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Leveraging Transformative Experiences from the Online News Association Women's Leadership Accelerator Program

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The Online News Association marked its 25th anniversary in 2024, and this study explores the experiences of 20 women identified as emerging digital news leaders who have completed the ONA Women's Leadership Accelerator by 2020. Most of the study participants were under the age of 40 when the study was completed. ONA appears to be thriving in the journalism association world at a time when some legacy journalism companies and organizations are struggling. The ONA WLA training was often described as a "transformative" and "life-changing" experience by participants who praised the power of their cohort relationships and one-on-one mentoring. Since completing the ONA WLA program, at least 60% of the 20 women in this study have been promoted, assumed additional responsibility or changed jobs including 20% who are entrepreneurs.

Keywords: Online news, digital news, women, leadership, journalism, entrepreneurship

A 2018 Kopenhagen Center Report about the role and status of women in communication industries found, “Women earn less, experience negative company cultures and still face a glass ceiling in the communications industries” (Kopenhagen & Abreu, p. 1). The Kopenhagen Center study also found “most communicators do not have digital training when beginning their positions and then do not receive that type of training in their current jobs” (Kopenhagen & Abreu, 2018, p. 13). The Kopenhagen study also showed many female respondents remain in middle management and junior level positions while males dominate senior leadership positions in the communications industries. That study involved a national survey of 1,378 people. It was released the same year that Douglas M. Branson’s book, *The Future of Tech is Female*, was published. A 2018 Pew Research Center study of U.S. Census Bureau data found that “newsroom employees are more likely to be white and male than U.S. workers overall” (Grieco, 2018, para 1). In fact, about 77% of newsroom employees were non-Hispanic white vs. 65% of U.S. workers overall, according to data from the American Community Survey (Grieco, 2018, para. 2). Geiger and Parker (2018) documented in a Pew Center report for Women’s History Month that women make up about “47% of the labor force, up from 30% in 1950” (para. 3), and the median wage for a working woman was 83 cents for every dollar earned by a man in 2016. However, Levinson (2015) found that “social media is one of the few areas of the news industry where women outnumber men in leadership positions” (para. 4) and that area is increasingly being labeled a pink ghetto because of the large number of women.

The Women’s Media Center produced “The Status of Women in U.S Media 2021,” which represents 109 studies and reports compiled from original WMC research as well as other aggregated sources including academic, industry and professional groups. The WMC also explored the media gender gap by analyzing content from prime-time broadcast and cable news, print, digital and wires. Per WMC’s President and CEO Julie Burton, the research shows:

Men dominated in every platform, receiving 57% overall of all byline and other credits. Women told only 41% of those stories. Online outlets are the most equitable while the largest disparity for women was with the wires, where they reported 36% of stories did not dominate in any coverage area. (WMC The Status of Women in the U.S Media 2021, p. 11)

That lack of diversity speaks to gender inequity and other issues in the workplace, particularly when people of color represent more than 38 percent of the U.S. population and women are at least half the population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). Those sobering statistics point to why exploring the ONA Women’s Leadership Accelerator Program is the focus of this study.

This study builds on the work done by the Kopenhagen Center, the Women’s Media Center and other scholars. This research is timely as women make up more than half of the ONA’s membership, which is celebrating its 25th anniversary in 2024. ONA brands itself as “the world’s largest digital journalism association” (ONA, n.d.) and its 2023 Retrospective reported 3,257 paid members with “over 90 partners, sponsors and funders” (Rabarrison, 2024a, para. 3). LaSharah Bunting, the current ONA CEO and executive director, is a Black female and journalist with more than 20 years of industry experience. ONA’s membership includes journalists, technologists, executives, academics and students.

In less than 25 years, it has become a major journalism advocacy organization. While ONA has been criticized for its lack of diversity by some media watchdogs and some members of national minority journalism organizations (Hill, 2010; Prince, 2018), there is little scholarly research about ONA's role in training female digital news leaders and other initiatives to diversify the makeup of the digital news industry. This study helps bridge that gap and adds to scholarship at the intersections of digital news, leadership, feminist, and critical race theories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Fluid, constant adaptation and iterative processes have become hallmarks of the Internet and World Wide Web culture, and by extension, those concepts are intertwined with the world of online or digital journalism in the 21st century. The various evolutions of the Web have disrupted journalism, news consumption, newsgathering, production, delivery processes and business models. The Pew Research Center (2018) found that more than 90% of U.S. adults get some news online via mobile device or desktop (para. 1). The impact of social media as a news source has grown dramatically in the last decade with a 2024 Pew study finding “half of U.S. adults says they get news at least sometimes from social media.” (Shearer, et al., 2024, para. 1). The 2024 Pew study involved 10,287 adult internet users and X (formerly known as Twitter) was cited as more of a news destination by adults surveyed in the United States, but the majority of users on the four major social media sites (Instagram, Facebook, TikTok and X) reported seeing news-related content on the sites.

