

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for
Journalism
&
Public Media

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This brief explores the giving of private foundations, corporations, community foundations and major donors to nonprofit journalism organizations, public media outlets and university programs training the next generation of journalists.

Public media stations and large, independent outlets receive a significant portion of the sector's charitable contributions. Support from individual donors, which includes grants made through family foundations and donor-advised funds, also plays a significant role across the sector. As much as 90% of the typical nonprofit outlet's revenues come from combined private supports, versus earned sources like events, subscriptions and advertising.

Support for nonprofit journalism outlets has steadily increased in the past 15 years, as funders sought to address gaps in local and investigative reporting arising from for-profit outlets' aggressive cost-cutting and consolidation measures. The 2016 election underscored the risks of misinformation and galvanized funders, while the 2020 pandemic and murder of George Floyd accelerated efforts to support local news and outlets serving communities of color.

This brief explores the following long-term factors and trends every funder and fundraiser in journalism and public media should keep in mind in the months and years ahead:

Who's Giving

- Institutional grantmakers, mostly private foundations, play a leading role in the nonprofit journalism and media ecosystem. These entities focus on priorities like strengthening local news and investigative reporting, combating misinformation, and supporting BIPOC-led outlets and those serving communities of color.
- The corporate funding space is disproportionately dominated by two of the sector's largest funders, Facebook and Google, whose giving targets do not seem to differ substantially from those of foundations and individual donors.
- Major individual donors, many of whom hail from tech, finance and entertainment fields, tend to earmark gifts for initiatives to combat misinformation, independent journalism organizations, public media and university journalism education programs.
- The amount of funding from community foundations is small but growing, playing an important role in the local nonprofit journalism and media ecosystem.

Who's Getting

- The bulk of private giving flows to public media outlets in major metropolitan centers and, to a lesser extent, established national investigative outlets.
- Commentators are encouraging funders to cultivate a more balanced nonprofit media ecosystem by extending support to historically undercapitalized organizations.

The Big Issues & Funding Trends

- As nonprofit journalism and media organizations emerge from the pandemic era, funders' top priorities include bolstering local news, strengthening investigative reporting, combating misinformation, and boosting racial equity across the field.
- Funders' most prevalent grantmaking strategies include resourcing intermediaries to advance strategic priorities, helping organizations boost earned revenue by increasing reader retention and building fundraising capacity, and supporting university journalism programs and related activities.

Equity in the Sector

- In an effort to address longstanding disparities across the sector, funders are ramping up support for BIPOC-led outlets and those serving communities of color and supporting initiatives to cultivate journalists of color.
- Funders are seeking to advance gender equity in the field and help journalism organizations more effectively serve the needs of immigrant communities and individuals who identify as LGBTQ+.

Fundraising Now

- Some of the nonprofit journalism association leaders IP interviewed said that philanthropic support for journalism is surging. Fundraising from foundations – including solicitation from newly established charitable entities organized to support struggling for-profit newspapers – is becoming a more prevalent part of the news business.
- While many nonprofit journalistic enterprises said that fundraising is increasing, others pointed to major challenges in the medium- and long-term outlook.

In their evolving funding priorities, the philanthropic sector responds to developments across the broader media landscape and American society itself. Each of these catalysts – the demise of the for-profit news sector, the growing threat of online misinformation, and ongoing calls for social and racial justice – will be with us for the long term, with many unforeseen challenges looming on the horizon. With for-profit public interest media facing potentially inexorable decline, philanthropic support for journalism is increasing like never before.

Funders and nonprofit media organizations have identified a set of emerging opportunities for grantmakers like local climate change coverage, an intersectional approach that links the news to issues like the environment and healthcare, and increased support for international journalism outlets.

Introduction

Twenty-five years ago, a handful of journalism and media funders operated against the backdrop of a for-profit space where revenues were surging, metropolitan dailies thrived, and most Americans had access to at least one local outlet that provided relevant and trustworthy coverage.

U.S. newspapers' estimated advertising and circulation revenues dropped between 2000–2002, but recovered and steadily rose before peaking at an all-time high of \$49 billion in 2006. There was no profound sense of urgency for funders to resuscitate or replace components of the media ecosystem.

Digital media set in motion a confluence of developments that irreparably disrupted the sector and by doing so, opened up new and ever-growing channels of support for nonprofit news organizations. By laying out grantmakers' key priorities, this brief aims to help nonprofit journalism and media organizations align their fundraising activities with emerging areas of support.

The decline of for-profit news. Beginning in the early 2000s, the proliferation of online news sites began to vie for readers' attention. Tech giants slowly eroded the primary revenue stream of for-profit outlets—paid advertising. “Many factors” contributed to the sector's troubles, said Dan Froomkin, editor of Press Watch, “but none more so than the cornering of the digital advertising market by the duopoly of Facebook and Google.” All the while, short-sighted newspaper executives failed to pivot to the digital space.

As revenues began to nosedive beginning in the mid- to late 2000s, for-profit outlets embarked on

aggressive consolidation and cost-cutting measures. Thousands of reporters were laid off. Hundreds of outlets closed, leaving Americans without access to reliable local news sources, differing perspectives, or investigative reporting that kept a watchful eye on local officials.

Grantmakers found themselves navigating a radically transformed landscape. Foundations and donors stepped up to fill the growing breach by supporting independent journalism organizations and public media outlets grappling with diminishing federal appropriations. The Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) found that, of the approximately 200 nonprofit news organizations in the U.S., three-quarters of them launched between 2008–2018, a period marked by “major cutbacks by traditional news organizations.” Alumni, buoyed by a booming stock market, made big gifts to strengthen universities' journalism education offerings and build a pipeline of next-generation reporters.

All the while, the state of the for-profit news sector continued to deteriorate. In 2012, the year Facebook went public, U.S. newspapers' estimated advertising and circulation revenues fell to \$25 billion, [down 49%](#) from its 2006 high.

Growing concern over misinformation. If the tech revolution's existential effect on for-profit outlets' revenue model was the impetus of funder support over a prolonged period of time, the 2016 election was its more immediate analog—a six-month stretch of unprecedented developments underscoring the risks posed by unregulated social media giants, proliferating misinformation, and foreign interference in the democratic process.

