers of news.
- Many audiences now access their news exclusively through social media, which is driven by algorithms that cater to users' existing biases, thereby increasing polarization. Algorithms can also reflect the biases of their creators, perpetuating systemic racism and spreading misinformation.
- A wide array of technologies, from smartphones to photo- and video-sharing sites, has made visual, audio, and multimedia journalism more important than ever.

SEJ Opportunities and Challenges

Opportunities

- Recognizing that climate change is among the most important stories of our time, SEJ can help journalists cover this issue as it intersects with nearly every other subject and beat.
- By making DEI key goals of its programs and operations, SEJ can help environmental journalism become a more equitable field. If SEJ's membership reflects the diversity of the general population and integrates traditionally marginalized people into the power structures throughout the organization, it can model such change and better support the career development of BIPOC journalists and those from historically and systemically underserved communities as well as the production of journalism about communities disproportionately affected by environmental issues.
- SEJ can help support environmental journalists and journalism in news deserts.
- SEJ can provide resources to help journalists produce accurate, comprehensive and ethical environmental journalism that acknowledges and overcomes implicit biases.
- In the face of severe political and personal attacks on journalists and the press, SEJ can build upon its reputation as an advocate for press freedoms, increase programming on physical and digital safety, and continue to provide a supportive journalism community.
- SEJ can help support freelancers, who currently comprise one-third of its membership, through networking, training, reporting grants, job listings and more.
- As newsroom budgets shrink, SEJ can help philanthropy support coverage of overlooked and underreported environmental topics through the Fund for Environmental Journalism (FEJ).

Challenges

- The collapse of traditional news outlets and the increasing number of freelancers active in SEJ raise the question of whether the organization's membership rules need to be altered to reflect today's economic realities.
- The difficulty in recruiting board members with finance, fundraising and governance skills inhibits implementing best practices.
- The field of environmental journalism remains predominantly white, challenging SEJ to connect with BIPOC journalists and ensure that they feel welcome to join, find value in their memberships, and become leaders in the organization.
- SEJ is well-positioned to serve North America's environmental journalists but has limited capacity to adequately serve international members.

- COVID-19 has delayed the redesign of SEJ's web presence as well as the updating of its online resources, tools and membership platform.
- Data security and online privacy present technical and policy challenges requiring greater investments in tools and training.
- SEJ's small staff and budget have not historically supported investment in significant technical and financial expertise or systems.
- As media types multiply, SEJ has to adjust programs to fit a wider array of platforms than ever before.
- When communicating with membership and the public, SEJ is challenged by how best to cut through the noise and compete for people's attention.
- The COVID-19 pandemic has forced SEJ to reconfigure the annual conference, its signature event and a major source of earned revenue. Tremendous uncertainty exists around how and when large gatherings may proceed in the future.

SEJ Long-term Impact

- Powerful, incisive news coverage that informs the public and holds corporate leaders and elected officials accountable.
- An environmental press corps composed of journalists who reflect the racial, ethnic, gender and socio-economic makeup of society at large, and equal opportunities for members of underserved communities to enter and remain in the field of journalism.
- Comprehensive coverage of environmental issues and the communities they affect, especially those that have historically been underrepresented.
- Increased public understanding of environmental issues and the importance of a healthy environment, environmental justice and a stable climate.
- Widespread public recognition of the value of environmental journalism, and an understanding of how environmental challenges intersect with a wide variety of other news beats.
- Direct financial and professional support for reporting at a time when traditional newsroom budgets are shrinking.
- Access to tools and skills needed to produce high-impact journalism on environmental issues.
- Respect for freedom of the press and the ability of journalists to do their jobs without fear of being threatened, attacked or persecuted.

SEJ Goals and Strategies

Goal # 1 ORGANIZATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: Evolve into an equitable organization that can nimbly adapt to shifting journalism and nonprofit landscapes.

Organizational Development Strategies

- Review and update policies and practices around board structure, board recruitment, personnel, and financial governance to ensure consistency, efficiency, and alignment with SEJ values.
- Clarify staff/board roles and adopt policies that encourage and enable experimentation and innovation.
- Create an environment for staff, board and members that fosters an equitable and engaged organization.
- Empower staff and support board-staff collaboration, while establishing systems to ensure decision-making is efficient and data-driven, with clear roles and lines of accountability and a defined decision-making structure, such as a RACI matrix, which ensures decisions are responsible, accountable, consulted, and informed.
- Conduct regular board self-evaluation.
- Identify priority skills for board and staff, analyze gaps in capacity prior to drafting of the annual budget and recruit/hire/train accordingly, considering DEI.
- Grow and cultivate a diverse and equitable volunteer pipeline of engaged members to participate in SEJ leadership, including, but not limited to, board service, committee work, conference planning and award juries.
- Cultivate the DEI committee to have strong representation from BIPOC members who can provide guidance on DEI initiatives and decision-making throughout the organization. [Note: SEJ recognizes that the language around DEI is imprecise and evolving and is committed to constant improvement.]
- Build and maintain strong relationships with journalism groups that serve historically underrepresented communities.
- Continue to develop and communicate SEJ's equity values and help journalists understand and address equity in their reporting.
- Provide staff and board with training on non-profit best practices.
- Seek human resources support to update personnel and hiring policies, and ensure total compensation structure is competitive in today's employment markets.
- Update SEJ succession plan.
- Seek opportunities to share program accomplishments with influential audiences, including donors and peers.