In addition to ONA, a variety of advocacy organizations including the Radio TV Digital News Association, the National Association of Black Journalists, the National Association of Hispanic Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association, the Indigenous Journalists Association, National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association and the Women's Media Center have challenged the lack of diversity among news workers and leaders over the years. For example, the Women Media Center's “Divided 2017” study analyzed bylines, on-camera anchor and correspondent appearances plus producer credits at the major broadcast TV networks, the nation's 10 most widely circulated newspapers and online news sites of CNN, Fox News, Huffington Post and the Daily Beast. Across all platforms, the WMC researchers found men reported more news stories. The Women's Media Center (2018) study was even more discouraging as this study found women of color continue to be underrepresented in U.S. newsrooms, and the news release cites “systemic racism, the old boys' network and gender bias, among other obstacles...” (para. 9). A 2021 update from the WMC research showed:

Overall men had more bylines than women at online news sites, but some outlets reached parity. CNN.com, HuffPost and Vox had more bylines by women than men while the Los Angeles Times, MSNBC, The New York Times more reporting by men (The Status of Women in U.S Media 2021, Women's Media Center, p. 20)

Since the 1950s, there has been research (e.g., Shoemaker & Vos, 2009; White, 1950) on the role of journalists as gatekeepers, and in the digital age, that is changing, too. Gatekeeping typically refers to controlling the flow of information, but increasingly journalists are becoming gatewatchers in the digital age. Some critics (Massey & Haas, 2002; Rosen, 1999) have proposed alternative models such as public journalism to strengthen audience engagement. In a study of participatory journalism of 16 online newspapers, Domingo, et al. (2008) found the gatekeeper remained the “monopoly of professionals” (p.

Bland | Leveraging Transformative Experiences from the Online News Association Women’s Leadership Accelerator 335) and the journalistic culture “largely unchanged.” A variety of studies including Lee and Lewis (2012), and Vu (2014), suggest audiences have substantial influence on editorial practices. Vu’s work also raises a fundamental question of whether other newsroom practices, skill sets, and job titles need a more audience-centric approach to reflect the changing world. In Philip Meyer’s *The New Precision Journalism*, he posited it is no longer enough to get the information in print or on the air. He challenged journalists to “get into the receiver’s head. In short, a journalist has to be a database manager, a data processor and a data analyst” (1991, p. 1). This insight has major implications for those working in digital journalism.

There is a growing body of research on women in leadership (Jogulu and Wood, 2006; Klenke, 2017; Lennon, 2013). For example, the *Benchmarking Women’s Leadership in the United States* report released in 2013 found that “women, remain on average, less than 20% of positional leaders across 14 sectors in the United States” (Gangone, 2013, p. 6). Irby and Brown (1995), who studied female and male perceptions of effective leadership, proposed the construction of a “feminist-inclusive theory of leadership” (p. 1). Dozens of books and studies have focused specifically on women in news leadership roles including Byerly and Ross (2006), Everbach (2006), Nicholson, et al. (2009). While there has been some progress over the last century, there certainly is not parity in leadership roles for the most part.

Riordan and Meehan (2002) argued that feminists and political economy scholars share an interest in power, and “all media structures, agent, processes and expression find their *raison d’être* in relationships shaped by sex and money” (p. x). In line with that thinking, Steeves and Wasko (2002) called for a “friendly alliance” between feminist and political economy theorists as “both groups promote theory and activism addressing distributions of power and patterns of inequality and oppression in society” (p. 16). This is important because of the increasing consolidation by global conglomerates, investment partnerships and the rise of media barons in Silicon Valley. Bell and Owen (2017) found that companies such as Google, Facebook, Twitter and Snapchat have “evolved beyond their role as distribution channels, and now control what audiences see and who gets paid for their attention, and even what format and type of journalism flourishes” (para. 1) This consolidation and control are detrimental to democracy and journalism because that can lead to less human interaction, inhibit socialization skills, and ultimately that leads to fewer voices shaping the news.

Critical race theory scholars such as Crenshaw (1995) as well as Delgado and Stefanic (2001) posit that racism is often institutional and advances the interests of white elites. CRT will be one of the lenses used in this study as Wilson and Gutierrez (1995) predicted that racial minorities “will probably take part in the news technologies more as employees or users, rather than as owners or developers of the news media” (p. 241). Furthermore, it’s noteworthy that a Reuters Institute Study for Journalism study of race and leadership involving 100 online and offline news outlets in five markets across four continents showed “people of colour are significantly under-represented and white people are significantly over-represented, relative to their share of the general population” in the markets studied over a four-year period (Eddy, et al. 2023).