Practically overnight, funders announced huge gifts aimed at combating “fake news,” boosting

news literacy, and restoring trust in the media. Commentators even had a term for the phenomenon—“the Trump Bump.” Many wondered if the trend would be short-lived. It wasn’t, thanks in no small part to social media networks’ inability—or, some would say, unwillingness—to tamp down on “click-worthy” misinformation; President Trump was himself a contributing factor, making a point to repeatedly denigrate the press as the “enemy of the people.”

According to Candid, foundation and donor-advised support for journalism and media outlets rose 37% from 2014 to 2018. The data does not capture the full breadth of giving from under-the-radar family foundations and major donors. For example, Candid cites \$3 million in total giving from Craig Newmark from 2014–2018. However, Newmark made a slew of additional gifts during this period, including a \$20 million gift to the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism in 2018. In addition, the data set produced no gifts from Facebook or Google. Since 2018, the companies have given a combined \$700 million in journalism-related support, far eclipsing the giving of prominent grantmakers like the Knight, Ford, Mellon, MacArthur and Open Society foundations.

This surge in philanthropic support continued to act as a counterweight to the sagging fortunes of for-profit media outlets. By 2018, newsroom employment at U.S. newspapers had [fallen 47%](#) from 2008, while advertising revenues declined an astonishing 62% over the same time period.

Key funder priorities

Two major signal events in 2020, the pandemic and George Floyd’s murder, had the effect of strengthening and expanding funder support for journalism outlets.

Throughout the pandemic, independent and local media outlets enjoyed increased traffic as readers sought out trusted information. At the same time, shuttered local brick-and-mortar businesses pulled advertisements, magnifying what Report for America co-founder Steve Waldman called local news’ “broken” revenue model. As the pandemic slowly recedes, fundraisers are encouraged to tap into grantmakers’ efforts to help outlets implement sustainable business models based on a mix of philanthropic dollars and earned revenue sources.

The murder of George Floyd and the protests that followed underscored funders’ insufficient support for BIPOC-led outlets and those serving communities of color. “Many funders are asking, out loud, how they can ensure that their dollars are being spent in much more equitable ways and how they can reach communities that they’ve only marginally engaged before,” said Tracie Powell, program officer of Borealis Philanthropies’ Racial Equity in Journalism Fund. Fundraisers can tap into this growing interest by articulating how their organization’s work addresses the information needs of historically underrepresented demographics and builds community engagement.

On January 6, 2021, protestors stormed the U.S. Capitol, driven by the false belief that the 2020 election was stolen, confirming civic-minded funders’ worst fears. The riot also reaffirmed funders’ long-held commitment to boosting local news. “The way to address misinformation and disinformation—which flourish in the absence of clear information—is to rebuild public trust,” said Media Impact Funders’ Executive Director Vince Stehle and Communications Director Nina Sachdev in a joint statement. “But you need to rebuild local news and invest heavily in diverse voices and communities in order to get there.”

Stehle and Sachdev’s comment suggests that fundraisers should broaden their pitch to civic-minded funders by accentuating how strong local journalism can act as a bulwark against divisive and inflammatory misinformation. With for-profit media continuing what may be its inexorable decline, philanthropic support for journalism is flourishing like never before, providing organizations with an unprecedented opportunity to engage funders around issues like supporting local news, curbing misinformation, and advancing racial equity.

The role of public media

As this brief details in the “Who’s Getting” section, a substantial portion of philanthropic dollars flow to public broadcasting outlets. The American public media field dates back to the passage of the Public Broadcasting Act in 1967, which created the private, nonprofit taxpayer-funded Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) with the mission of providing high-quality content and telecommunications services that are commercial-free and free of charge.

By law, [95% of the federal appropriation](#) of the CPB is earmarked as grants to local television and radio stations, including PBS, the nonprofit public broadcaster and television program distributor that was established in 1969, and NPR, the privately and publicly funded nonprofit media organization established in 1970. Since Congress stipulated that public media outlets must provide content free of charge, these organizations developed a revenue model that included government funding and philanthropy, a break with for-profit newspapers and television stations that generated revenues from paying customers and advertising dollars.

“For more than 50 years, public broadcasters commanded the attention of large audiences and

had significant power and influence,” wrote media and technology consultant Sue Gardner in a Knight Foundation white paper titled [“Public Broadcasting: Its Past and Its Future.”](#) Public broadcasters’ influence began to wane in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of cable TV and decline of government support. These factors led to a shift in the public media revenue model, as broadcasters became more reliant on a “market-centered” approach built on advertising and other commercial activities.

With the dawn of the internet age, broadcasters had to compete with media from around the world. By 2010, global tech giants came to dominate the broader media sector. Social media networks like Facebook and Twitter republished sensationalistic content without creating original content. Commentators found the confluence of these trends harmful to the body politic as public broadcasters tend to air what Gardner called “more hard news and current affairs programming” than their commercial counterparts.

By 2018, public media’s primary revenue source for subsidizing news production—paid advertising—had “mostly disappeared,” Gardner wrote, while public funding had all but evaporated. CPB currently manages a relatively meager \$450 million annually appropriated by Congress for public broadcasting. On average, less than 1% of NPR’s annual operating budget comes in the form of grants from CPB and federal agencies and departments.

Private funders’ desire to support objective, free and informative journalism can also serve as a bulwark against social media-driven misinformation, which helps to explain funders’ robust support for public media organizations.

Surveying the nonprofit field. The INN’s 2020 Index counts 309 nonprofit journalism member groups as of February 2021.

These outlets’ top revenue source is foundations (48%), followed by individuals (35%), earned sources like advertising and events (11%), and “other charitable” (5%). In contrast, “local” outlets, which constitute roughly one-third of the institute’s membership, are more reliant on individuals (40%), followed by foundations (33%), earned revenue (24%), and “other charitable” (2%).

Nonprofit media remains a relatively small part of the larger media landscape. By the end of 2019, the INN pegged the size of its news network, which primarily consisted of digital organizations that have been fully operational for at least a year, at **\$500 million**. In 2019, revenues at PBS and NPR (the parent company only) totaled **\$630 million** and **\$258 million**, respectively. In contrast, advertising revenue of U.S. newspaper publishers alone amounted to **\$11.52 billion** in 2019, although that figure was down 9.7% from the previous year.

Looking ahead, the overall composition of the nonprofit journalism field is “likely to shift from large, specialized reporting and investigative shops—which will continue to dominate in size and revenue but make up a smaller slice of the whole by number—toward more local news, and local/national partnerships and collaborations,” wrote the INN’s Michele McLellan and Jesse Holcomb. “This trend means that requests for donors to support news will multiply in many states and communities.”