Goal #2 FUNDRAISING AND FINANCE: Maintain financial stability and program effectiveness by diversifying funding sources and building staff capacity.

Fundraising and Finance Strategies

- Prepare for the unexpected during the COVID-19 crisis as best as possible by seeking guidance and best practices from nonprofit experts.
- Diversify foundation and donor support, including securing additional sources of funding to expand the FEJ.
- Increase capacity for financial and grant management.
- Review, update and simplify fundraising guidelines and acceptable sources of revenue so editorial independence becomes the primary criterion for determining acceptable sources of revenue.
- Foster fundraising skills among board members, staff and members.
- Create an active legacy giving campaign.
- Identify and appeal to philanthropists and foundations who are newly emerging as supporters of environmental and/or journalism causes.
- Do scenario planning to be prepared to take advantage of future opportunities and address potential challenges that emerge from changing economic conditions.
- Explore alternatives to the university model for conference support.
- Set annual targets for operating reserves.
- Review endowment purpose and policy, and set targets for future growth and/or plans for disbursement.

Goal #3 MEMBERSHIP: Review and clarify membership guidelines to adapt to a changing media landscape and create a more equitable, diverse and inclusive organization.

Membership Strategies

- Maintain and diversify membership
 - Set annual priorities for specific areas of focus (beats, geography, diversity and media types and platforms) and create benchmarks for success.
 - Recruit from journalism schools and other professional journalism associations, especially those serving underrepresented communities.
- Increase member retention and program participation by creating strong platforms for member engagement.
- Regularly survey members to better understand member needs and how SEJ can meet them.
- Support BIPOC journalists and those from historically and systemically underserved communities.

- o Engage with affinity journalism groups, international journalism groups, and emerging networks, such as Environmental Journalists of Color (EJOC)
- o Encourage the use of the SEJ-Diversity listserv for networking, as well as organizing and curating relevant events and other resources.
- o Offer fee waivers that encourage diverse applicant pools for SEJ grants and awards.
- o Revise membership guidelines to foster DEI.
- o Collect demographic information on a voluntary basis to establish DEI benchmarks and assess progress over time.
- Regularly distribute communications from leadership about SEJ's mission, values and strategic priorities.

Goal # 4 PROGRAMS: Create inclusive and relevant programming that makes SEJ the go-to resource for journalists covering environmental issues.

To empower staff to act decisively in the face of changing circumstances, programming that meets as many of the following criteria as possible should be prioritized:

- Improve DEI among environmental journalists and in SEJ programs.
- Expand and improve environmental justice reporting.
- Utilize committed or available funding.
- Leverage existing SEJ expertise, programs or capacity.
- Provide an opportunity to pilot new or experimental approaches before large-scale implementation.
- Expand SEJ's reach by bringing in new members, connecting with new audiences, or forming new partnerships.
- Enhance the health and safety of journalists.

Program Strategies

- Develop and enhance opportunities for networking, training and building resources.
- Strengthen and/or expand SEJ's mentorship program.
- Continue strong advocacy for government transparency and press freedoms through the FOI Task Force and other programs.
- Facilitate increased environmental coverage by expanding the FEJ as funding, staff capacity and opportunity allow.

- Enable members to support each other in navigating sometimes-hostile government bureaucracies.
- In light of the pandemic's impacts on public health, travel, and the news industry, develop alternative methods for delivering training and building community.
- Cultivate an engaged DEI Committee that actively develops guidelines for program initiatives (grants, awards, panels) that address systemic inequities.
- Develop strategies for SEJ's social media presence that highlight work by members and amplify this work, along with all coverage on environmental issues, to broader audiences.
- Explore leveraging academic expertise and research within the organization to help support working journalists, from analyzing new media models and methods to public education about the importance of quality journalism on environmental issues.

Risks

- The COVID-19 pandemic has created financial uncertainties among members, publications and philanthropic donors that could make recruitment and fundraising more difficult.
- Ongoing pandemic-related stresses may drive unanticipated turnover of staff, who are central to SEJ's functioning.
- Medium- to long-term interest in online programs and trainings (versus in-person events) may wane.
- Failing to cultivate a new generation of engaged, long-term volunteers, staff and contractors could limit SEJ's program and leadership options.
- Political conditions may increase the risks of advocating for freedom of information and transparency or shrink the pool of member-volunteers willing or able to engage in this work.
- Not reflecting the demographic changes in the United States could erode the organization's relevance and appeal.
- A continued assault on the freedom of the press could limit the ability of journalists to provide essential information to the public.
- Trust in journalism could erode even further.

Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning

The SEJ board will develop and finalize measurable Key Performance Indicators before Jan. 2, 2021, which will guide the implementation of this plan. The SEJ Board will revisit the Strategic Plan and future KPIs on an annual basis.