Over the last two decades, there has been an explosion in journalism subspecialties ranging from computational to interactive journalism (Usher, 2016). This digital explosion in access and platforms is significant because one of the fundamental theoretical issues and research opportunities is determining which subspecialties will resonate with audiences and how the workforce will adapt or evolve to meet those needs.

Primary research questions for this qualitative study:

- RQ1: What is the history, mission and structure of the ONA Women’s Leadership Accelerator?
- RQ2: How effective do study participants think the ONA WLA training is, and how have they applied what they have learned to their work in online/digital news?
- RQ3: What critical skills do study participants think are needed to thrive in digital news as well as barriers and opportunities in digital news leadership?

METHODS

Creswell (2013) identified five approaches in *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design*, notably narrative, phenomenological, grounded theory, ethnographic and case study. The grounded theory approach was selected because it “attempts to derive a general, abstract theory of a process, action or interaction grounded in the views of participants in a study” (Creswell, 2013, p. 14). The use of grounded theory is important because the goal is to better understand the roles, experiences and views of female emerging digital news leaders who have participated in the WLA.

Using contact information from ONA news releases and assistance from ONA staff, a snowball sample technique was employed for this study. Emails were sent to women who participated in the ONA WLA asking them to participate in interviews about the digital news industry and their experiences. The emails were followed up with phone calls to the 20 women who agreed to share their experiences by providing semi-structured interviews for this study, and most interviews were about an hour long. Audio interviews were recorded with 18 study participants through Audacity, and as a last resort email interviews were conducted with two participants between 2019 and early 2020. Each of the 20 study participants were assigned pseudonyms as they expressed concerns that using their names could jeopardize their career and employment opportunities. The use of pseudonyms encouraged study participants to be candid about their workplace experiences during a time when there is a seismic shift in the industry (Bell & Owen, 2017) and increasing media consolidation. Additional insights about ONA’s history were gathered via its website, bylaws, strategic plan and interviews with several ONA founders and the leadership team members since its inception in 1999 to early 2020 to gain more insight about the organization and its impact on the rapidly changing industry to supplement the interviews with the 20 study participants.

FINDINGS

An ONA survey of 2018 conference attendees showed 74% of the respondents identified as white and 26% as nonwhite (Prince, 2018). Several years before that data was released, ONA partnered with the Poynter Institute in 2015 to create the Poynter Leadership Academy for Women in Media, a week-long management training program targeting women. The Poynter program has graduated more than 550 women as of 2023, and a survey of the Poynter Leadership Academy for Women in Media alumni over an eight-year period showed 60% took on new or expanded leadership roles and 75% reported more confidence in themselves and the industry (Poynter, 2023). ONA branched out with the year-long Women’s Leadership Accelerator (WLA) program starting in 2017. The ONA WLA typically involves a week-long immersive program focused on leadership and management issues, and more than 150 women (or about 25 per year) have participated in the ONA WLA since 2017 from an applicant pool that has ranged from about 300 to 500 applicants a year. Each cohort gets additional coaching

Bland | Leveraging Transformative Experiences from the Online News Association Women’s Leadership Accelerator throughout the year, and the WLA experience culminates with a workshop during the ONA Annual Conference. It is noteworthy that ONA announced in April 2024 that it acquired Digital Women Leaders (DWL), an online mentorship resource founded by Katie Hawkins-Gaar in 2018, that has “facilitated thousands of one-on-one mentoring conversations” and has more than 150 leaders volunteering their expertise on topics “ranging from boosting community engagement to big decisions like switching career plans.” (Rabarison, 2024b, para. 2). DWL is beyond the scope of this study and could be a future line of research.

Aside from the fact that they are all females with college degrees, ONA Women’s Leadership Accelerator graduates in the study have at least five years of experience navigating what one study participant described as the digital Wild West in news organizations. The work lives and experiences of the emerging digital women news leaders in this study vary greatly depending on their roles, backgrounds and work environments as their organizations vary from startups of one person to those working for multinational corporations managing global news brands. Interviews with 20 women in the study show their lived experiences involve many twists, turns and pathways to move forward.

