



FOUNDATION
Limelight

Annual report 2024



Supporting a strong and free
information ecosystem
in the digital age



Contents

1. Foreword	6
2. About Limelight Foundation	8
Vision Mission Activities Geographic scope	8
In numbers	9
How we work	10
> Interview Hans Laroës and John Caspers, incoming and outgoing chairpersons of the Limelight Board	14
3. Who we support	18
Priority areas: Production and distribution of independent, quality information Infrastructure Enabling environment	18
Meet our grantees	21
> Interview Tamás Bodoky, founder and editor-in-chief of Atlátszó	23
> Interview Paul Radu, head of innovation at OCCRP	28
> Interview Carlos Gaio, CEO Media Defence	32
> Interview Katya Viadziorchyk, head of fundraising and advocacy, AI Forensics	38
4. Looking ahead	44
Strategy 2025 – 2028	44
5. Who we are	50
Board	50
Team	50
Patrons	52
> Op-ed Hans Laroës, chair of the Limelight Board	54
6. Financial information	56
7. Our grantee partners in 2024	57

Cover photo: © Lipskiy / Shutterstock.com

Alinda Vermeer - executive director, Limelight Foundation

1. Foreword

It is March 2021. The pandemic is still ongoing but as vaccines become available, there is a sense of light at the end of the tunnel. Limelight Foundation is founded by John Caspers and Merel Borger. Its mission: to strengthen the information ecosystem so that independent, trustworthy information is available at this important time.

A spark of light for the public interest journalism sector, whose survival has long been threatened by financial uncertainty. Before the year came to an end, Limelight Foundation's grant-making programme was a fact and the first nine donations were made.

Three years later, at the end of 2024, Limelight Foundation had made 87 donations and had 51 active partnerships. We have doubled our annual budget, thanks to the fantastic support of the Hartwig Foundation. Limelight's team has grown and its expertise has been built.

We now support a wide range of organisations that each contribute to our mission in their own way: from large cross-border investigative networks to small non-profit newsrooms operating across Europe, and from organisations that investigate algorithms to those that hold large tech companies to account when they break EU law. While the approach of each grantee partner differs, what unites them is the outstanding quality of their work. Complementing and strengthening each other's work, the profound impact they achieve – often with modest budgets – is truly remarkable. However, the challenges to the information ecosystem that existed in 2021 have become

even more pressing. A handful of tech companies have become the gatekeepers of the platforms people use to get their daily news. They are driven by profit rather than a commitment to preserve the elements essential to a healthy information ecosystem: access to information, transparency, privacy, free expression, and fair regulation of technology.

“Now more than ever, we want people to be able to participate fully in democratic processes and hold those in power to account.”



© Anne van Zantwijk

of Service attacks, hacking, website blocking, spyware infections, etc.). In addition, violence against journalists is more common in Europe than often assumed and is fuelled by a climate of impunity and hostility.

Looking ahead, the picture is bleak. At the time of writing, the investigative journalism sector in many parts of the world has lost all foreign assistance from the US government, which was its largest funder. This has abruptly left a gap of \$268 million in funding which the US had allocated to support independent media and the free flow of information in 2025 alone. In previous years, the US provided funding to hundreds of independent news outlets and thousands of journalists. Meta's decision to abandon its third-party fact-checking programme outside of the EU not only affects the quality of information available, but cuts off another source of income for independent media. At the same time, some philanthropic foundations are reducing their contributions or pulling out of funding journalism entirely.

Many public interest newsrooms and civil society organisations may not survive unless there is a drastic increase in funding for this critical component of our democracies.

We at Limelight Foundation have therefore formulated an ambitious strategy for the next four years. We have clarified our priorities, focusing on two areas: Public Interest Journalism, and Tech and the Information Ecosystem. We aim to scale up the support that we provide across both areas. But we cannot do this alone. In the coming years, we are on a mission to build a community of likeminded funders who recognize the critical importance

to society of a healthy information ecosystem. We are honored that six incredible patrons are joining forces with us on this mission: Princess Mabel van Oranje-Nassau, Jimmy Wales, Maria Ressa, Olga Rudenko, Matthew Caruana-Galizia and Marietje Schaake. We are grateful to our funder and outgoing chair of the board, John Caspers, who continues to promote our aims and help grow our funder community.

What will not change over the next four years is our commitment to our vision of a healthy information ecosystem, in which reliable and pluralistic information can be produced and distributed freely, and in which this information is accessible to everyone. Now

“Public interest journalism is still under threat from all angles.”

more than ever, we want people to be able to participate fully in democratic processes and hold those in power to account. Now more than ever, we need technology to buttress rather than obstruct these functions of the information ecosystem.

What also remains unchanged is our belief in an ecosystem approach to funding, supporting organisations that take many different approaches to address the same problem through multi-year funding. Interviews in this report with four journalism and civil society organisations shed light on how that ecosystem works in practice, how multi-year funding helps grantee partners continue their vital work, and how they support each other, build connections, and share knowledge.

2025 is already proving to be exceptionally difficult year. But reading these stories of resilience, perseverance and creativity, I firmly believe that with sufficient support, our grantee partners can tip the balance in the right direction.

2. About Limelight Foundation

Vision

We envision a healthy information ecosystem in which reliable and pluralistic information can be produced and distributed freely, and in which this information is accessible to everyone. This will enable people to fully participate in democratic processes and hold those in power to account. We want technology to support rather than hinder these functions of the information ecosystem.

Mission

We support public interest journalism and organisations that ensure that technologies strengthen the information ecosystem.



© Leo Patrizi / iStock

Activities

We fund journalism and organisations that work on a broad range of topics that are relevant to the health of the information ecosystem. Occasionally, we provide non-financial support where our network or expertise can add value, for instance by connecting grantee partners.

We also raise awareness of the importance of our mission with other funders, by actively participating in donor networks and partnering with other foundations where relevant.

Geographic scope

While the information ecosystem transcends borders, our budget is limited, so we currently focus on Europe. This means that we are open to supporting organisations based in Council of Europe countries, but also global initiatives that have a strong, proven impact in Europe.

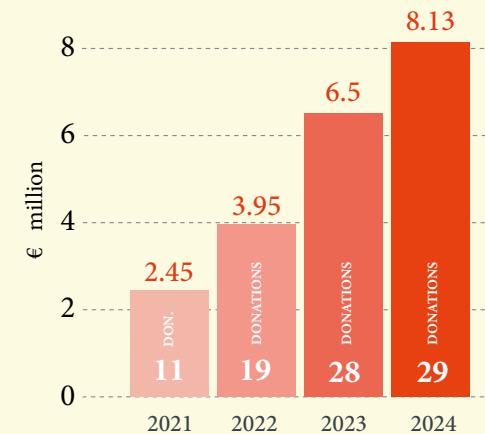


In numbers

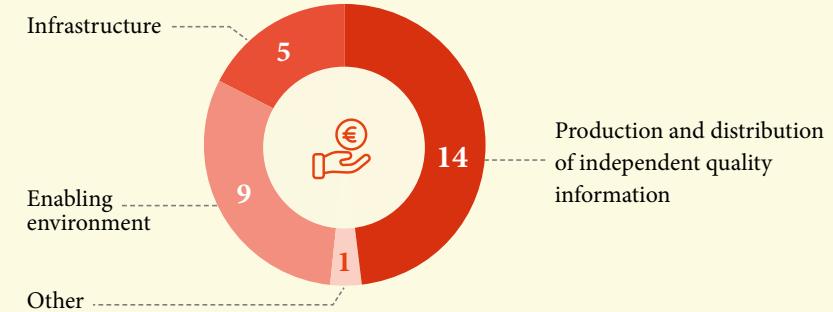
87 donations since 2021

€21 million donated in total

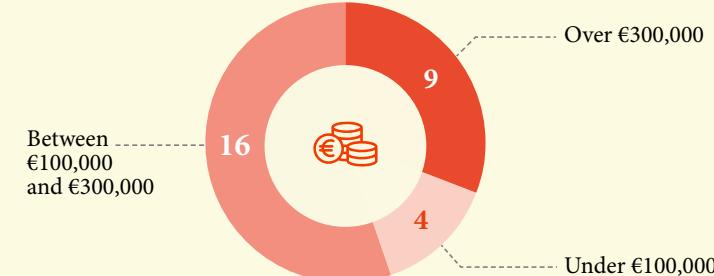
51 active partnerships



Donations per priority area



Donation size



How we work

Ecosystems approach

We take an ecosystems approach to funding: healthy ecosystems are made up of many different, interconnected components. To achieve change, we cannot just focus on one component. Instead, we fund multiple actors in the field who work towards addressing the same problem using different approaches.

Healthy ecosystems are resilient. That's why we take a long-term outlook. The challenges to the information ecosystem are enormous and change does not happen overnight. At the same time, technology is evolving fast and effective responses require agility. Rather than focusing on rapid response ourselves, we prioritise strengthening the sustainability of our grantee partners so that they can be nimble, when necessary. This means that we prefer multi-year support over short-term grants and that we provide institutional funding where possible. It also means that the renewal of support to current grantee partners is prioritised and budget to enter new partnerships may be limited.



© Spenser H / Unsplash

Strategic selection of grantees

Our budget is limited and there are many more organisations and initiatives deserving of our support than we can fund. We must therefore be strategic in our work, looking proactively for funding opportunities that are in line with our mission. We conduct thorough due diligence on the organisations we support and want to be respectful of grantee partners' time. That's why we do not accept unsolicited proposals. However, we do our best to respond to any questions about our work.