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

The ecosystem of philanthropy supporting nonprofit journalism consists of private and family foundations, individual donors, corporations and government agencies. Historically, a handful of large national foundations providing support to prominent public media and investigative journalism outlets have dominated the field. However, in recent years, wealthier new entrants hailing from the tech and finance sectors have begun to reshape the ecosystem.

Google and Facebook have flooded the space with donations in an effort to bolster local news ecosystems, curb misinformation, and broker partnerships. Major donors like Craig Newmark, Pierre Omidyar, and John and Laura Arnold frame their support for independent journalism as a means to establish trust in civic institutions, reduce divisiveness across the body politic, and strengthen democracy. The aftermath of the January 6 attack on the U.S. capital only intensified these concerns, providing organizations with an opportunity to access a growing pool of financial support from these types of funders, most of which operate in a transparent and accessible manner.

When possible, fundraisers should align their organization's work with funders' broader social agenda and discrete grantmaking priorities like strengthening investigative reporting capacity, helping outlets design sustainable business models, and addressing the needs of diverse communities that have been historically underserved by mainstream providers. Organizations led by people of color are well-positioned to engage equity-minded funders like the Democracy Fund, and the Knight and Ford foundations, among many others.

According to Candid, as of April 2021, the 10 institutional givers providing the most to nonprofit journalism organizations from 2014–2018 were as follows:

Top 10 Journalism & Public Media Funders 2014 - 2018¹

Grantmaker	Dollar Value of Grants Awarded
John S. and James L. Knight Foundation	\$145M
Ford Foundation	\$140M
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation	\$138M
Silicon Valley Community Foundation	\$111M
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation	\$93M
Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation	\$85M
The California Endowment	\$74M
William and Flora Hewlett Foundation	\$69M
Robert Wood Johnson Foundation	\$69M
Lilly Endowment	\$52M

Source: Candid

The data was collected across the following search parameters: Audio recording, Mobile media, Publishing, Radio, Television, Web media, Information and media literacy, Media justice, Journalism, United States (country). Categories like “digital divide” and “net neutrality,” which focus on increasing public access to digital information generally, were excluded, as they will be covered in Inside Philanthropy's Civic Engagement and Democracy brief. An additional standalone brief will explore grantmaking for boosting access to information through “open data” practices (these initiatives are focused on open access to government systems/information and sometimes grouped with the public information efforts

discussed in this brief; however, the grant recipients tend to function far outside of the realm of public journalism).

Major donor-advised fund managers like Fidelity, Vanguard and Schwab also play an increasingly large role in the public journalism space with the large sums of personal donations they manage. By funding journalism organizations recommended by donors, DAFs essentially act as proxies for individuals. We have excluded data for these corporations in the top 10 list since nonprofit fundraisers often have difficulty directly engaging DAF donors or the fund’s operators. However, if for-profit DAF providers were included in the analysis from 2014–2018, one corporate vehicle, the Fidelity Investment Charitable Fund, would rank as the fifth-largest grantmaker. The fund processed \$105 million through over 29,000 grants for public journalism during this time period.

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

“Local news and information are essential to a healthy democracy. Newspapers are struggling financially and many have gone out of business creating news deserts. The number of reporters employed by newspapers is down over 60% in the last decade. Journalism projects funded by philanthropy must play a bigger role going forward.”

—Foundation professional, Ponte Vedra, Florida

In terms of the overall grant dollars, Facebook and Google have come to dominate the space. Funding flows through the Facebook Journalism Project and the Google News Initiative. Both programs are open and accessible to journalism fundraisers.

While many of the institutional grantmakers support national outlets, it’s also “very important to note that at the state and local level, most nonprofit

media funding comes from large, national foundations, rather than community foundations or public charities or donor-advised funds,” said MIF’s Stehle and Sachdev. Media Impact Funders is a membership organization that advances the work of over 100 foundations, high-net-worth individuals, and donors committed to ensuring that compelling media serves the public interest.

Stehle and Sachdev cited three particularly influential funders in the sector—the Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund and the Kaiser Family Foundation. The Democracy Fund, the pair said, is “intensely focused on issues of equity, and many of its efforts are focused on investing in leadership and emerging talent in communities of color.” Meanwhile, the Kaiser Family Foundation “has shaped the way media and journalism pays attention to health news and information” with its editorially independent health journalism newsroom, Kaiser Health News.

With support from funders like the Ford and W.K. Kellogg foundations, Borealis launched the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund in 2019 to bolster the capacity and sustainability of news organizations led by people of color and increase civic engagement for communities of color. “We began to explore the idea for a pooled fund to secure resources for newer and/or regional news outlets that serve BIPOC communities with the goal of helping them grow to appropriate scale,” said Ford’s Margaret Morton, program director, Creativity and Free Expression, and Farai Chideya, program officer, Creativity and Free Expression. “While these organizations provide critical news coverage, they have generally been under-resourced.” Now at \$12 million and growing, the fund “is truly hitting its stride,” the pair told IP, “with contributors including Craig Newmark Philanthropies, the Democracy Fund, and many other donors.”

Covering Climate Collaborative (CCC), an initiative of the [Local Media Association](#), makes grants to support local news organizations covering climate change. This initiative is poised to address growing demand across the sector—respondents to an IP survey cited “climate change” as a funding strategy that merited greater support from journalism and media funders.

Many of the prominent funders in this giving area derive their wealth from the journalism and media industries. The Knight Foundation operates in cities where brothers John S. and James L. Knight once published newspapers. In 1991, James died, leaving \$200 million to the foundation.

Gerry Lenfest formed Lenfest Communications in 1974 and sold it to AT&T in 1999, which in turn sold it to Comcast in 2000 for \$6.7 billion. In 2014, he purchased Philadelphia Media Network, the holding company that owned the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, *Philadelphia Daily News*, and the newspapers’ joint website, Philly.com. Two years later, he donated the publications to the newly formed nonprofit Lenfest Institute for Journalism. He also donated \$20 million to the institute’s endowment and \$40 million in 2017.

The Henry Luce Foundation, whose namesake founded magazines such as *Time*, *Fortune* and *Sports Illustrated*, funds the Luce/American Council of Learned Societies Program in Religion, Journalism & International Affairs to foster new connections between scholars and journalists covering international affairs, and the GroundTruth Project’s Global Migration, Refugees and Resettlement Reporting Fellowship. This brief takes a closer look at funders with roots in the media and publishing field in the “Corporate Giving” section.