Four key themes that emerged from the interviews were the power of the cohort, the freedom to create the future while being one’s authentic self, the quest for survival in an industry that is changing rapidly and the power of being an entrepreneur. Seventeen (or 85%) of the 20 ONA WLA alums in the study work in the United States, and three (or about 15%) work outside of the United States and yet they all praised the value of the ONA WLA cohort. This speaks to the global nature of the Internet, digital work and ONA’s growing global impact. Of the 20 women participating in this study, at least 55% worked for organizations whose roots are based in legacy print or broadcast media, 20% have become entrepreneurs, and the remainder are working in digital native companies or firms related to the industry. This suggests that digital news jobs are becoming a greater part of legacy media newsrooms. At least 60% of those interviewed have been promoted, changed jobs and/or assumed additional responsibility since completing the ONA WLA. Most of the 20 women in the study supervised at least one direct report, but none said they supervised more than 12 direct reports in 2019. Three U.S.-based entrepreneurs work with a variety of contractors and clients, and the entrepreneurs had no full-time employees when interviewed in the United States. However, the leader of the startup outside of the U.S. had 10 people on staff. Overall, the study group’s influence, in many cases, impacted millions of people as women interviewed have worked on projects on at least five continents – North America, South America, Africa, Asia and Europe. Most of the women worked in for-profit enterprises and very few worked for nonprofit organizations. There was not a noticeable difference between those working for nonprofits vs. for-profit companies in describing their work environments. Had it not been for the support they received from the ONA WLA, several study participants said they would likely have left their organizations because of a lack of support or feelings of isolation in their workplaces. Lack of inclusion is a “perpetual issue,” said Betty.

As for pay, interviews indicated that more than half of the emerging digital women news leaders in this study earn \$75,000 or more a year and most are under the age of 40. This salary information is significant as it suggests that some emerging digital women news leaders are moving beyond the pink ghetto stereotype. However, it is important to note most of the women who agreed to participate in this study live and work in major metro markets on the East and West coasts of the United States with higher living costs, and three live outside the United States. In the digital age, traditional

geographical work boundaries are less important, particularly with those who work remotely or manage remote workers.

DISCUSSION

The Power of the Cohort and Freedom to Create

The women in the study group consistently said lessons from the ONA WLA helped them grow professionally and personally. “I feel more empowered, self-love and confident,” said Debbie, who works on the East Coast. The year-long program “turns it from a conference to a cohort,” said Opal, who also worked on the East Coast. She said the first week “was like grad school with five to six intense classes. Your brain is so full” and “you get to inject product thinking” in the workplace.

Opal said she loved the “freedom” of her job that her ONA WLA network helped her find. This networking benefit is part of what the women call “the cohort.” At least two emerging digital news leaders said they created their own job descriptions. For example, Frances, said, “There is no traditional path to digital, and I’m creating it” at her company in the Western United States. She has worked at the company more than a decade and created her path into digital news after she told her editor, “Everybody knows our social media sucks. You should let me run the social media account. I wrote that job description and it was an immediate success.” As for what her work life looks like, she replied, “I spend just as much time thinking about revenue as editorial,” and she supervises a salesperson. As for a typical week, “I’m all over the place” in that she is a content editor who directs visuals, writes grants and creates advertising copy, too. “Leading digital is less about production,” said Frances. “It’s more about guiding the brand, which is a marketing word that journalists don’t like.” She added that her team is “super fluent” on social media and video.

Most of the women interviewed said the variety in their jobs and their thirst for continuous learning drive part of the appeal for working in digital news. In the last 20 years, there has been an explosion of new roles and job titles such as engagement editor, community manager, product manager, newsroom developer, social media manager, video producer, search engine optimization editor and UX designer. UX refers to user experience, and UX designers typically focus on the user experience as they research, test and design sites to make them more user-friendly. Opal said her job includes supervising a dozen people, and “it spans from helping reporters and editors to thinking through the packaging of their stories to headline writing.”

Patrice succinctly summarized her role at a major East Coast legacy news organization in the passage that follows:

I optimize stories for web/search/mobile and social, strategize and propose story ideas, analyze traffic and identify trends to understand readers’ behavior, identify and solve workflow issues, help plan digital strategy and special coverage, particularly live coverage and I coordinate with other sections.

Kenya, another emerging digital news leader, said working in the digital space is “not like a clear career trajectory like going from reporter to editor. It’s harder to figure out the next steps.” She added, “A lot of audience work you learn on the job.” As for her typical week, every day is different. She supervises an “intercontinental” team of 10. Kenya said she has never met “four people on my team” in

Bland | Leveraging Transformative Experiences from the Online News Association Women's Leadership Accelerator person, because they work outside of the United States. She uses Google hangouts and Slack for meetings and check-ins. She uses Chartbeat analytics, helps the team figure out when to do A/B testing, helps figure out what new newsletters should be rolled out, what should be posted to Facebook, Twitter and how often as well as how to manage the constant flow of user-generated content.