Priority areas

During Limelight Foundation's first strategy period, running from 2021 until end of 2024, we selected grantees that worked within one or more of the following priority areas:

1. The production and distribution of independent quality information
2. The infrastructure that is necessary for journalists to do their work
3. The wider enabling environment within which quality information can flourish

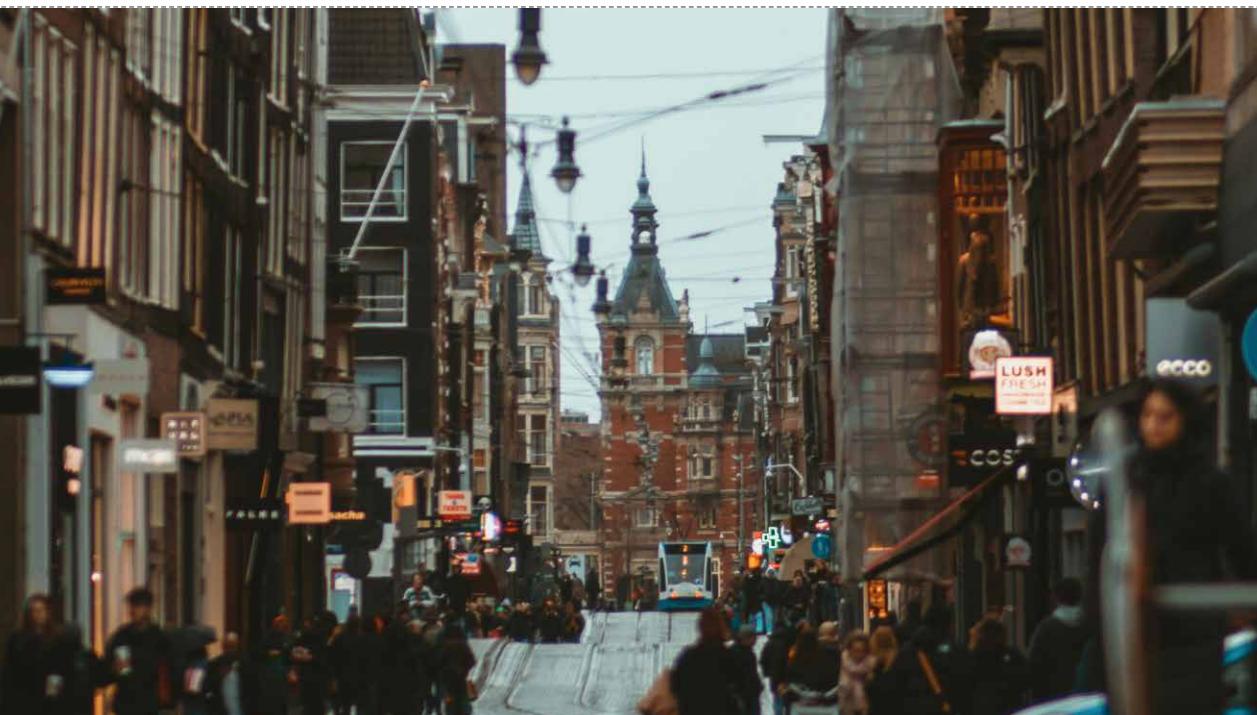


Working with other funders

In 2024, Limelight Foundation co-chaired the steering committee of the Journalism Funders Forum (JFF) in partnership with Adessium Foundation.

JFF is an initiative that brings together philanthropic organisations that fund journalism or adjacent work in Europe. It offers a vehicle for programme teams from different foundations to share experiences, expertise, and analyses about the journalism sector and healthy funding practices. JFF also advocates for increased funding for journalism. It does so by developing a strong case for its crucial role in protecting democracies and by creating an environment in which those who are curious about how to fund journalism responsibly can learn more.

In the past year, the steering committee was able to reinvigorate JFF after its transfer to the philanthropy association Philea offered the structural support needed. JFF now has a very successful newsletter that offers in-depth articles about relevant developments in the sector, and has organised several lunch-and-learn sessions that were well attended, as well as panel discussions about the value of journalism at the Philea Forum and the Konnektor Conference. Furthermore, JFF organised its flagship event in Amsterdam, which convened a large group of funders in person to discuss relevant topics such as the risks of the use of AI in newsrooms, the intensifying crackdown on journalists, and how journalism can be a supportive tool for other programmatic work, such as migration, climate, or gender.



© Sleurink / Pexels

Interview Hans Laroës and John Caspers, incoming and outgoing chairpersons of the Limelight Board

Keeping vital work in the light

On 1 September 2024, Hans Laroës succeeded John Caspers as chair of the board of Limelight Foundation. In this interview, the seasoned Dutch journalist and the tech entrepreneur and co-founder of Limelight reflected on Limelight's current position and future direction.

All hands on deck

In the past few years, several philanthropic foundations have re-evaluated their priorities and focused on initiatives to develop journalism in support of democracy in the Global South. This has left a gaping hole in funding for journalist platforms and civil society organisations in Europe at the same time as press freedom and human rights are increasingly threatened there.

“Democracy and press freedom can only continue to exist if everyone keeps on doing their best to preserve them,” said Hans Laroës, Limelight Foundation’s recently appointed chair. “It’s all hands on deck. That’s why attracting more funding is a key component of our new strategy. Ideally, we’d like to double or even triple the current budget to accomplish much more. There are many new initiatives we’d like to support, and even our current

grantees sometimes require more money because the pressure on them is rising.”

Professionalism and maturity

From the perspective of an entrepreneur, outgoing chair John Caspers believes the foundation is ready to up its game. “In terms of organisational growth, Limelight is definitely not in its infancy. With a staff of five it’s now in a growth phase where they can still make very quick decisions about grantees. We built an exceptional team who possess good judgement, have a comprehensive understanding of their field, and are well connected to key networks. The professionalism and maturity they bring is not just the basis for building trust-based relationships, it helps keep the organisation lean.”

“It’s easy to overlook the fact that Limelight is still relatively new, because we already have a solid reputation,” added Hans.

How it all started

John co-founded Limelight with Merel Borger in 2021. “At the time, I was considering

making a personal grant to Bellingcat,” he explained. “They were using open-source information and white hat hacking to expose wrongdoing in the public domain. Thanks to my tech background, I have a long-standing affinity with open source. When I asked them for a reference, Bellingcat suggested I contact Adessium Foundation, one of their other backers.”

“We have an exceptional team with a comprehensive understanding of their field.”

Merel was in charge of the public interest journalism portfolio at Adessium, a prominent family fund located in the Netherlands. With years of experience in both journalism and the philanthropic sector, she was able to provide John with more than just a reference for Bellingcat – she also gave him insight into the bigger picture.

“I’d been thinking about a structured, long-term approach to giving back for some time, so I asked Merel if she could recommend someone to help me set up a foundation. That person turned out to be her! She even came up with the foundation’s name. The



© Microgen

idea is to expose things that would otherwise remain hidden or not receive adequate public scrutiny."

A personal commitment to investigative journalism

John's interest in investigative journalism was partly inspired by 'Vrij Nederland'. The publication started in 1940 as an underground paper for the Dutch resistance during the Nazi occupation and still exists today. "In my youth I really enjoyed reading the investigative pieces they've always specialised in. They helped me to realise that there can be all kinds of things going on in the economy, at companies, and in the government. The public has a right to know what's going on and journalism plays a pivotal role in making that happen. In hindsight, the idea of supporting investigative journalism came naturally to me."

Limelight Foundation's mission is to support independent investigative journalism. Hans explained: "We're a catalyst. Our purpose is to enable an ecosystem of information that's reliable and helps people make independent, educated choices. Our grantees make their

own choices too – we don't tell them what to investigate. We do empower them to make their own decisions based on fundamental principles of journalism. We believe in supporting investigative reporting and allowing it to flourish as a principle in itself."

Laying the groundwork for growth

Although John is no longer on the board of Limelight, he is still committed to promoting its aims and broadening its funding base. For instance by mobilising support from wealthy individuals and philanthropists and teaming up with other foundations working in the field. Both John and Hans are well aware that governance will need to evolve as Limelight seeks more funding. The new strategy from 2025-2028 addresses the

internal implications of an increased volume of donations by implementing a two-tier governance model and expanding the board over time.

John believes that having a professional journalist as chair is an important milestone towards achieving maturity. "It makes a huge difference – Hans is a domain expert and has

a network to match. But at a more overarching level – and this was my initial reason for setting up Limelight – I recognise the importance of a robust independent journalism ecosystem and the reasons why it needs support. That's a level at which I can add value."

Hans: "John has brought his own brand of dynamism and entrepreneurial spirit to Limelight, of course. But he's also highly attuned to how tech can add value to our work. I don't think many journalists are well-informed about the latest happenings in the tech industry. Yet it's very important to focus on how tech can be used for good. That's another crucial aspect of his distinctive style. It's also clear to me that nobody here is building a monument to themselves. The foundation was named 'Limelight' to highlight the work of our grantees, rather than drawing attention to ourselves."

We've got your back

"When a founder steps down, it doesn't necessarily mean they'll leave things to their successor," Hans went on, smiling. "But John is very good at being hands-off. My role here is to be part of the conversation in the context of change and growth, and to let the team know I have their back. As editor-in-chief of the Dutch broadcaster NOS, my task was to steer the organisation towards

a more publicly focused approach and create a new culture. It was a challenge, but I helped to create quite a few tipping points along the way. That's sometimes your role as the new kid in town. As chair of the News Assembly of the European Broadcasting Union, I participated in a task force on the six core values of public



© Jacek Dylag / Unsplash

journalism: universality, independence, excellence, diversity, accountability, and innovation. I hope to foster all of these at Limelight and safeguard trust and confidence in the team and with our stakeholders."

Asked how qualified he feels to take decisions on which grantees to fund, Hans replied, "The quality of the people who work here is the most important thing. They perform due diligence on candidates and provide recommendations. It's the board's responsibility to assess the quality of their proposals and the chances of success. A young organisation might not be able to handle a large grant, for example. A government crackdown on independent news organisations could pose a risk to a potential grantee, but it shouldn't be a reason for us to avoid funding that candidate. It could actually be an even more compelling reason to support them."