Low-profile family foundations and non-DAF individual donors are enormously influential players in the journalism funding ecosystem. In addition to billionaires like Newmark and Omidyar, alumni donors frequently make gifts that can match or eclipse the annual journalism grantmaking for a mid-sized foundation. For instance, in 2018, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill alumni Don Curtis and his wife Barbara gave the UNC School of Media and Journalism a \$10 million gift through their Curtis Foundation to build a new media center and seed a fund to support undergraduate majors who participate in out-of-class activities.

Poynter.

“As is common in the foundation world, some of the same well-known outlets turn up over and over as recipients. [A] long-established practice among foundations is to put their money where they can be most confident of the desired result.”

—Rick Edmonds, media business analyst and leader of News Transformation, Poynter Institute

These gifts often materialize after years of close collaboration with the advancement officers or on the heels of a series of smaller gifts from the donor. As to what drives mega-donor giving, a December 2019 Public Administration Review report cited the “desire to have an impact” by increasing “the quality and/or reputation” of a university as the “most common motivation” for this affluent demographic. Fundraisers may want to consider these factors and how a potential gift aligns with the university’s mission while cultivating support from affluent alumni donors.

Funders that lack programs explicitly devoted to journalism and media grantmaking support organizations to “help sustain strong information ecosystems in the fields in which we work,” said

Neha Gohil, communications officer, Education and U.S. Democracy at the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. For example, the Hewlett Foundation's Environment Program provides support for the Society for Environmental Journalists.

The American Press Institute's "[Guiding Principles for Funders of Nonprofit Media](#)" provides grantmakers and grantees with a useful framework laying out respective roles to protect the independence, integrity and impact of the organization's work. Key principles include funder transparency to avoid perceived conflict of interest, long-term views of grantee sustainability and organizational health, and a commitment to unrestricted general operating support.

The journalism funding ecosystem consists of additional grantmakers that give more modestly but are nonetheless important players. These funders include the Abrams Foundation, Rita Allen Foundation, Annenberg Foundation, Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, Emerson Collective, Heising-Simons Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Lenfest Institute for Journalism, Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations, Rockefeller Foundation and the Tow Foundation.

Regional funders are also major players. Examples include Joyce Foundation and Robert R. McCormick Foundation (Chicago), Inasmuch Foundation (Oklahoma), Barr Foundation (New England), Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation (New Jersey), Heinz Endowments (Pittsburgh/Southwest Pennsylvania), and the William Penn Foundation and Wyncote Foundation (Philadelphia).

Funders support a broad spectrum of niche areas across the journalism space, including

photojournalism (W. Eugene Smith Memorial Fund, CatchLight Foundation), coverage of religion (Lilly Endowment), the environment and science (Earth Journalism Network, Walton Family Foundation, Sloan Foundation, Fund for Environmental Journalism), arts and culture (Andy Warhol Foundation and Creative Capital), health (the California Wellness Foundation, Annie E. Casey Foundation, Association of Health Care Journalists, and Helmsley Trust), and education (Lumina Foundation).

Who's Getting

The bulk of institutional philanthropic giving for journalism flows to public media organizations in major metropolitan areas with sophisticated fundraising operations and established independent journalism outlets. NPR receives support from a broad array of private and family foundations and donor-advised funds. Its funders include the Rita Allen, Annenberg, Hewlett, MacArthur, and Wyncote foundations.

WNET is America's flagship PBS station: parent company of New York's THIRTEEN, WLIW 21, WLIW-FM and operator of NJTV, the statewide public media network in New Jersey and its news division, NJ SPOTLIGHT NEWS. In 2015, WNET announced a gift of approximately \$20 million from the estate of Sylvia and Simon B. Poyta, then the largest bequest in the station's history, which established the Sylvia and Simon B. Poyta Programming Endowment to Fight Anti-Semitism.

The Boston-based WGBH is the largest producer of PBS content for TV and the web. WGBH and its programs are supported by a broad mix of funders, including the MacArthur, Ford, and Heising-Simons foundations.

In a 2019 report exploring grantmakers’ support for radio and audio organizations, MIF’s Sarah Armour-Jones cited those mediums’ “low barriers to entry, flexibility and ubiquity, offering funders tremendous opportunities to educate and inform, tell critical stories, engage communities and counteract consolidated and one-sided programming.”

Public TV and radio outlets’ revenue models differ dramatically from those of nonprofit journalism organizations like ProPublica and the Center for Investigative Reporting.

Recipient	Dollar Value of Grants Received
National Public Radio	\$102M
WNET	\$101M
WGBH Educational Foundation	\$91M
WETA-Greater Washington Educational Telecommunications Association	\$74M
ProPublica	\$73M
Northern California Public Broadcasting	\$52M
Council on Library Information Resources	\$49M
WYNC Radio	\$45M
Minnesota Public Radio American Public Media	\$39M
Center for Investigative Reporting	\$47M

Source: Candid³

NPR is primarily funded by station dues and fees (35%) and corporate sponsorships (33%), which, according to Report for America’s Waldman, are “pretty much the same thing as advertising.” [NPR received 13%](#) from “contributions of cash and other financial assets.” NPR has over 1,000 member stations that mostly rely on contributions from listeners. At 38%, individuals provide the [highest percentage](#) of member station revenues, followed by corporations (19%), “investments and other” (11%), foundations (10%), colleges and universities (10%), federal appropriation via CPB (8%), and federal, state and local governments (4%).

In contrast, “contributions and grants” constituted 96% of ProPublica’s and 97% of the Center for Investigative Reporting’s total revenues in 2018. According to the [Nonprofit News Institute](#), the average member organization generates 83% of revenue from philanthropic sources—48% from foundations and 35% from individuals—and 11% from earned sources.

A 2018 report called “Funding the News,” by the Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy and Northeastern University, found that nearly half of the \$1.8 billion allocated by funders from 2010 to 2015 flowed to flagship public radio stations in cities like New York, Boston and Philadelphia. Moreover, 80% of foundation dollars supported just 25 news nonprofits and only 5% of total funding went to state and local news outlets. The study characterized funders’ penchant for established and affluent coastal outlets as an example of “elites supporting elites.”