Mary, another emerging digital news leader in Europe, said, "When you work for a small company or remotely, you often have to do more than what's in your job description." Her counsel? Don't get overwhelmed. "There's always something else to do and something else to fix," Mary added. She shared ONA WLA has helped her with goal setting, measuring results and deciding what assignments to take on. She added that she values working in an environment dominated by women because they "pay attention to work-life balance," and not just profits.

Another emerging digital news leader who has the title of editor and works in a digital native organization said, "What I do now isn't quite news" in the traditional sense since her work isn't responding in the 24/7 news cycle, and she works with two different teams on story development and projects that may take nine weeks or more to produce for a company known for its podcasts. Queen captured the spirit of what at least a fourth of the study participants experienced when she said one of the biggest challenges is "people not understanding what I do and people asking is that really journalism?" since much of her work is focused on building audience and innovation. She stressed the importance of understanding search engine optimization. "It's not very sexy, but it is needed," said Queen, who taught herself coding and JavaScript. She also encouraged building more bridges with data scientists in newsrooms because they can mine data, analyze trends and help with product development.

Abby, another emerging digital news leader who wrote her own job description, said many traditional news workers do not understand the need for a person with market research and a business background. She said her job is to bridge the gap between audience development and audience engagement. She's the person who serves as a liaison between the sales and marketing team, developing partnerships, planning long-term and asking questions about the return on the investment and legal/business implications of various deals. She shared that negotiation skills acquired during ONA WLA helped her negotiate working remotely. Kenya, another ONA WLA alumna who has been promoted since she completed the program, said, "ONA gave me the confidence to make the transition." Besides negotiating a raise in compensation, "I negotiated some flexibility, the title I wanted," she said. The big lessons: Don't sell yourself short; do your homework; and remember there is no harm in asking for what you want.

The Quest for Survival

While all expressed gratitude for the ONA WLA opportunities and said it has equipped them better navigate work and life, some expressed concern about challenges facing the industry. Opal, who changed companies and has been promoted since participating in the program, acknowledged there has been "some degree of organizational trauma" in her company due to downsizing and consolidation. The Pew Research Center has documented a 26% drop or a loss of about 29,000 newsroom jobs representing newspaper, broadcast outlets and "other information services" including digital news outlets between 2008 and 2020 in the United States (Walker, 2021, para. 2) with the greatest decline in newspapers and the greatest growth in the digital-native news sector. Specifically, Pew analysts reported, "Newspaper newsroom employment fell 57% between 2009 and 2020, from roughly 71,000 jobs to about 31,000. At the same time, the number of digital-native newsroom employees rose 144% from 7,400 workers in 2008 to about 18,000 in 2020." (Walker, 202, para. 4)

At least three of the study participants said their companies are looking at transitioning to a nonprofit model, and most are not high enough in the organization to call those shots. Louise, who lives outside the United States, said, “My biggest concern is having our organization survive.” In her role, she stressed that survival isn’t just about producing news; it also involves managing the organization’s finances so that salaries are paid, the audience grows and the business continues to function.

Queen, an emerging digital news leader who worked on the East Coast, said her publisher is “not digitally savvy,” and many of those who work within legacy media organizations acknowledge the industry does not have a stellar record in embracing change. “Some have not acknowledged the newspapers are a business in decline, and you have to ramp up growth businesses at the same time,” said Queen. “One of our big problems is we’re constantly reacting, and what gets lost is performance management.”

Fifteen of the 20 women in the study group work in companies where they supervise or manage others. However, Ida was the only woman working as a supervisor or manager in a company to describe her work culture as “kind” in that “anyone can question what management is doing.” However, Ida also said the “the idea of managing up was something I’d never heard of” before the ONA WLA training. She also said the concept of leading sideways or cultivating relationships and working with your peers to effect change also was a big takeaway from the ONA WLA. Ida said connections made because of her ONA experience led to her participating in a solutions journalism project in another region.

Eva, another ONA WLA alumna, shared she has changed jobs at least three times and survived three layoffs in three years. “Careers are not linear,” she said. Luckily, she has always found another job and was working in a major East Coast city in January 2020. She said the work environment/culture can be fierce in digital media startups. “People tend to throw others under the bus,” said Eva. She added her experience was that digital culture tends to give the “side eye to people who leave at 5” p.m. Queen said, “A lot of newsrooms don’t give a s--- about culture...What do they say culture eats strategy for breakfast?” She added more focus needs to be on strategy, accountability and transparency in newsrooms overall.