The grantees interviewed for this report all mentioned that a Limelight Foundation multi-year grant gives them space to respond to changing circumstances as they see fit and keeps bureaucracy to a minimum. John:

"Limelight provides funding for a period of two to three years with the possibility of renewal, so grantees know they can rely on support for the long term. Many of them are working against alarming odds."

Hans: "I'm proud to hear that they trust us and know we will continue to go above and beyond to support them. They're doing vital work that must be kept in the light."

3. Who we support

Priority area:

Production and distribution of independent, quality information

Limelight Foundation is committed to ensuring that independent, quality information can continue to be produced and distributed throughout Europe. Our work under this priority area is focused on public interest newsrooms and cross-border networks of investigative journalists. Our funding is intended to create stability, and to facilitate the development of more stable revenue streams and organisational structures.

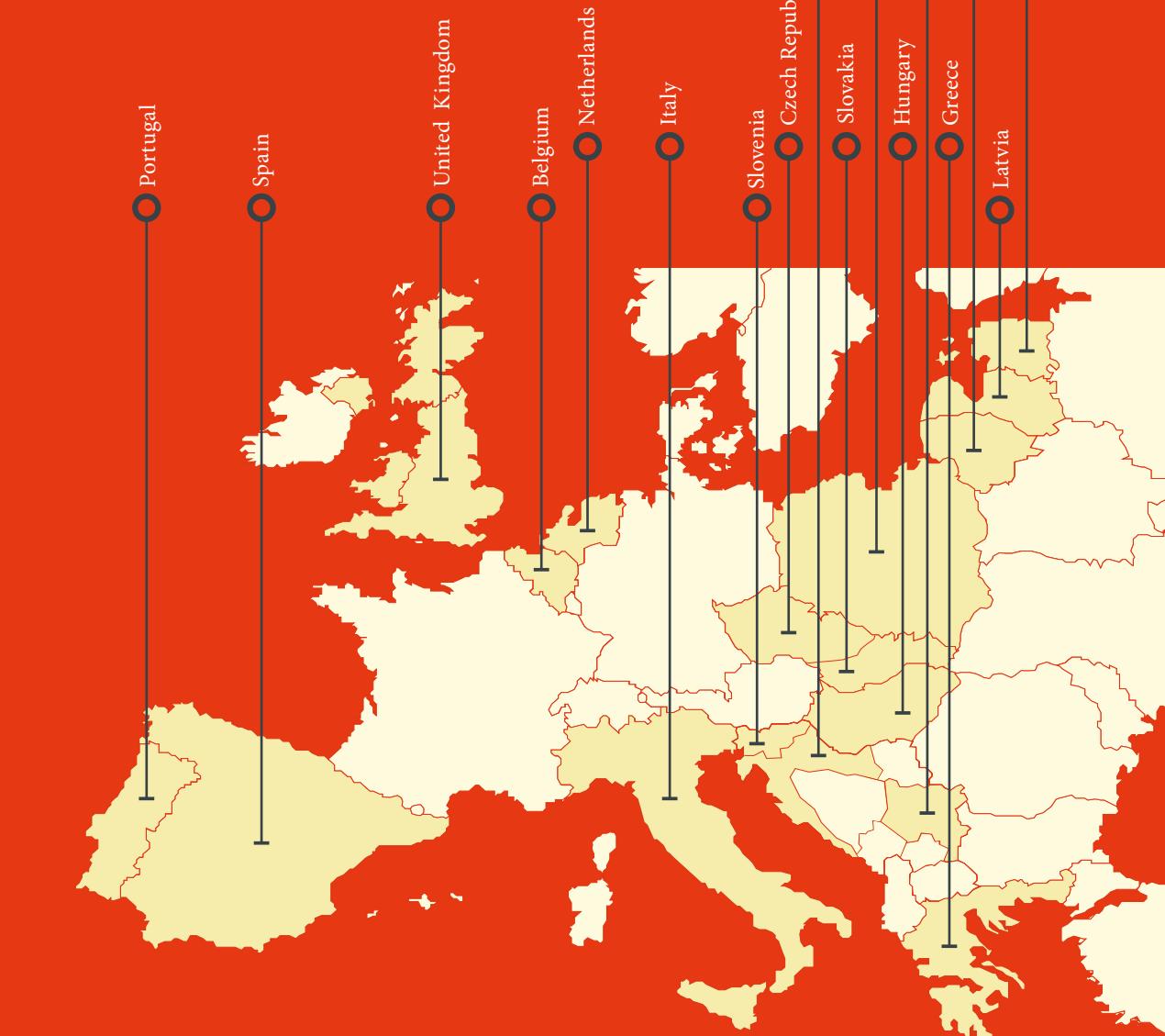
43 donations since 2021

27 active partnerships



In addition to cross-border newsrooms and journalistic networks, the national newsrooms we support are located in:

Portugal, Spain, United Kingdom, Belgium, Netherlands, Italy, Slovenia, Czech Republic, Croatia, Poland, Hungary, Slovakia, Serbia, Greece, Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia



Priority area: Infrastructure

Limelight Foundation's work under this priority area is focused on strengthening the resilience of the sector and giving newsrooms the tools they need to flourish.

15 donations since 2021

9 active partnerships



Priority area: Enabling environment

Under this priority area, Limelight Foundation supports organisations that help shape an environment in which journalists can thrive and information reaches its intended audiences.

As the enabling environment consists of many different elements, the work of our grantee partners under this header is very diverse. For instance, we fund organisations that are focused on strengthening digital rights, press freedom and freedom of information, countering the use of spyware, and holding tech companies to account where their actions violate EU law. Partnerships can be grouped into two categories: research, advocacy and/or strategic litigation, and regranting organisations.

23 donations since 2021

15 active partnerships

In addition, we made six donations since 2021 from a flexible budget aimed at responding to recent developments in the field or making use of opportunities that strengthen the information ecosystem but fall outside of the scope of the priority areas above



© Shutterstock / Hamara

Meet our grantees

Limelight Foundation supports a strong and free information ecosystem in the digital age.

In interviews with four journalism and civil society organisations, we explore how multi-year funding helps grantees continue their vital work, and how they support each other, build connections, and share knowledge.

National and global non-profit news platforms

- > Tamás Bodoky, editor-in-chief and founder of the Hungarian investigative media platform Átlátszó (Transparency)
- > Paul Radu, co-founder and head of innovation at OCCRP (the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project)

Non-profits offering legal, cyber, and digital support to strengthen infrastructure and the enabling environment

- > Carlos Gaio, CEO of Media Defence
- > Katya Viaziorchyk, head of fundraising and partnerships, AI Forensics

ATLÁTSZÓ

Átlátszó is an investigative journalism platform and watchdog founded in Hungary in 2011 by journalist Tamás Bodoky.

The word átlátszó means transparent in Hungarian. Átlátszó's mission is to promote transparency, accountability, and freedom of information in an increasingly challenging political climate.

Átlátszó produces investigative reports on political corruption, public procurement scandals, and the misuse of national and EU funds. It stands out as one of the few remaining independent news providers in the country and is committed to providing fact-based information not just to urban populations, but also to residents of remote, rural areas, where pro-government media dominate.

Difficult operating environment

Under the current leadership, Hungary has experienced a gradual decline in press freedom, negatively affecting media pluralism, editorial independence, and journalists' ability to operate without interference. The government has largely taken control of most media outlets, which now function as instruments of state propaganda. This has resulted in a constrained space for dissenting voices and critical journalism.

Independent journalists still active face significant obstacles in their daily work, including limited or no access to politicians and government officials, as well as harassment, targeted smear campaigns, and online abuse.

Early in 2024 Átlátszó, along with Transparency International Hungary, became the first targets of the government's new Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO), which has the authority to investigate anyone suspected of threatening Hungary's sovereignty. The Office launched an official investigation into the newsroom, accusing it of being an organisation that uses foreign funding to manipulate voter sentiment or support such activities.

© Luis Villasmil / Unsplash



Interview Tamás Bodoky, founder and editor-in-chief of Átlátszó

Under pressure: how Átlátszó champions transparency in Hungary

At the end of 2024, we talked to four grantees about what funding from the Limelight Foundation means to them.

Foreign funding under fire

By chance, we spoke to Tamás Bodoky, founder and editor-in-chief of Átlátszó in the week that his journalism platform launched a defamation suit against Hungary's Sovereignty Protection Office (SPO). So his government's anti-foreign funding agenda was a logical place to start.

"Government campaigns against foreign funding of independent media and civil society organisations have been a fact of life for the past 10 years," explained Tamás. "In the past they relied on pro-government media and NGOs, but now they've taken it to a different level by creating a state authority."

The SPO's rhetoric is being used to discredit Átlátszó and other critical media and NGOs. "They want to deter people from reading our stories or believing our scoops," said Tamás. "They also want to scare off foreign grant makers and donors. And, of course, they're trying to overload us by making us defend ourselves instead of investigating wrongdoings."

Keeping content free

As a non-profit independent media outlet and watchdog NGO, Átlátszó's aim has always been to keep its content free for

readers. "You don't need to pay, you don't even need to register to access our content because we want to reach as many people as possible. We think this is the best way to make a difference for people all over Hungary."

Átlátszó runs both national and local stories, employing journalists in Budapest and around the country. Conducting long-running investigations like these doesn't come cheap, which raises the important question of where Átlátszó's budget comes from.

"About 40% comes from readers in the form of micro-donations and the 1% law [ed: in Hungary people can donate 1% of their personal income tax to nonprofits]. The level of donations has fallen from 50% in 2022, due largely to inflation and the cost-of-living



Tamás Bodoky © Follow the Money



© Atlátszó

crisis. The remaining 60% of the budget is met through multi-year funding from the Limelight Foundation and the Sigrid Rausing Trust, and through short-term project grants from sources including the EU."