A year later, Monash University professor Bill Birnbauer analyzed the IRS returns of 60 Institute for Nonprofit News members, accounting for roughly half of the institute’s membership at the



time. According to Birnbauer, foundations and donors gave those outlets a total of \$469.5 million between 2009 and 2015. However, three national news organizations—ProPublica, the Center for Public Integrity and the Center for Investigative Reporting—took in \$185.4 million, or 39% of total funding. The 20 largest organizations received 90% of total funding.

“As is common in the foundation world, some of the same well-known outlets turn up over and over as recipients,” wrote the Poynter Institute’s Rick Edmonds, referring to what he called the “long-established practice among foundations” to “put their money where they can be most confident of the desired result.”

But many journalism experts believe the practice harms the sector. “We need to grapple with the concentration of foundation investments within a relatively few nonprofits,” said MIF’s Stehle and Sachdev. “And there’s certainly a case to be made for more funding of nonprofit media outlets outside of the Northeast and the West Coast, where most major foundations are based. We won’t be able to address the equity piece if many states still do not have access to quality news.”

This phenomenon also applies to community foundation giving. Media Impact Funders found that, of \$17 million in community foundation support for investigative journalism since 2009, more than \$6 million—or 35%—was directed toward ProPublica and the Center for Investigative Reporting. Moreover, eight states do not have a single community foundation that made journalism-related grants.

Experts who spoke with IP advised fundraisers seeking support from grantmakers with histories of funding mostly established, national media

organizations might do best to accentuate how their own media initiative provides readers with trustworthy and relevant coverage, especially if the outlet operates in a “news desert” devoid of other reputable local sources.

Foundation and DAF grants flowed to the following priorities from 2014–2018:

Subject	Amount Funded
Television	\$825M
Radio	\$924M
Journalism	\$574M
Media Justice	\$198M
Web Media	\$186M

Source: Candid

Giving & Getting Deeper Dive

Support for journalism organizations has grown steadily in recent years. Kathy Im, director of MacArthur Foundation’s Journalism & Media program, attributes this increasing support to funders’ recognition of “the full impact of the steady and dramatic decline of the news industry on American democracy, but also because of Donald Trump’s and his supporters’ persistent attacks on the press.”

The pandemic compelled journalism funders to provide unrestricted general operating support. However, leaders told IP that foundations need to do more. “Too much journalism funding is restricted, and this ultimately undermines a newsroom’s independence and hampers the ability and agility of newsrooms to pursue unexpected challenges and opportunities,” said the MacArthur Foundation’s Im.



A year after the beginning of the pandemic, experts were still encouraging fundraisers to ask funders explicitly for unrestricted support. “Organizations have a right for general operating support and multi-year funding,” said Hilary Pennington, Ford’s executive vice president of programs. “The more that organizations feel brave enough to ask for that, the better, even if they don’t always get it.”

After George Floyd’s murder, funders ramped up support for racial justice initiatives and pledged to make their leadership ranks more representative of the communities they serve. “I’ve noticed a growing number of institutional funders take a pause to assess their funding practices,” said Tracie Powell, program officer of Borealis Philanthropy’s Racial Equity in Journalism Fund. But grant dollars are only one part of the equation. “If we are going to position our grantee partners for success, we have to provide more than money,” Powell said. We have to offer training, give them access to our critical networks, and share expertise and technology.”

In August 2020, IP surveyed funders and fundraisers in the journalism and media fields to get their take on the state of the sector. The survey listed 12 sources of unearned revenue and asked respondents whether the importance of that source

of revenue is increasing in importance, decreasing, or staying the same. For those whose work includes journalism and media, most said private and family foundations were decreasing in importance as a funding source for the field (about 6 in 10 said this), followed by large individual donors (about half), and community foundations (4 in 10). Giving circles, currently a small source of support for the field, comprised the source that the greatest percentage of respondents cited as “increasing in importance,” (about 6 in 10 said this) followed by public/private partnerships (about half), and “crowdfunding” (about half). Three-quarters of those IP survey respondents said that philanthropic interest and funding levels for their field was either “gaining momentum” (51%) or “about the same” (24%) in the midst of the pandemic.

The Big Issues & Beyond

As nonprofit journalism and media organizations emerge from the pandemic and work past the Trump era, the most pressing issues for the field revolve around bolstering local news, strengthening investigative reporting, combating misinformation, and investing in issues of equity. (This brief explores the equity mandate in greater detail in the “Perspectives on Equity” section.)

Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Grantmakers	Grants Awarded	Recipients	Year-over-Year Trend in Total Funding
2014	\$617M	7,155	19,011	2,849	--
2015	\$727M	8,051	34,125	3,038	+18%
2016	\$775M	8,045	38,589	3,306	+7%
2017	\$780M	7,451	19,499	2,970	+6%
2018	\$846M	7,747	21,895	3,826	+8%

Source: Candid

Program Spotlight: Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation Fund

In 2018, the Knight Foundation and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism announced a joint \$20 million, five-year commitment for a “new national initiative to strengthen local journalism for the digital age.” The fund is based in Philadelphia and is equally funded by both organizations. Inaugural grants were awarded to Resolve Philadelphia (\$250,000); News Catalyst at the Klein College of Media and Communication (\$2 million) and the Philadelphia Inquirer (\$3 million).

Boosting local media ecosystems. Research by the University of North Carolina’s School of Media and Journalism found that more than 1 in 5 newspapers has closed over the past decade and a half, leaving thousands of communities at risk of becoming “news deserts,” that is, a community that is no longer covered by daily newspapers. In addition, half of the 3,143 counties in the country now have only one newspaper covering local communities. Almost 200 counties in the country have no newspaper at all.

Driven by the belief that a strong local news ecosystem can boost engagement with readers, restore trust in civic institutions, hold elected officials accountable, and curb the spread of misinformation, funders have committed vast resources to reverse this trend.

In January 2019, Facebook announced a three-year, \$300 million commitment to invest in local news programs, partnerships, and content development efforts. A month later, the Knight Foundation said it would double its investment in strengthening journalism to \$300 million over five years, with a focus on building local news. “We’re not funding

one-offs,” said Alberto Ibarguen, Knight Foundation president. “We’re helping to rebuild a local news ecosystem, reliable and sustainable, and we’re doing it in a way that anyone who cares can participate.”