The Power of Entrepreneurship

After working in corporations, four ONA WLA alums (or 20% of study participants) interviewed had taken the entrepreneurial route and launched journalism-related business ventures, including one outside of the United States. Being an entrepreneur is the “hardest, most enriching two years of my professional life,” said Betty, an entrepreneur who is based on the East Coast. She has worked 20 years in a variety of newsrooms before becoming CEO of her own digital media company. Betty said she has learned a lot by trial and error. “I worked 16 hours a day for 18 months and didn’t pay myself,” and still works six days a week because she loves creating and building a brighter future for her family. While she is the only full-time employee of her digital media company, she works with 30 contractors and collaborators in Europe and South America. She said one of her proudest moments was making \$130,000 in payouts to contributors. The ONA WLA experience has helped her with the design thinking process and discerning her leadership style. One of the most useful exercises was helping define whether her dominant leadership style was as a collaborator, pilot, provider, producer or composer. She described herself as a composer/producer and credited ONA WLA with expanding and deepening her networks plus improving her time management skills.

Nora, another ONA WLA alumna, has embraced the freelance economy after leaving a toxic workplace, and her entrepreneurial journey has taken her to three different continents. "Having your own business allows you to do what you want when you want," she said. "I've learned from every newsroom I've been in," said Nora. She shared the ONA WLA has become like family and helped her expand her network as she has spent more time with spreadsheets, invoicing, tracking expenses and "building a sales pipeline."

Robin, another entrepreneur with multiple college degrees and the owner of other non-journalism related businesses, launched a startup digital media and communications company with 10 people on staff outside of the United States since completing the ONA WLA. Robin said securing and managing resources are ongoing challenges. Starting a company can "take a long time" given the paperwork and expenses, she said. Luckily, Robin said her team found a pro bono lawyer to help, but her country does not have "the habit" of supporting media or journalistic projects. In addition to operating as the CEO, she is responsible for editorial design, coordination of new projects and editing content of her startup.

It is noteworthy that all four of the entrepreneurs in the study group have strong journalism backgrounds. The fourth entrepreneur, identified by the pseudonym Tina, also is a software engineer who has leveraged ideas percolating from her work in the industry into a business. Tina's niche is different from the other three described above in that she works at the intersection of technology and journalism with news teams on collaboration and publishing across multiple platforms. Much of her business focuses on writing and consulting projects. She said the cohort "helps me stay connected" at a time when "the industry is as unpredictable as we know it can be." Tina has worked with at least two dozen clients, and she stressed the importance of being "honest with yourself" about what it means to be in this field and what you want to do and the kind of person you want to be. The four entrepreneurs and those with journalism backgrounds all stressed the importance of having a strong compass for journalism, ethics, integrity and responsiveness to navigate career options in the digital news space.

Critical Skills to Survive and Thrive in Digital News

Flexibility, adaptability, continuous learning and experimentation were consistently identified as the top critical skills needed to survive and thrive in digital news by female emerging digital news leaders in the study group, and they said their ONA WLA experiences have helped them further develop these skills. "It's not about knowing everything. It's about being willing to learn anything," said Tina, who has expanded her skill sets to include being a web designer and learning programming tools. She is often up at 5 a.m. on the West Coast to work with collaborators on the East Coast. Managing change, the ability to deal with ambiguity and work on a variety of teams also are valued. "One person working alone cannot get very far," said one ONA WLA alumna, as she and others stressed speed and agility are needed in the digital news environment. Nora, an entrepreneur, added, "There is no point B, just an evolution. There is no end to the journey. You need to be open to learning." Eva, who spoke earlier of the need for resiliency, stressed the importance of having a "willingness to try different ways to tell stories, to try new models, new stories new topics, new ways to engage with audiences." She added that being hardworking and competitive as well as valuing distribution, presentation and the audience experience are also paramount. "You can have the best journalism story in the world, but if you don't have the skills to leverage the platform of distribution...then you won't have the impact you should have," said Eva.

Opal stressed the importance of making "the right prioritizations to get journalism to audience members. It is no longer OK for someone in the newsroom to not understand how business works." In

that same vein, at least six women in the study stressed the importance of understanding target audiences and market segmentation. Queen said every journalist needs to be comfortable with metrics such as subscribers, conversion rates for turning readers into subscribers, time on site, returning visitors, engagement rates, bounce rates and page views.

Patrice, an alumna who has worked in digital news organizations in the United States, Europe and Central America, shared she learned valuable lessons when a digital native venture ended outside of the United States in 2009 because of a “lack of a sustainable model.” She added, “doing a good job does not guarantee success or survival anymore...Advertising, I learned would not save journalism, and from now on journalists would be also responsible to come up with new ways to fund our work.”