Access to funding and networks

Given the current operating environment, is funding a blessing or a curse? "It's a lifeline that keeps us afloat," replied Tamás. "Program funding is particularly precious, because it allows us to decide for ourselves how to spend the money over a three-year period. While short-term project funding is very welcome for specific issues, we think it's better if journalists can spend their time doing stories and talking to sources, rather than writing project reports and managing grants. Multi-year funding gives us space to do exactly that."

The network that comes with being a Limelight Foundation grantee is a great support at multiple levels. "We're up against a government propaganda machine and it's good to remember we're part of a network of similar outlets in other countries who share our values and professional standards. It's also essential to increase our visibility outside

Funding is a lifeline that keeps us afloat.

Átlátszó measure its direct impact through audience metrics for their website, social media posts, and YouTube video reports. Hungarian emigrants who follow or donate to Átlátszó are included in the data. A second impact, and one which Tamás sees as even more important, is the reach of its stories via other media outlets. "What we produce is always original," he explained. "As a result, other Hungarian media mentioned or referred to us more than 4,000 times last year. When we manage to hit the national news channel RTL – yes, there is still one TV channel which sometimes carries our stories – it means we reach millions of viewers."

The third impact is what Tamás calls consequences: "Given the current climate

Hungary. If we are under attack or facing harassment, the network can bring the issue to international attention."

Reach, impact, and consequences

The overall objectives of Limelight's funding are to sustain and further strengthen Átlátszó as an independent newsroom, and to help them increase the reach and impact of their investigations.

in Hungary, most authorities don't follow up on our stories, but from time to time one does turn into an official probe with legal or political repercussions. Especially our work into wasted EU funds often has consequences."

Exposing EU funding fraud

Last year, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and Hungary's newly formed Integrity Authority decided to investigate an issue that Átlátszó had been looking into since 2022.

"Basically, the EU funds the Hungarian state to buy and distribute food packages to people living in poverty. Using data requests and a public interest data lawsuit, we proved that the packages had become heavily overpriced. We then reported it to OLAF and to the Integrity Authority." In November 2024, these authorities announced that they had indeed found serious irregularities and corruption associated with food aid.

It's a perfect example of what Átlátszó is trying to achieve, said Tamás. "We started an investigation, initiated a lawsuit to get the information we needed, and published the story. Ultimately this resulted in official consequences for the wrongdoers and recognition of our findings. Above all, we hope that the price of the food packages won't be inflated next time, and that more packages will be available for the poor."

The food aid story was one of a series into public procurement through which Átlátszó exposed multiple examples of fraudulent practices. For instance, the case of the forest canopy walkway built on a local mayor's private land using EU funds. See photo above. "It was heavily overpriced and useless and became a symbol of wasted EU funds in



© Atlátszó

Hungary. It made national and also some international impact when it was investigated by OLAF." Just as important was the local impact: at municipal elections the following year, the corrupt mayor lost their seat. "That's the kind of impact we're looking for."

Reporting on local issues

Tamás believes that reporting on community issues by local journalists is essential for ensuring public oversight and accountability of local politicians and businessmen. In 2017 Átlátszó started to develop a network of full-time journalists outside Budapest. "Hungarian independent media are concentrated in the capital, so regional and local outlets are almost 100% controlled by the government. At this level Átlátszó has broken stories on child protection abuses, fracking, and the deplorable state of railway infrastructure, to name just a few. A relatively new topic is the impact of new electric battery factories on local environments."

Freedom of information requests and whistleblowing

The need for systematic and thorough investigation of all the facts and interconnections means that projects can span years – even when journalists are not subject to harassment, and where public interest information is easily accessible. So how does Átlátszó manage to conduct public interest journalism when its

access to public information is increasingly hampered?

"That's nothing new. The government has been trying to restrict access to public information since 2010. Our answer is freedom of information requests, which are protected by EU law. When we ask questions in this way, state organisations are obliged to answer and can be taken to court if they don't respond adequately."

The platform set up a freedom of information request generator service 12 years ago which allows any citizen to file legally correct FOI requests. Not only has it helped to file 25,000 requests, the authorities often include documents in their replies, which Átlátszó makes available to the public online. They've also filed eight lawsuits for access to public data.

The other way to obtain information in the current climate is to enable whistleblowing. "We encourage our audience to send us information anonymously and we get a lot of tips by phone and mail. For instance,

On 4 November 2024, Átlátszó publicly announced its intention to sue the SPO, reiterating that the office lacks a legal mandate to interfere with independent journalistic activities. This legal challenge has been reinforced by further steps taken in January 2025, when a formal court case was filed against the SPO for overstepping its authority in its investigative practices. As of February 2025, the legal proceedings against the SPO are in progress.

Throughout these developments, Átlátszó has maintained its commitment to full transparency and compliance with all legal requirements. They continue to publish financial statements and supplementary annexes detailing sources of income, including international donor funding. Their position remains that all information provided to the public is complete and accurate, and that the SPO's additional document requests exceed its legal authority.

the canopy walkway issue was originally discovered and photographed by a reader who suspected foul play and asked us to look into it. People trust us to go after these stories and they know we've never burnt a source."

What lies ahead?

"We're running marketing campaigns and setting up a CRM database of supporters to push audience revenues back up to 50%. We're also working hard to develop our video and podcast content, because it's important that we do more with our reports. In fact, our YouTube channel impact has doubled in two years.

"Of course, we'll continue to apply for funding and grants to strengthen our capacity to deal with whatever is thrown at us. And keep on doing our job as public interest journalists and watchdogs. I'm particularly proud of the work we're doing to raise awareness around hosting Chinese and Korean battery factories. That's a top priority. While they might be good for the economy, they take a heavy toll on the environment and local quality of life."





The Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP) is a platform for investigative reporting that empowers a global network of independent media outlets and journalists. In 2024, the non-profit delivered over 100 high-profile investigations. Less well known is the fact that OCCRP supports 71 member centres with critical resources, from data-processing capacity and editorial coordination to digital and physical security measures. Paul Radu, head of innovation, described how the platform's industry-wide initiatives help the information ecosystem thrive.

Interview Paul Radu, head of innovation at OCCRP

OCCRP's industry-wide initiatives help the ecosystem thrive

Paul Radu and Drew Sullivan founded OCCRP in 2007. Paul explained, “I'd co-founded the Romanian centre for investigative reporting and Drew was doing the same type of work in Bosnia. We first connected to collaborate on some cross-border reporting.”

That regional project has grown into a multinational non-profit with over 65 editors on six continents, along with 70+ media outlets and regional partners. “Our global network is the lifeblood of our reporting. The decentralised model allows OCCRP to expose criminal connections across

An estimated \$3.1 trillion in illicit funds flowed through the global financial system in 2023, according to the *Nasdaq Verafin Global Financial Crime Report* published in December 2024. The report exposed how money laundering bankrolled a range of



Paul Radu © OCCRP

“Our global network is the lifeblood of our reporting.”

continents, while local member centres inform regional audiences in their native languages. “We're not the typical media organisation that values click counts above all else – we measure our impact in how much illicit money is recovered and redirected to the public good.”

destructive crimes including an estimated \$346 billion in human trafficking, \$782.9 billion in drug trafficking, and \$11.5 billion in terrorist financing in 2023.

Paul estimated that investigative reporting networks worldwide have looked into \$1 trillion in illegal funds over 15 years, and that OCCRP itself has aided in the recovery of \$10 billion from various criminal parties. “Over the years, we've built a blueprint for what can be done, and I'm very proud of what we've accomplished. But it's still not enough considering the scale of the problem. At the same time, costs are rising and independent media are increasingly under threat. That's why we're constantly working to refine existing tools and introduce new ones to empower the member centres.”

Combining global data sets

Collaboration with member centres often starts with a local journalism platform requesting access to the OCCRP Aleph investigative data platform to process large quantities of data. “Our networks understand that money laundering schemes need local enablers like lawyers and accountants to

succeed. By combining data sets from around the world with local information, investigative platforms can develop their hypotheses and craft their narratives in a way that law enforcement agencies cannot.”

“We share what we know and learn from the people on the ground.”

If the data reveals cross-border activities, the next step in working together might be a request for OCCRP to coordinate the project and

engage additional foreign partners. “At that point OCCRP designates an editor to work with the local organisation and to build an international team. Sometimes the partners come from our network, other times the lead journalist platform may introduce one of their own trusted connections.”

Paul emphasised that while OCCRP plays a big role in creating the global infrastructure that enables local organisations to cooperate across borders, they always adapt their processes to local realities. “A sizeable portion of OCCRP's budget goes straight to the centres for investigative reporting. But we never go in and say, ‘Hey, this is the OCCRP way of doing things.’ We share what we know and learn from the people on the ground.”

The Network

65+

editors across 6 continents

70+

media member centers & regional partners



Journalists' safety comes first

One important element OCCRP shares, is how to understand and deal with the digital and physical security risks of working at this level. It provides hands-on training, and regular audits of instruments, laptops, and phones. "We strive to ensure that local investigators are as safe as possible, knowing that the enemy is much more powerful than we can ever be because they have unlimited resources. If their safety is threatened, we have the means to put them out of harm's way until things calm down."

The rise of SLAPPs (strategic lawsuits against public participation) is a growing threat to public interest journalism. These bogus lawsuits are designed to intimidate and financially burden newsrooms and prevent them from doing their jobs.

In 2022, OCCRP helped to establish 'Reporters Shield', a membership programme offering legal protection services to the entire ecosystem.

"While Drew and I are still on the board, Reporters Shield is a separate organisation. The clients they've enlisted so far are mainly investigative reporting centres. We know that if the ecosystem thrives

"If the ecosystem thrives outside of our control, we too will thrive."

outside of our control, we too will thrive." More recently, OCCRP joined forces with the Global Forum for Media Development to develop the Journalism Cloud Alliance. "We just completed the first industry-wide audit of the cloud computing power needed (and the estimated costs) for investigative reporting centres to work with more data and process it locally."