COVID-19 further underscored the importance of local news. Residents turned to trusted outlets for “shelter-in-place” orders, case numbers, and vaccine testing sites. In March 2020, Facebook announced another \$100 million commitment to local news. Of the total committed, the company allocated \$25 million in emergency grant funding through Facebook Journalism Project and funneled the remaining \$75 million to global news organizations through Facebook marketing and ad space purchased by the company to market itself through those outlets.

Funders like the Lenfest Institute and the Knight, MacArthur, McCormick and Driehaus foundations also stepped up to provide emergency support to local news outlets. Looking ahead, funders say they will remain committed to shoring up local news ecosystems. Organizations can effectively leverage this interest by highlighting that their work provides trusted local coverage, meaningfully enriches readers’ lives, and unites “neighbors with common interests,” said Report for America co-founder Steve Waldman.

Meanwhile, some for-profit outlets are considering transitioning to a nonprofit model. Interest in this approach gained currency in 2016 when H.F. Lenfest donated the Philadelphia Inquirer, the Philadelphia Daily News and Philly.com to the newly formed nonprofit Lenfest Institute for Journalism. (Lenfest passed away in August 2018.)

In 2019, Knight published a report laying out a menu of philanthropic options for profit-making

newspapers, including case studies illustrating tax-related implications. The same year, the IRS signed off on the Salt Lake Tribune's request to become a nonprofit.

By June 2020, the [2020 INN Index](#) found that 62% of the institute's outlets focus on local and state reporting. "It is clear that local reporting is a growth area," wrote the index's Michele McLellan and Jesse Holcomb. "More than one-third of the outlets are local, up from one-fourth three years ago."

That same year, six news organizations converted from for-profit to nonprofit news, up from two in 2019 and none before then, according to Jonathan Kealing, chief networking officer of the Institute for Nonprofit News. Kealing anticipates more for-profits will consider the nonprofit model, increasing the number of organizations competing for philanthropic support. "When things start to bounce back, and things are just a little more stable, organizations that may have survived but barely will look for those other paths," he said.

Kealing's prediction requires some nuance. The four Chicago-based outlets that transitioned to nonprofit status under an organization called Growing Community Media were "independently owned or closely held," publisher Dan Haley told IP. Haley said he isn't "expecting a large group of weeklies under corporate ownership to make this transition." In addition, outlets like The Guardian and the New York Times have formed separate independent charitable organizations to generate support for their journalism work.

Curbing misinformation. In the aftermath of the events of 2016, including an election marred by foreign interference, an explosion of social-media-driven conspiracy theories and the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica data scandal, civic-minded

funders ramped up efforts to combat the proliferation of online misinformation.

"The tools of the tech industry's platforms are now a big part of our lives and a big part of the way we govern ourselves—our politics—and it has to be done just right," Craigslist founder Craig Newmark told IP in 2018 after committing \$20 million for The Markup, a journalism outfit that investigates and examines the effects of the tech industry.

"Previously, we didn't quite get how big the effect would be, what the effect would be. Now, we do. People with goodwill who have the resources should do what we can to make things better for everyone."

Venture Philanthropy Spotlight



According to the American Journalism Project (AJP) website 2,100 communities have lost their local newspapers since 2004. This ongoing collapse of local journalism is one of the many reasons why Elizabeth Green and John Thornton established AJP. Now with around \$50 million in its initial fund, it is offering financial investments, venture support and movement building to "exceptional leaders with newsrooms that hold the powerful accountable, combat disinformation, and deepen civic participation."

Channeling Newmark's sentiments, a broad range of funders responded by allocating support for research into the origins of digital misinformation, building trust across communities, and empowering consumers and journalists to detect disreputable online sources. Knight, Hewlett and Ford foundations, as well as Facebook and the Democracy Fund, have all launched initiatives in recent years aimed at curbing disinformation.

These produced significant results, said Joshua Stearns, director of the Democracy Fund’s Public Square Program. “We have seen that over and over pandemic—where community organizers, researchers, advocates and educators organized around new networks helped suppress bad information and boost good information.” Funders drew from these experiences in the spring of 2020 to curb online misinformation about COVID-19.

Less than a year later, funders’ worst fears came to pass when Trump supporters, fueled by election-related misinformation, stormed the Capitol. In response, funders’ post-January 6 action items look a lot like the ones that preceded it, albeit with an even greater sense of urgency. “The best defense is a good offense,” Lenfest Institute’s Friedlich told IP. “Fake news and misinformation fill voids where there is a lack of quality news and information.”

Facebook and Google have committed millions to combat online misinformation while continuing to rely on algorithms designed to maximize what the *Wall Street Journal’s* Joanna Stern called “the reach of the incendiary—the attacks, the misinformation, the conspiracy theories” that push us “further into our own hyperpolarized filter bubbles.”

Foundation leaders told IP that until social media companies change their algorithms to de-escalate public discourse, funders’ efforts to combat misinformation will only go so far. “We do not yet have the visibility into platform operations that allows us to truly understand what is happening, who sees what, and to properly study the impact and reach of social media in particular,” Open Society Foundations’ Vera Franz said. “We need access to the platforms’ data and algorithms so we can understand and keep the platforms accountable.”

Looking ahead, funders face an array of challenges inhibiting their work in curbing misinformation. Paul Cheung, the Knight Foundation’s director of journalism and technology innovation, told IP that while it is investing in training to help journalists detect misinformation, grantmakers will need to do more. “Who can fund media literacy for different segments of our populations so that they can distinguish facts from fiction?” he said. “Who can equip community leaders with resources so that they can prevent their community from a misinformation attack?”

Strengthening investigative reporting. Drew Sullivan, founder of the Organized Crime and Corruption Reporting Project, speaking at the 2019 Global Investigative Journalism Conference, predicted that “the for-profit world for investigative reporting will almost disappear, I’m afraid, and we will go back to a public service [model].” The next year, newsroom layoffs reached a record high, growing nearly 200% compared to 2019, according to a study from the global outplacement firm Challenger, Gray & Christmas.

Disruption across the for-profit sector presented nonprofit organizations with an opportunity to engage civic-minded funders focused on holding public officials accountable and strengthening the body politic. Laura Arnold, the wife of billionaire hedge fund manager John Arnold, succinctly encapsulated this sentiment, saying, “Policy work won’t mean a thing if we have no democracy, if our political institutions are broken, and if there’s no check on power. Unfortunately, we can’t rely solely on private journalism to carry the banner of transparency and rigorous reporting. The business model of journalism is broken.” The couple’s giving vehicle, Arnold Ventures, is a strong supporter of investigative journalism. Grantees include the

Global Investigative Journalism Network, Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism, and InquireFirst. The Arnolds also made a five-year commitment of \$5.75 million to fund an investigative reporting unit jointly operated by ProPublica and the Texas Tribune.