Just as flexibility, adaptability and continuous learning are important for those working in digital news, those same words popped up often when asked about critical skill sets needed for digital news leadership. Another top theme that emerged was the importance of communication with a great appreciation for more collaboration, empathy, compassion, humility and clarity of expectations. In the 21st century, “so many people come into news management with no training,” said Queen. “Just because you’re a good reporter doesn’t mean you’ll be a good editor, and just because you’re a good editor doesn’t mean you’ll be a good manager.” She and others stressed the importance of developing people skills, listening, practicing conflict management plus giving meaningful and specific feedback.

Louise, who worked outside of the United States, said the ONA WLA experience taught her every meeting should have a purpose, outcome and process. Speaking of processes, Queen said, digital news leaders must understand “the product development process, including ideation, scope, making the business case, financial analysis, product launch and life cycle.” Tina said, a leader must “recognize when you need to serve” and have the ability to discern when you need to lead because they need direction, an advocate or someone pushing.

Several also spoke about the importance of self-care and reflection. “If you need stability (and clarity to thrive, then seek out those environments,” said Mary, who worked in Europe. Heidi, who worked in the Western United States, added, “leadership isn’t about titles. It’s about responsibility.”

As they reflected on the ONA WLA program, participant identified two key themes to improve the ONA WLA training: more practice time for difficult conversations and more training on money issues ranging from sustainable revenue models to negotiating compensation. Stella also said there needs to be more emphasis on ethics, race and how women of color are treated differently than white women. Queen suggested there be a session on 20 key financial concepts ranging from accrual accounting to profit and loss statements. The section that follows will focus on barriers and opportunities facing the digital news industry identified by study participants.

Barriers and Opportunities

While most of the study participants said they enjoy the variety in their work lives, two expressed concerns about the potential for burnout. A consistent key barrier facing the digital news industry is the reality that it remains a “male dominated-industry with boys at the top,” said Stella, who worked at a major digital native news company on the East Coast. Study participants – regardless of race or geographic locations -- voiced concerns about the digital news industry suffering from a lack of inclusion as well as the tension between the current stagnation in the industry vs. the perception that there will be a return to stability. Patrice said legacy structures often “marginalize women, people of color and other minorities.” Several spoke of navigating through sexist and toxic work environments

Bland | Leveraging Transformative Experiences from the Online News Association Women's Leadership Accelerator over the last decade. For example, Queen ultimately left a global, multi-platform company after she was told she was "too outspoken. It was the first time that being a woman was an issue." Nora said she knew she had to leave a multinational news company after she learned "I was hated because I was a woman of color. I was told to exercise forgiveness for patterns of sexual harassment." Patrice said more people need to pay attention to the "subtle dynamics" of sexism by watching how tasks are distributed and who often gets the plum assignments. Eva, who worked at a broadcast network and has about five years of experience in digital startups, said "I don't know if gender is a barrier," but "bosses are always men... There are more women in leadership positions, but they're U.S. centric and that means we're missing out on stories about China, Russia or Africa because newsrooms leaders are Americans." Queen said she feared the diversity gap could be a "losing battle" in that "you can bring diverse candidates, but if there's no one who understands diversity then it won't be properly managed." Queen's comments suggest how complicated managing diversity issues can be and the lack of understanding of intersectionality. For example, it is important that supervisors, managers and leaders understand that the experiences of a white female can be very different than a Black female and it's not just about race. When you add in factors such as socioeconomic, family history, life experiences and environmental pathways there is much room to make inaccurate assumptions.

Within digital news organizations, there is perception that people with digital profiles, particularly in big legacy organizations, haven't necessarily acquired full editorial power, several participants said. "We might be in charge of silos (social media accounts, analytic, video, interactives, visual storytelling), but our digital competencies haven't transcended the whole assignment process," said one emerging digital news leader.

A fourth of the study participants expressed concerns about sustainable business models and working in the news industry where more than 3,100 job cuts were documented by the *Columbia Journalism Review* in 2019 alone (CJR). "It's scary to be in a career you don't know if it'll be around in 20 years," said Gina, who worked on the East Coast. Another ONA WLA alumna identified as Ida said, "The landscape is terrifying... We're trying to forge a new model and it's hard... There's always a sense of insecurity."