Leveraging cloud computing

Cloud infrastructure enables secure storage and exchange of sensitive files between investigative journalists and analysts collaborating on cross-border projects worldwide. The infrastructure also simplifies the process of releasing multiple stories simultaneously. These collaborations have revolutionised

journalism by using distributed computing to reveal corruption, surveillance, and corporate misconduct on a global scale. The investigations often involve processing millions of leaked documents, images, and terabytes

of data. This data is systematically stored, converted into readable formats, translated, and analysed by reporters to publish stories tailored to local audiences.



© OCCRP



© Cody Bahn

Like many cloud service users, news organisations face soaring costs and restrictive contracts imposed by major providers. Contributing to a [report published by the Center for Journalism & Liberty](#) in March 2024, Paul said: "The cost of this computing power is too high and increasing by the day as we have to process more and more data. We're paying over \$12,000 per month at OCCRP alone and most centres around the world can't begin to think about processing their own large volumes of information. This doesn't even include being able to crunch video, which is a lot more demanding and costly." At the time of writing this annual report in early 2025, that figure of \$12,000 per month had risen to \$30,000 per month.

Concerns about unpredictable price hikes compound these challenges. Meanwhile, the demand for computing resources continues to grow. The need is intensified by larger leaks, more frequent data dumps, and the emergence of AI-driven tools for processing, analysing, and interpreting data in real-time. Lack of affordable solutions may stifle investigative projects due to financial pressures. The Journalism Cloud Alliance aims to tackle these issues by lowering cloud service costs, freeing newsrooms to prioritise their vital work.

Developing the organisation in Amsterdam

With the help of two grants from Limelight Foundation, OCCRP is hoping to make an even bigger impact from its new headquarters in Amsterdam. Having an office in an EU member state makes it easier to attract senior talent, and to participate in calls for proposals from the European Commission and international development programmes across the EU. "Limelight's multi-year grants have helped us to develop the organisation, in contrast to other forms of funding that are linked to a specific region or project." The first grant prioritised the relocation from Sarajevo and enhanced the digital and physical security of OCCRP and its member centres; the second focuses more on development.

"There are numerous advantages to being in the Netherlands, and having offices there is really crucial for us," confirmed Paul. "That's why we've established Amsterdam as our core point, where we can work with data sets and enable collaborations in a safer environment, in a place where journalism and this type of work are truly respected."



Media Defence is a London-based NGO that works globally to provide legal help to journalists, citizen journalists, and independent media. They do this through three programmes:

Emergency defence

Ensuring that quality legal representation is available to journalists by paying for legal fees, connecting them to a lawyer if they don't have one, and providing that lawyer with technical legal support. Media Defence also ensures that journalists have access to legal remedies when their right to freedom of expression has been violated, for instance if they have become victims of violence or harassment.

Strategic litigation

Taking on strategic cases to challenge unjust laws used to silence journalists and to ensure the law is used to protect rather than persecute them. Media Defence seeks out cases that offer an opportunity for systemic change (for instance changing a problematic law or practice) that will benefit media freedom.

Capacity building

Building local legal capacity with a view to providing journalists around the world with an opportunity to access the best possible legal defence. Media Defence does this through training lawyers and funding local legal centres that can represent journalists free of charge.

In 2024, Media Defence took on 229 new cases, 149 of which were emergency defence cases and 80 strategic cases. In total they supported 788 active cases from 96 countries. Throughout the year, they also worked with 21 partner organisations operating in Europe, Latin America, Africa, Asia, and the Middle East and North Africa. Their support enabled them to litigate 400+ cases. Their capacity building programme supported 133 lawyers from 45 countries, hosting litigation surgeries, online know-how events, partners and lawyers convenings.

© Media Defence



32

Interview Carlos Gaio, CEO Media Defence

Journalists face growing number of sophisticated legal threats

Media Defence supported a record number of new cases in 2024. While the CEOs of most law firms would be thrilled to report rising demand, for Carlos Gaio this 'success' is bittersweet. On the one hand, it reflects the troubling increase in lawsuits and harassment against independent journalists. On the other, it highlights the NGO's solid reputation and growing visibility. Carlos: "We're the only organisation in the world solely focused on providing this crucial legal help to journalists."

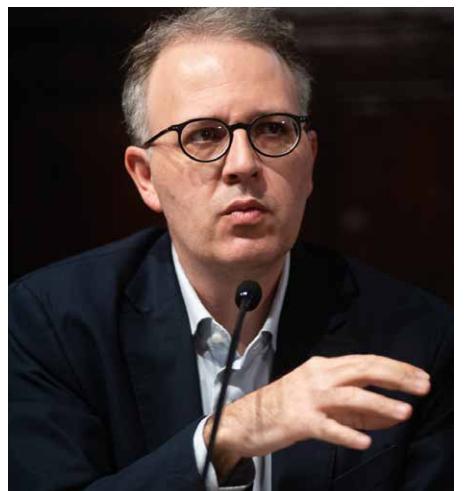
One goal of Media Defence's Limelight grant for 2022 to 2024 was to ensure that European independent journalists and news outlets have access to legal support and can continue to work, with an expected total of 20 cases in Europe.

That proved to be a significant underestimate. "In 2022, we supported a then-record 188 new applications around the world, last year we took on 176, and in 2024 we're heading for an unprecedented 240," said Carlos when we spoke to him in November 2024. "Around 30% of those came from European news outlets and journalists. Mostly Eastern Europe, but we're also seeing more requests from countries like France and the Netherlands."

Digital rights, environmental journalism, and arbitrary detention cases

It's clear to Carlos that legal threats to journalists are becoming more numerous and more sophisticated. In 2024, Media Defence dealt with an important set of complaints relating to arbitrary detention as well as a growing number of environmental and digital rights cases.

"We filed over 20 applications to the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) related to Pegasus spyware being used against journalists, and intervened in an internet shutdown case in Kazakhstan," said Carlos. "Meanwhile, there are people investigating environmental abuses who are basically human rights defenders threatening very powerful interests. Among others, Media Defence is supporting the case regarding the British journalist Dom Phillips and his Brazilian expert partner Bruno Pereira who were shot dead in the Amazon in 2022."



© Diego Figone / Media Defence

33



© Media Defence

In Western Europe, Media Defence is used to dealing with SLAPPs against journalists, but new tactics are also being used. “In one particularly serious situation, an investigative journalist was detained for a prolonged period, which is unheard of in the region. We also saw a company use a commercial court to try and establish the source of a leak. That’s significant because commercial courts don’t necessarily know or think about the human rights or freedom of expression aspects of a complaint.”

Media Defence is often a third party in what it categorises as strategic litigation, i.e. cases it deems important to develop standards that apply more broadly. “We have a solid reputation at the ECtHR, so it’s incumbent on us to make sure that they have our views and that we insist on acceptable standards.” It has intervened in a few applications to the court for the ‘right to be forgotten’, insisting on an interpretation that was more protective of the right of freedom of expression.

“Lawyers representing journalists are increasingly subject to intimidation.”

In 2024 Media Defence collaborated with the American Bar Association and Thompson Reuters Foundation on a publication entitled *Defending the defenders: legal threats against lawyers protecting journalists*. It presents

Harassment of journalists and their lawyers

In Europe and Latin America, journalists are experiencing higher levels of harassment from governments that initiate tax audits, accuse them of fraud, or subject them to investigation under foreign agent laws. A relatively new development is that lawyers representing journalists or independent media are increasingly subject to intimidation.

“Several lawyers working on cases we funded have been harassed or detained, and in some countries they face bogus charges and arbitrary imprisonment – or have to go into exile to avoid them. With hounding of lawyers on the rise, we’re planning to set up a specific fund to get them out of harm’s way if necessary.”

preliminary findings of ongoing research into why and how lawyers working to defend human rights and representing journalists are targeted.

The benefits of funding are more than transactional

To return to the opening analogy: a mainstream legal firm would see revenues soar on the back of a jump in demand. That is not a given for a non-profit NGO reliant on grants and donations. It’s often a case of swings and roundabouts. Carlos: “Fortunately we were approached proactively by new donors in 2024 and had a few positive outcomes, but other donors have shut down programmes. To some extent that reflects the shift to the right in politics, with national governments terminating development aid funding.”

The adoption of foreign agent laws by certain countries is a dark cloud on the funding horizon. “Funders are already moving out of Kyrgyzstan because of the new foreign agent law. And while the need for support is growing in Turkey, local non-profits are holding their

breath as similar legislation awaits its passage through parliament.”

Given the pressing demand for its work, the organisation is looking at ways to boost income by reaching out to new donors and securing more programme funding. “Around 60% of our income comes through multi-year grants. They’re the ideal type of funding because they make such a difference in how we organise our work, enabling long-term planning to build lasting impact. Without it, we’d have to reduce our caseload as we only have a staff of 20.”

For Carlos, the benefits of funding are not just transactional. “There’s an element of solidarity as well, and it’s a validation of your organisation’s work to receive funding from well-regarded foundations.” It also helps to build trust, with Limelight and other donors acting as a conduit for referrals from journalists in need. “That’s probably the best way to help someone – they talk to us more openly because they trust the recommendation, which means we’re better able to support them.”

MISSION STATEMENT MEDIA DEFENCE

We support journalists who hold power to account by working to ensure the legal protection and defence of journalists and independent media so they can report on issues of public interest. We do this by providing legal assistance to journalists, citizen journalists, and independent media through an emergency defence fund, by taking strategic cases to challenge unjust laws and protect freedom of expression, and through developing a worldwide network of partners and specialists to provide legal defence, which we support through grant making, training and information sharing. We are unique in what we do. To date, we are the only organisation in the world solely focused on providing this crucial help to journalists.