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—Laura Arnold, cofounder and co-chair, Arnold Ventures

The pandemic further incentivized citizens to demand accountability from their elected officials, said Chris Fitzimon, director of States Newsroom, which has established a network of over a dozen outlets dedicated to statehouse reporting with support from Google, small foundations, and an array of individual donors. People “want to know what the state governments are doing,” he told IP, while predicting more disruption across the for-profit sector. “Our biggest concern about statehouse coverage is how hedge funds and private equity are buying and consolidating legacy outlets, shortchanging the people who depend on their coverage.” (Hedge fund Alden Global Capital [recently purchased](#) Tribune Publishing and its nine metropolitan papers.)

In December 2020, the *New York Times* announced it had raised \$4 million to launch Headway, a three-year journalism initiative to investigate global and national challenges. Funders for the initiative include the Ford Foundation, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and the William and Flora Hewlett Foundation. A month later, Lenfest Institute Chief

Executive Officer and Executive Director Jim Friedlich told IP that the funder had doubled the size of the investigative news team at the Philadelphia Inquirer by building and launching Spotlight PA, a nonprofit newsroom covering state government in Pennsylvania. “With a team of more than 12 investigative journalists, Spotlight PA covers governmental excess, corruption and fake news, and it partners with more than 50 newsrooms around Pennsylvania,” he said.

By underscoring that strong investigative journalism can hold the powerful accountable while combating misinformation, Friedlich provides fundraisers with a resonant talking point in their discussions with civic-minded funders like the Open Society Foundations. “Aggressively countering disinformation is not enough,” said Vera Franz, deputy director at the grantmakers’ Information Program. “That is why we fund networks of independent, investigative journalists and locally based journalism organizations that produce credible, verifiable information and build trust with local audiences.”

Funder Trends & Strategies

The most prevalent grantmaking strategies of nonprofit journalism funders include resourcing intermediaries to advance strategic priorities, and helping organizations build sustainable business models by increasing reader retention and building fundraising capacity. Funders also provide extensive support to university educational initiatives.

Resourcing intermediaries. Beyond directly supporting nonprofit media outlets, funders support grantmaking intermediaries focused on key initiatives like bolstering local news. One of the most promising recipients of philanthropic dollars

is the American Journalism Project (AJP), a venture philanthropy organization and grantmaker that helps local outlets build a sustainable business model on a revenue mix of earned income, public funding and philanthropy.

By 2020, AJP had raised at least \$46 million from a who's who of prominent journalism funders, including the Knight Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Democracy Fund and the Facebook Journalism Project. The project's long-term goal calls for catalyzing \$1 billion in financial support for independent local news.

AJP expects grantees to have a public service mission, offer a free core product, produce high-quality local news, have local financial backing, and aspire to grow. AJP shares information about new opportunities on an ongoing basis on its website and with organizations who have submitted an inquiry via its site.

Program Spotlight



**KNIGHT
FOUNDATION**

In 2019 the Knight Foundation launched a \$50 million initiative to better understand how technology is transforming democracy. The initiative was part of its larger \$300 million investment to strengthen journalism and democracy.

Since its launch, funding has led to the establishment of new research centers at five universities around the country, creating a well-resourced network of independent research organizations and policy think tanks focused on understanding technology's impact on democracy and helping to inform solutions.

The Media Democracy Fund (MDF) supports organizations defending people's freedom of expression and their right to communicate in the digital age. Its funding partners include the Democracy Fund, MacArthur Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, and Mozilla. MDF has made more than \$34 million in grants to over 200 organizations since its founding in 2006. The MDF does not accept unsolicited grant applications or requests for funding.

Report for America is a national service program that aims to put at least 1,000 local reporters in the field by 2024. "Report for America and our peers have benefited greatly from the leadership of the Knight Foundation, the MacArthur Foundation, Facebook, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the Joyce Foundation and more, who see the many ripple effects good journalism can have at the local level and nationally," Report for America co-founder Steven Waldman told IP.

Boosting outlets' earned revenues. Jennifer Preston, Knight Foundation's vice president for journalism, told IP that while "there is not a single model for sustainability, the strongest organizations include leaders who are completely focused on revenue, whether it's from local philanthropists, national foundations, local events, sponsorships, advertising, memberships or subscriptions."

The [INN 2020 Index](#) found that in 2019, earned revenue made up, on average, 11% of reporting members' total revenue. The pandemic made outlets even more reliant on philanthropy since they couldn't earn revenue through live events and advertising from local brick-and-mortar businesses. As a result, funders are looking at ways to boost outlets' earned revenue sources to build long-term financial stability in a post-COVID-19 world.

Citing its 2020 findings as an “impetus,” the INN and Google News Initiative released “The Nonprofit News Guide to Earned Revenue,” a playbook showing nonprofit newsrooms how to grow revenue from display advertising, event sponsorships, sponsored content and other earned sources. “It is apparent,” the authors wrote, “that nonprofit news organizations have an enormous, largely untapped opportunity to dramatically grow their earned revenue.”

One opportunity is retaining readers who turned to outlets for pandemic-related information. Facebook launched the Retention Accelerator Program in 2018 to help local newsrooms optimize their subscription and membership models. A year later, it committed over \$20 million to continue the program in the U.S. In June 2020, Facebook published key findings gleaned from a cohort of 16 participating outlets like the *Los Angeles Times*, the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and the *Philadelphia Inquirer*.

Funders are also helping nonprofit outlets engage individual donors. In late 2016, the Knight Foundation, in a partnership with the Democracy Fund and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, launched NewsMatch, a nationwide campaign focused on three interlocking goals: driving more donations to nonprofit journalism, strengthening nonprofit newsrooms’ fundraising capacity, and promoting the role of nonprofit news in America. Newmatch has raised \$100 million for nonprofit journalism since its inception.