Entrepreneur Betty pointed out that inequity in funding of startups remains an issue in that "women only get 2% of VC (venture capital) funding." This reflects the hegemony in inequity that female startups continue to face. Entrepreneur Tina spoke about the stages of grieving and her concern that many in the news industry have not reached a "level of acceptance yet that that things are different and are going to stay very different." Among some news leaders, there is a perception that there will be a "return to stability. If we just figure this ad thing out. If we just figure out AI (artificial intelligence) or whatever else it is they think is going to save us," said Tina. "They think this is temporary and that there is going to be some leveled out sense of normalcy, and I don't agree that's likely. If we do reach a level of stability, it'll look so different than what we had in the past." Tina added, "We are not going to build new kinds of leaders if we keep training women as leaders using traditional masculine leadership as the template... If one more person tells me I need to have a really firm handshake, I'm going to scream."

Another potential barrier that Tina discussed was the concern that the professionalization of the journalism industry has led to an obsession with degrees and tools by some in the industry. In some cases, "if you can't use a camera this way or an audio recorder or a computer, then you're not even getting in the door," she said, and called for a paradigm shift so that the focus isn't so much on tools and more on understanding truth, reality and accountability.

The barriers cited by the ONA WLA study participants can be flipped and seen as opportunities, some study participants said. For example, the lack of inclusion is an opportunity to make digital news operations more inclusive. Study participants consistently said there needs to be more programs like ONA WLA to expand and diversify digital news leadership training to reach more potential women who could benefit beyond the ONA WLA cohorts. ONA WLA is “amazing, but it only takes about 25 a year. How about making it 100?” asked Mary. ONA appears to be listening and taking action. In addition to acquiring the Digital Women Leaders website recently, ONA hosted an Executive Women Leaders Salon for off-the record conversations to discuss topics such as organizational culture and team building strategies. In January 2020, ONA South Florida hosted a full-day women’s pop-up leadership workshop targeting women in small and local markets.

The need for more outreach and engagement with those working in higher education also were themes that emerged as a major opportunity. For example, Patrice, who has taught at university, said more journalism schools need to “recruit instructors from digital firms and news outlets to provide current frameworks and processes.” Stella, who turned an unpaid internship into more than a decade career in digital news, said there needs to be more emphasis on video editing, social media publishing and “things like how to livestream from phone for an event.” She also called for an “more honest conversation” about the ad industry, the impact of Google and Facebook as well as misinformation/disinformation. Opal, who once managed a college newsroom of 100 and has a journalism degree, expressed concern that some journalism schools are “failing” to embrace digital journalism. For example, she said there needs to be more classes with professionals experienced in topics such as virtual reality, live tweets, experimentation, mobile and data analysis. Louise, who works outside of the United States, said students need to be more aware of the business side and how it works. “We’re in a whole new age when business models are changing,” she said.

CONCLUSION

Women in the study group consistently praised the power of the cohort, support networks and one-on-one mentoring they received from ONA WLA. In addition to the immersive shared training experience, which included sessions covering topics ranging from identifying your leadership style to design thinking, study participants said social media tools such as Whatsapp and a Slack Channel ensure they stay connected and maintain virtual networks well beyond the annual ONA Conference and training year. A limitation of this study is the small sample size. “More” is the single word that many of the participants used to describe what is needed to accelerate access and expand leadership opportunities for emerging digital women news leaders. More funders and allies, both male and female, need to be recruited to move the dial exponentially in addressing workforce needs. The more diverse and inclusive these programs are, the better the pipelines will become in reflecting the world’s growing diversity. Journalism educators also have a role to play as several study participants called for more curriculum reform so that more college graduates have stronger soft skills such as teamwork as well as human-centered design thinking, entrepreneurial thinking, multimedia storytelling, digital analytics, audience engagement, product development, basic business acumen and social media engagement in their tool kits.

The backlash the industry has received in light of the #MeToo movement and some of the experiences shared by women in this study are evidence that concerns about gender inequity, sexism and

Bland | Leveraging Transformative Experiences from the Online News Association Women’s Leadership Accelerator racism in the workplace still exist. Ultimately, the long-term impact of the program may take a decade or longer to measure as future research could track the career trajectories, positions and salaries of cohort members over the next few decades. Also, there is wisdom from mentoring across generations and opportunities for more collaboration among the various associations working to diversify the industry. For example, simply promoting the ONA WLA opportunities to members in other groups such as the Society of Professional Journalists, the Association for Women in Communications or one of the minority journalism organizations could ultimately be a greater good to help more women understand opportunities in the digital news industry.

Information gathered in this qualitative study is not generalizable to all ONA members or all women who have participated in the ONA WLA. Although ONA’s recent acquisition of the digitalwomenleaders.com website is beyond the scope of this study, that online mentoring resource could be another future research line of inquiry to better understand emerging issues in digital journalism. How female salaries compared with males doing the same jobs was beyond the scope of this study, and that also could be another future study.

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