Ecosystem of local defence centres

Media Defence is a grantor in its own right, with an ecosystem of defence centres around the world. It funds 20 organisations that provide legal services to journalists at a local level, including seven in Europe: in Italy, Poland, Hungary, Ukraine, Turkey, and Russia (the latter working in exile). It also offers other forms of practical support, such as fundraising advice in countries where circumstances are particularly difficult, for instance Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan.

“This funding and practical support enable our partners to help journalists quickly and with the benefit of their on-the-ground expertise. If local lawyers have exhausted domestic remedies and need support to take cases to the ECtHR, or they ask us to intervene in their application when it’s reached the court, we’re happy to do that.”

Media Defence also offers three-day workshops for groups of 12 to 15 lawyers from different countries. “We prefer to call these sessions

“Local defence centres help journalists quickly with on-the-ground expertise.”

‘litigation surgeries’ to emphasise that we’re not teaching the participants, we’re learning with them and exchanging views. The conversations continue afterwards in Signal or WhatsApp groups, and people create new networks for collaboration. From next year, we’ll be running surgeries in every region we operate because we’re keen to reach more people.”

The Resource Hub that serves as the basis for the surgeries and provides information around freedom of expression and digital rights to a wider group of lawyers is being updated and expanded. “We’re focusing on tailoring resources to our audience and ensuring that all content is up to date. We continuously do outreach at conferences and events.

And we’re translating our website into five languages.”

Additional roles and tools in 2025

“We’re recruiting a new grants officer because the recent surge in demand meant it was very difficult for the team dealing with our grants to function. In terms of capacity, we’re

implementing a digital transformation to help us manage our work better. And we’ll be implementing a new five-year strategy that includes the goal of attracting more multi-year funding.”

There are also plans to recruit an additional legal officer to fill a gap in its work: to ensure that judgments obtained are actually implemented. For instance, even if a court decides there is a need to train police officers on how to deal with gender-based violence against journalists, the respective government can’t be relied on to voluntarily implement the necessary measures. In future the organisation wants to ensure follow-up with the courts and governments in question.

“It’s clear that the world is becoming more closed, with more barriers to journalism,”

concluded Carlos. “The rise in lawsuits and use of (legal) threats against journalists and lawyers will worsen in the next five years or so. The adoption of foreign agent laws could spread, too. On the bright side, I’m proud of

“We can still get positive or progressive decisions from a number of key jurisdictions.”

us being able to intervene in an increasing number of cases. And we’re seeing much more collaboration among journalists and lawyers. Above all, we’re still able to get positive or progressive decisions from a number of key jurisdictions.”

© Media Defence

SLAPPs

Strategic lawsuits against public participation (SLAPPs) are defined by the UK’s Solicitors Regulation Authority as “a misuse of the legal system, through bringing or threatening claims that are unmeritorious or characterised by abusive tactics, in order to stifle lawful scrutiny and publication, including on matters of corruption or wrongdoing.”

Research by CASE, a coalition of non-governmental organisations from across Europe united in recognition of the threat posed to public watchdogs by SLAPPs, found that public watchdogs such as journalists, newspapers, activists, campaigning organisations, whistleblowers, and others were increasingly being targeted by lawsuits in response to their efforts to hold the powerful to account.



AI FORENSICS

AI Forensics is a young European non-profit which holds major technology platforms accountable by conducting independent and high-profile technical investigations to expose the harms caused by their algorithms. The platforms they investigate include Meta, TikTok, YouTube, Amazon, and chatbots such as Microsoft Copilot.

Its work as a 'digital detective' adds value to various partners in the information ecosystem: other auditing experts who collaborate to utilise AI Forensics' tools to conduct similar research; advocacy organisations that lobby for stronger regulation and enforcement, but don't have the capacity to investigate the algorithms themselves; and those who need analysis-ready evidence to report on, such as investigative journalists (like those working for *Le Monde*, *Nieuwsuur*, and *The Guardian*). Its reports have been used by the European Commission to investigate Meta under the Digital Services Act (as covered by the *New York Times*).

AI Forensics collaborates closely with news media to publish the results of its investigations, and in turn supports investigative journalists and civil society organisations to analyse and interpret the data that increasingly underpins their reporting.



© Unsplash

Interview Katya Viadziorchyk, head of fundraising and advocacy, AI Forensics

How AI Forensics transforms technical investigations into advocacy campaigns

For Katya Viadziorchyk, head of fundraising and advocacy at AI Forensics, it was important to clarify the organisation's role in supporting a strong and free information ecosystem. "We're experts in the quantitative and technical aspects of investigating algorithms. Our team develops and adapts tools and technical resources to conduct adversarial audits of big tech algorithms, and hold platforms like Meta and TikTok to account."

Katya added that AI Forensics is not a policy and advocacy thinktank. Nor is the non-profit a journalistic platform. But it does contribute its specialist knowledge to support these organisations. "We share our expertise and results with others in the media, legal, and social ecosystems as a matter of course," she confirmed. "For instance, newsrooms and NGOs that need to report on toxic algorithms and their implications for society often lack the technical knowledge to gather or interpret data. Policymakers and advocacy groups pushing for improved regulations must first understand the technology and gather evidence about its functionality in order to fully appreciate its impact."

Collaborating with ecosystem partners creates a mutually beneficial relationship. "While media and NGOs increasingly benefit from our work, we need their advocacy skills and media reach," explained Katya. "Producing a technical report on algorithmic irregularities is the first step. With the support of our partners,

we turn these technical investigations into powerful advocacy campaigns."

Working with AI for the public good

Many of the 14 current members of AI Forensics have an academic background, with PhD or master qualifications in computer science, mathematics, law, ethics, sociology, psychology, communication and human



© AGABY

rights. Despite high demand for AI- and data specialists in the private sector, team members remain true to their collective ideal of using their skills for the public good.

In its previous incarnation as Tracking Exposed, the young collective had a very wide focus and just one backer, based in the US. “Our budget was much smaller then. A single funder accounted for 60% of our budget, which left us vulnerable when they had to withdraw.” In the uncertain period before new multi-year funding was confirmed, the team seriously considered how they could continue without personal means to keep the NGO going.

Marc Faddoul, co-founder and director of AI Forensics, also worked in academia for a time, but soon realised that it wasn’t moving fast enough to solve urgent real-world problems. According to Katya he also saw that civil society ecosystems lacked essential technical resources and tools to hold powerful entities to account for their use of AI. Filling that gap

has rapidly turned AI Forensics into a highly regarded partner doing distinctive work in the public interest.

Teaming up for impact

In April 2024, AI Forensics’ report *No embargo in sight* highlighted Meta’s failure to moderate political advertising in the European Union and raised serious concerns about the integrity of the EU parliamentary elections to be held in June of that year. In particular, it highlighted a surge in pro-Russian propaganda, with 38 million users being targeted in France and Germany between August 2023 and March 2024. Among other things, the report called for robust enforcement of the Digital Services Act (DSA). Since then, AI Forensics has collaborated officially with the European Commission on evidence gathering for the proceeding.

In 2023, the collective teamed up with the Algorithmic Transparency Initiative and Amnesty International and conducted a

two-part audit on TikTok’s content recommendation system. The high-profile findings revealed that TikTok’s algorithms could potentially lead young users down dangerous paths and expose them to content that glorifies self-harm and suicidal thoughts. This research contributed to the European Commission announcing a formal proceeding against TikTok under the DSA, with AI Forensics’ team officially collaborating with the Commission on this matter.

“Our work generates significant impacts in both media and policy: we measure our success not just through quantitative indicators like completing a project on time and on budget, we also analyse qualitative engagement metrics such as policy meetings, workshops, and media coverage because they help to increase the impact of our work. The majority of our reports and investigations have been followed by policy meetings with the European Commission.”

Diversified funding to safeguard growth

As a European non-profit that operates beyond the confines of European geography AI Forensics is proud to receive support from European funders. “Their understanding of, and direct experience with, regulation is invaluable, as it also promotes a stronger network of philanthropy and non-profits across Europe.” As head of fundraising and advocacy, Katya constantly monitors and maps the philanthropy landscape. “When we changed our identity to AI Forensics and focused our approach, we also revisited our fundraising strategy.”

The growing demand for its technical investigations and the expansion of the organisation prompted AI Forensics to prioritise diversifying its funding sources to ensure operational sustainability. This was one of the stated objectives in its multi-year grant application to Limelight Foundation. This grant runs from mid-December 2023 until December 2026.

AI FORENSICS’ VISION

The organisation applies innovative methods to uncover violations, and provide information to help shape and enforce responsible regulatory policies. It works towards a world where algorithms are accountable, adjustable, and even avoidable. It shines a light on hidden algorithmic injustices, and works to bring accountability and transparency to the tech industry.

AI Forensics turns its investigations into insights and actionable recommendations to inform and support policy, advocacy, and regulation. It mobilises its large network of journalists and generates high-profile press to raise awareness. It regularly provides expertise through legislative testimonies, academic conferences, and other public forums. Beyond that, it makes its expertise available to partners who fight for better accountability with other approaches, such as policy and advocacy, and strategic litigation.



AI Forensics also receives multi-annual support from funders including OSF, Luminate, Civitates, and Omidyar, in addition to short-term, deliverable-based projects from SIDN and NGI.

“Still, multi-year funding is what everyone strives for because of the flexibility it offers. Over the course of a three-year programme grant, so many things can change, especially in our fast-moving field. So you may need to adapt the deliverable, revise the budget, or completely change the scope to respond to different circumstances.”

“We anticipate spending more time on finding other types of funding in the next few years - for instance, through commercial auditing of algorithms, which companies will want since the DSA came into effect - although it's still unclear how this would work in practice. That said, as a non-profit there's a cap on the number of these contracts we can work on per year. But there's also potential to embark on more tenders for contracts from the EU.”

Building strong relationships with funders

Katya emphasises that for any organisation in its early stages, it is crucial to have multiple funders, as grantors are reluctant to be the sole or majority contributor. They prefer to see diverse funding sources to ensure long-term sustainability. While they seek assurance that the organisation has the structural capacity to manage a significant grant, they are also willing to provide guidance on improving

“ Networks have multiplier effects for both funders and grantees.”

internal operations and governance to support sustainable growth.

AI Forensics recruited a head of operations in 2024, a significant step forward in its organisational growth. Among other things, this allows director Marc Faddoul to step away from finance and operational tasks, enabling him to focus on strategic planning and other essential responsibilities.

Accountability is another key element in the relationship between grantor and grantee. “We submit a progress report to Limelight Foundation every six months and always update them when we release a new report or make a new hire to professionalise the organisation. The interim and final reports are a valuable opportunity for reflection and learning.”

In Katya's experience, multi-year funders want to go beyond simply giving grantees money. “In contrast to project financing for specific deliverables, multi-year grantors talk with us beyond the financial resources they're providing. They want to know how else they can support us as part of a network and through capacity building. Foundations like Limelight are connected not just within the funding network, but to policymakers and other stakeholders who might be interested in supporting us. So networks can have multiplier effects for both grantors and grantees.”

“For instance, we were working on an election-related project supported by another Dutch funder and were looking for good media partners to collaborate with. So we reached

out to our programme manager at Limelight because he's based in the Netherlands, is interested in the elections, and knows the media landscape there.”

Staying true to its vision and its people

With its services so much in demand, how does AI Forensics decide which jobs to take on? “That's often funding-driven. It can also be media-driven if a party reaches out for support to investigate a particular topic. Or a policymaker might ask us to investigate risks involved in the DSA, for instance.” In short, some things are planned, others come unexpectedly, but they must fall within the scope of the platforms and objectives AI Forensics has identified for its work.

In the increasingly competitive labour market for AI specialists and data analysts, how confident can the collective be of keeping – and growing – its staff? “That's an issue we're very much aware of,” said Katya. “We are working now to ensure mindful growth and the wellbeing of the team. That means staying true to our vision and to our people, and still achieving value and impact as the organisation matures.”

© Kayle Kaupanger / Unsplash



4. Looking ahead

Strategy 2025 – 2028

Our society faces multiple crises, ranging from ongoing wars and the climate crisis to rising authoritarianism and the cost-of-living crisis. To effectively address these crises, we need a healthy information ecosystem in which a strong public interest journalism sector can flourish, and technology supports rather than harms the information ecosystem.

Unfortunately, the information ecosystem is under threat. The traditional business model of journalism is broken and funding for public interest journalism is scarce. Journalists increasingly face threats from multiple angles: abusive lawsuits, digital attacks, and violence both on- and offline. As authoritarianism rises, press freedom is in a steady decline. People's access to independent, accurate information is also fundamentally challenged, e.g. by toxic algorithms that prioritise polarising content, and by the spread of mis- and disinformation.

In 2024, we developed a new strategy that builds on our work over the past few years and responds to our changing environment. Our overall goal is to strengthen the information ecosystem. The above-mentioned priority areas have been combined into two strategic goals: supporting public interest journalism to ensure that accurate, relevant, and pluriform information is available, and supporting civil society organisations that work to ensure that technology strengthens rather than harms the information ecosystem.

In its **2024 World Press Freedom Index**, Reporters Without Borders (RSF) showed that in virtually all regions journalists and independent media outlets faced increasing repression. In particular, political attacks, such as detention of journalists, suppression of independent media outlets, and widespread dissemination of misinformation significantly increased.

In April 2024, the Germany-based Civil Liberties Union for Europe (Liberties) reported in its annual report on media freedom in the European Union (EU) that media freedom was declining across the EU and was "perilously close to breaking point" in several countries.

"Strong and stable democracy cannot exist without a free and pluralistic media. It is not a coincidence that in countries where rule of law is eroding, so too is media freedom."

- Liberties, April 2024





Strategic goal 1

Public interest journalism

We will contribute to a well-funded, independent and resilient public interest journalism sector that produces reliable information and holds power to account. Consisting of a broad range of actors, this sector understands that its work doesn't stop at borders and recognises the critical importance of collaboration.

In line with our ecosystems approach to funding, we will support not only public interest newsrooms in Europe and cross-border networks, but also organisations that provide critical support and infrastructure that strengthen the enabling environment for independent journalism.

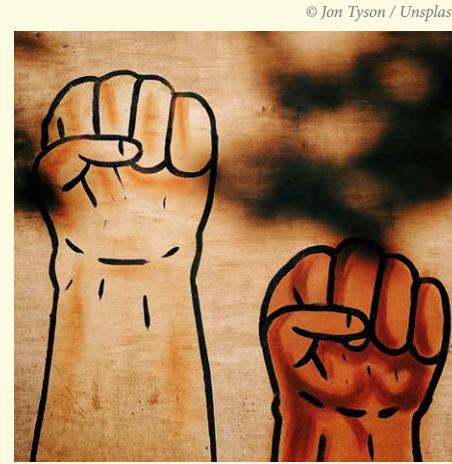


Strategic goal 2

Technology and the information ecosystem

We will fund a broad range of civil society actors who can keep up with the fast pace of technological development, inform regulatory frameworks, and hold tech companies and governments to account. This will contribute to creating an information ecosystem in which people have access to reliable, pluriform information, and where the development and use of harmful technologies is not rewarded.

Although this area of our work is fast evolving, we will not be funding 'hype to hype'. As always, we will take an ecosystems approach to our grant making. We will support diverse organisations working on tech accountability that bring critical skillsets to the sector, and help to diversify and strengthen it.



Organisational goals

Drastically increase funding

Underpinning these strategic priorities are a number of organisational goals. First and foremost, we recognise that we are up against challenges that dwarf the resources of the entire philanthropic sector. Our main focus will therefore be to drastically increase funding that can be used to strengthen the information ecosystem. Limelight Foundation aims to bring together a community of like-minded funders who recognize the critical importance to society of a healthy information ecosystem and wish to get involved in supporting public interest journalism and/or work to strengthen the information ecosystem.

We also aim to better meet the needs of our grantee partners, for instance by giving multi-year unrestricted funding where possible, which also keeps administrative requirements light.

5. Who we are

Limelight Foundation is a philanthropic foundation based in the Netherlands. Limelight Foundation was founded in 2021 by John Caspers and Merel Borger. John is an internet entrepreneur and co-founder of payment platform Adyen.

Limelight Foundation has been designated as a public benefit organisation (ANBI) by the Dutch tax authority. Limelight Foundation is a member of European philanthropy association Philea and Ariadne, a European peer-to-peer network of funders for social change and human rights. Limelight Foundation is a member of the steering committee of the Journalism Funders Forum.

Board

Limelight Foundation is governed by a board of directors composed of three members elected in line with its articles of association.



Hans Laroës | chair of the board

Hans succeeded John Caspers as chair of the board in September 2024. Hans is the former editor-in-chief of the news of the Dutch public broadcaster (NOS) and held various other roles in journalism.



Henriëtte Boerma | treasurer

Henriëtte succeeded Hannah de Jong as treasurer in March 2025. Henriëtte has a background in accountancy and currently works in the non-profit sector.



Merel Borger | secretary

Merel is the co-founder of Limelight Foundation. With a background in journalism, philanthropy, and academia, she currently works as chief of staff at John Caspers' family office, responsible for strategy development in the areas of philanthropy and impact investing. Merel has a PhD in journalism studies.

Team



Alinda Vermeer | executive director

As Limelight Foundation's executive director, Alinda is responsible for the overall leadership and day-to-day management of the foundation, overseeing both the grant making and operations. Prior to joining Limelight Foundation in 2023, Alinda was CEO at Media Defence, an NGO that provides legal support to journalists and newsrooms across the world.



Willem Lenders | programme manager

Willem joined Limelight Foundation as programme manager in 2022. He previously worked at the Stichting Democratie en Media (Democracy and Media Foundation).



Floor Milar | programme manager

Floor has been at Limelight Foundation since 2021. She previously worked at De Correspondent and the Dutch Association of Journalists.



Andrea S. | programme officer

Andrea joined Limelight Foundation in 2022. Andrea has a Master's degree in Public Administration, International and European Governance from Leiden University.



Eva Entenmann | operations manager

Eva joined Limelight Foundation in 2024. She previously coordinated a media house in exile at Free Press Unlimited and worked as programme manager at the International Center for Counter-Terrorism, among other roles.

© Photos by Anne van Zantwijk

Patrons

This year, five global leaders in journalism, tech and social change have joined Limelight Foundation as patrons, endorsing our mission to strengthen the information ecosystem.



Mabel van Oranje

Mabel van Oranje is a serial entrepreneur for social change working globally to advance equality, freedom, and justice. She has founded, led and advised numerous network organisations, campaigns and initiatives promoting international human rights and development. Most recently, she has taken a role in the global movement to end child marriage, including the creation and development of three backbone organisations: the Girls First Fund, Girls Not Brides, and VOW for Girls.

Mabel © Mark de Groot

“Independent, quality media and objective information are foundational for critical thinking, well-informed debate, wise decision-making – and essential for a properly functioning democracy. That is why I champion Limelight Foundation’s mission to support journalism and the information ecosystem in Europe.”



Matthew Caruana Galizia

Matthew Caruana Galizia is the director of The Daphne Caruana Galizia Foundation and has been a tireless advocate for justice for the murder of his mother, Daphne Caruana Galizia. She was Malta’s most well-known investigative journalist and was killed by a car bomb near her home in Malta in October 2017. At the time of her assassination she was investigating corruption at the highest state level in Malta and facing 48 SLAPP suits. Her family inherited the civil libel cases and has been fighting them since.

“I’m grateful to Limelight Foundation for supporting the work of the Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE) and of so many other organisations that are adjacent to it. The right to freely receive and impart information is something I care about deeply. Knowing that this is a core value shared by Limelight makes me proud to be working together.”

Olga Rudenko

Olga Rudenko is a Ukrainian journalist and editor-in-chief of the Kyiv Independent. Launched a mere 14 weeks before the Russian invasion, the Kyiv Independent became the world’s primary source for reliable English-language journalism on the war in Ukraine. Olga’s work has also been published in a number of major Western news outlets, including The Washington Times, the Global Post and USA Today. In May 2022, Time Magazine named Rudenko as one of its “Next Generation Leaders”.



Olga © GLOBSEC

Maria Ressa

Maria Ressa is the co-founder and CEO of Rappler, the Manila-based digital newsroom for investigative journalism which became known for detailing the weaponization of social media, and for exposing government corruption and human rights violations. A fearless defender of freedom of expression, Maria won the Nobel Peace Prize in 2021 for her efforts “to safeguard freedom of expression, which is a precondition for democracy and lasting peace”, in addition to many other awards.



Maria © Committee to Protect Journalists



Jimmy Wales

Jimmy Wales is a American-British internet entrepreneur best known for founding Wikipedia.org, as well as other wiki-related organisations, including the charitable organisation Wikimedia Foundation, and the for-profit company Fandom. Today, Wikipedia and its sister projects are among the top-five most visited sites on the web.

Jimmy was awarded the UNESCO Niels Bohr Medal in 2013 and has received many other awards.

© Zachary McCune /
Wikimedia Foundation

“Throughout my career I've been committed to making trustworthy, verifiable information available to all. That is why I wholeheartedly endorse Limelight Foundation's mission to strengthen the information ecosystem.”

Marietje Schaake

Marietje Schaake is a non-resident Fellow at Stanford's Cyber Policy Center and at the Institute for Human-Centered AI. She is a columnist for the Financial Times and serves on a number of nonprofit boards as well as the UN High-Level Advisory Body on AI. Between 2009-2019 she served as a Member of the European Parliament where she worked on trade, foreign and tech policy. She is the author of *The Tech Coup*.



“Now that power politics is returning in dangerous ways and fundamental rights and freedoms are under historic threat, investigative journalism is a critical pillar of democracy that needs to be sustained.”



Op-ed Hans Laroës, chair of the Limelight Board

Facing the new bullies in town

Sometimes, one year dissolves into the next like a calmly flowing river. Not now. We seem to be in the midst of a storm, pounding on our doors, trying to smash the windows, damaging everything in its path. How much worse can it get? It probably can.

Press freedom has been under pressure and deteriorating for a long time. We saw Poland slipping away and making a comeback a few years later. Hungary remains an illiberal democracy, led by an autocrat who, together with his business allies, has nearly eradicated independent journalism.

We see mounting pressure in Italy, particularly on public broadcasting. Slovenia remains a persistent concern. And let's consider my own country, the Netherlands — a nation often too self-satisfied — acting as if it were a shining beacon on a hill. Here, the extreme-right



© Efrem Efre / Pexels

Party for Freedom (PVV), the largest party and now in government, wants to dismantle public journalism. They call it woke, they call it leftist...We all know the accusations. Even if the dismantling doesn't happen outright, the relentless rhetoric, year after year, poisons the atmosphere.

Is anyone still speaking truth to power? For a long time, journalists were appreciated for the work they did, even when they produced uncomfortable or unwanted stories. This was part of the system. The media were integral to shaping the mainstream information ecosystem we all valued. Now, they are being pushed to the fringes — sometimes beyond — by large groups, organisations, and political parties that label them as enemies of the people. So why not assault journalists? Why not cut their funding? Why not take them to court after changing the laws in your favour?

Sometimes I wonder whether journalists in countries with long traditions of press freedom, like mine, fully grasp what is happening around them. Are they and their bosses conceding too easily to the new bullies in town? Using language that would have been unthinkable 10 years ago? Normalising what should never be accepted? Are they so consumed by their deadlines and daily production schedules that they fail to see the era they are living in — like trees blocking the view of the forest?



© Zack Walker / Unsplash

Trump fosters extreme political instability, punishing long-time allies, basing his decisions on lies, and attacking the media and individual journalists trying to expose them. Too many would-be Trumps lurk on this side of the ocean, sharing similar worldviews and hostility toward independent, inconvenient journalism.

Zuckerberg's decision to end fact-checking on Facebook in early 2025 wasn't, in itself, a catastrophic move. The truly damaging message — at least in my eyes — was that there is no longer a hierarchy between fact-checked, reliable, and relevant information on the one hand, and nonsense, lies, and misinformation on the other. Just go ahead — you're entitled to your lie.

I realise I am painting a grim picture. But here we are, together — partners, Limelight, friends and ambassadors. We all know why a quality-driven information ecosystem is vital. We all want the people we serve — our audiences — to be better informed at the end of the day. We want to speak truth to power, to show that actions have consequences. We don't just want to highlight mistakes and misconduct; we also want to showcase right actions and behaviors for the good of society. We need and want to be kind, empathetic, compassionate — and unforgiving toward those who seek to sabotage our society.

And we must use technology for good. We have Mastodon and Pixelfed. We have Signal, led by Meredith Whittaker, an example of someone who understands what is crucial right now: "There is an appetite for alternative models. If we can finance and stimulate an ecosystem of alternatives, smart people can develop technology for a more livable future rather than maintaining the status quo."

We need this kind of thinking, this kind of coalition. This is not just about protecting journalism. Journalism is a means, not an end. Safeguarding and strengthening? a healthy information ecosystem are what truly matters. So, all of us — Limelight, partners, NGOs, politicians, and trustworthy high-tech players — must work together. We must exchange best practices and experiences, develop reliable ways to use AI, and prioritise privacy. Let's make this the year in which we pushed back even further, demonstrated our strength and ideas, joined forces, and made a difference. Quoting someone from 2008, because it still applies in 2025: "Yes, we can."

On a personal note: I joined Limelight Foundation in September 2024 as the successor to John Caspers, one of our two funders, alongside the Hartwig Foundation. I have been a journalist for nearly my entire life. That is why I was thrilled to join Limelight, its team, and, in a way, its network of friends and grantees. I feel honoured to be part of this innovative and important initiative, knowing that I am in a seemingly quiet place while our grantees are working tirelessly on the frontlines of change.

Hans Laroës

6. Financial information

In 2024, Limelight received funding from four donors, including major donors John Caspers and the Hartwig Foundation.

Limelight Foundation donated € 8.134.000 to 29 grantee partners in line with its statutory aims. This included 13 new partnerships and 16 donations to renew and strengthen existing grantee partnerships.

At the end of 2024, Limelight had 51 active grantee partners.

Breakdown of expenditure	2024	2023
Donations	4.164.000	48% 6.498.000
Donations (to commence in 2025) ¹	3.970.000	46%
Staff costs	442.628	5% 356.764
Operating and other costs	172.628	2% 164.600
Financial costs	-107.600	-1% -14.402
Total expenditure	8.641.656	7.004.962

Donations per priority area	2024
Production and distribution of independent quality information	3.785.000 47%
Infrastructure	1.324.000 16%
Enabling environment	2.575.000 32%
Other	450.000 5%
Total expenditure	8.134.000

7. Our grantee partners in 2024

- Access Now
- ACOS Alliance
- AI Forensics
- Amnesty Tech
- Apache
- Arena for Journalism in Europe
- Átlátszó
- Bellingcat
- Bits of Freedom
- České centrum pro investigativní žurnalistiku, o.p.s. (Investigace.cz)
- CiviCERT
- Civitates (sub funds 2 and 3)
- Coalition Against SLAPPs in Europe (CASE)
- Coda Story
- Crime and Corruption Reporting Network (KRIK)
- De Balie
- Detector Media
- Digital Freedom Fund
- European AI & Society Fund (EAISF)
- European Digital Rights Initiative (EDRi)
- Follow the Money (Brussels office)
- Forbidden Stories
- Fumaça
- Fundación Ciudadana Civio
- Fundacja Ośrodek Kontroli Obywatelskiej OKO (OKO.press)
- Glitch
- International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ)
- Investico
- Investigate Europe
- Investigative Center of Jan Kuciak (ICJK)
- Investigative Reporting Project Italy (IRPI)
- Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)
- Journalismfund Europe
- La Quadrature du Net (LQDN)
- Lighthouse Reports
- Media Legal Defence Initiative (Media Defence)
- Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project (OCCRP)
- Oštros, Center za preiskovalno novinarstvo v jadranski regiji (Oštros)
- Pluralis
- Qurium Media Foundation
- Reporters United
- Spyware Accountability Initiative
- Stichting 1877
- The Baltic Center for Investigative Journalism (Re:Baltica)
- The Bureau of Investigative Journalism (TBIJ)
- Unbias the News

¹⁾ 12 donations totaling €3.97 million were made in 2024 for grants commencing in 2025. In accordance with Dutch accountancy guidelines, these are accounted for in this 2024 Annual Report.

Please note that for security reasons not all grantees have been included.

Limelight Foundation aims to bring together a community of like-minded funders who recognize the critical importance to society of a healthy information ecosystem and wish to get involved in supporting public interest journalism and/or work to strengthen the information ecosystem

Credits

This is a publication of Stichting Limelight Foundation. We are grateful to everyone who has contributed to this annual report.

Text	Jill Whittaker Limelight Foundation
Editing	Marijn Moltzer
Design	Blick – Visuele Communicatie
Contact details	Stichting Limelight Foundation PO Box 15652 1001 ND Amsterdam limelight.foundation enquiries@limelight.foundation
URL	
Email address	
Date of publication	May 2025
Disclaimer	Parts of this annual report may be distributed or cited, provided that Limelight Foundation and this annual report are cited as sources. No rights can be derived from the information provided in this annual report, and Limelight Foundation accepts no liability whatsoever from damages of any kind that may result from the use of or reliance on the information provided.