Supporting university activities and initiatives. The Shorenstein Center’s 2018 “Funding the News” report found that top 10 U.S. foundation funders for university-based journalism initiatives from 2010–2015 were, in order, the Knight Foundation,

Ford Foundation, William Penn Foundation, Gordon & Betty Moore Foundation, Wyncote Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, W.K. Kellogg Foundation, Open Society Foundation, Carnegie Corporation, and Omidyar Network Fund.

Initiative Spotlight: Headway *The New York Times*

Founded by Michael Kimmelman and launched in 2020, Headway is a three-year journalism initiative covering a “range of economic, social, health, infrastructural and environmental challenges.” It plans to produce 10-12 projects a year, develop an online platform focused on community engagement and create a new fellowship supporting local news. Thanks in part to funding from the Ford, Stavros Niarchos, and the Hewlett foundations, Headway’s coverage is free and does not require a subscription for access. Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors serves as Headway’s nonprofit fiscal sponsor.

Funders provided approximately \$147 million to university journalism/communication programs in general support from 2010–2015, with two foundations and universities accounting for nearly half the funding—Annenberg Foundation, which gave \$50 million to build a new academic building at the University of Southern California’s Annenberg School of Communication, and the Donald W. Reynolds Foundation, which donated \$30 million to the Reynolds Journalism Institute at the University of Missouri School of Journalism.

Funders also earmark support for journalism scholarships and internships, specialized training opportunities, and named professorships or faculty hiring initiatives.

Perspectives on Equity

Nonprofit journalism leaders and foundations that support them had been addressing equity challenges long before the pandemic and upsurge in public demands for racial justice. However, funding experts told IP this support was often insufficient. “In the wake of the 2016 election, there was a rush to invest in tech solutions and tools to address misinformation, rather than learning from and investing in the communities who have been battling these issues for a long time,” said the Democracy Fund’s Stearns.

The Democracy Fund defines “equity in journalism” as “investing in newsrooms led by and serving historically marginalized groups, supporting organizations working to shift industry culture and leadership, and closing historic resource gaps that philanthropy has helped to perpetuate.” In 2018, the funder launched the Engaged Journalism Lab with the mission of engaging funders to support equity in journalism. A year later, the lab published a report, “[Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Journalism: What Funders Can Do](#),” laying out an operational roadmap for grantmakers in the space.

COVID-19 underscored what Craig Newmark called “the need for trusted news sources that prioritize the needs of underserved communities, who will be among the most impacted.” Funders are pursuing a range of pathways to address equity, including

supporting BIPOC-led newsrooms, boosting the ranks of journalists of color, and supporting organizations advancing equity efforts focused on women, immigrants and LGBTQ+ communities.

Calls for direct support to BIPOC-led newsrooms. According a Democracy Fund analysis, based on available data in the Foundation Maps for Media Funding, \$1.1 billion went into journalism more generally in the United States from 2013 to 2017. However, only 8.1% of this funding flowed to journalism efforts specifically designed to serve populations that included racial and ethnic groups, women and girls, and LGBTQ+ communities.

A Borealis Philanthropy study reached a similar conclusion. Researchers interviewed 114 news media outlets serving communities of color and found that 45% of respondents cited “advertising” as a major source of revenue. Only 2% cited “grants.”

The Ford Foundation’s Margaret Morton and Farai Chideya told IP that this stark funding discrepancy stems from funders’ misconceptions of what kinds of outlets have sufficient capacity. “Historically, larger and generally white-led news organizations were seen as ones which had the ability to absorb funding; while many led by underrepresented groups like disabled journalists, people of color, or lower wage earners, were seen as “not able to scale”



“[The MacArthur Foundation is most concerned with] the proliferation of disinformation and the media and political environment that allows it to spread and flourish and the lack of diversity and inclusion inside newsrooms, particularly in leadership roles, and the feeble institutional response to the vitriolic attacks experienced by women and people of color reporters.”

—Kathy Im, director of Journalism and Media, MacArthur Foundation

or “not having capacity.” Ford has “learned how to judiciously make grants to organizations which meet their needs and their ability to scale with equity,” the pair said. “Scaling organizations which do not embrace equity simply means taking inequity to scale.”



In September 2021, Democracy Fund joined other funders pledging to raise \$50 million over the next five years to support Black, African, Arab, Middle Eastern, Muslim, and South Asian (BAMEMSA) communities “deeply impacted by the United States’ response to 9/11.” The fund also has a grantmaking program dedicated to BAMEMSA-led organizations. Recent grantees include the RISE Together Fund, Pillars Fund, and the InSTITUTE for Public Understanding.

As noted in the Who’s Giving section, Ford provided seed funding for Borealis Philanthropies’ Racial Equity in Journalism Fund, which supports outlets led by and serving communities of color. “One of the biggest challenges I have in running this fund is helping folks expand their notion of what journalism is,” said the fund’s program officer Tracie Powell. “It’s not what we say it is, it’s what communities say it is.” Powell argued that funders also need to reconsider burdensome reporting requirements. “Providing applicants and grantees with reams of paperwork isn’t helpful,” she said. “Whereas most funders put the onus on grantees, it mostly now falls on me as a program officer. My job is to interview grantees, translate it into foundation-speak, and report it to our funders.”

In 2020, Leaders for a New Chicago, an initiative of the Field Foundation of Illinois, announced its

Media and Storytelling initiative will expand the reporting and storytelling capacity of a more diverse set of news outlets, reporters and storytellers with grants totaling \$1 million a year for the next three years. The initiative receives support from the MacArthur Foundation’s Jack Fuller Legacy Initiative and the Democracy Fund.

Funders’ support for BIPOC-led outlets complements efforts to boost “civic engagement for communities of color.” In 2020, the Community Listening and Engagement Fund launched with support from the Knight Foundation, the Democracy Fund and the Lenfest Institute. The fund subsidized news outlets’ partnerships with Hearken and GroundSource, two services that help newsrooms produce more relevant, differentiated, and engaging content to help newsrooms better connect with their communities. But a representative from Knight recently told IP that the fund is no longer open.

Funding experts interviewed by IP cited an array of front-line organizations working to advance racial equity and combat disinformation campaigns aimed at communities of color, including Media Justice, Color of Change, Free Press, and Disinfo Defense League.

Cultivating journalists of color. People of color made up nearly 40% of the U.S. population, according to 2018 Census Bureau figures. In comparison, only 16.55% of journalists in U.S. newsrooms in 2017 were people of color—down from 16.94% in 2016, according to the American Society of News Editors’ newsroom census. Of all newsroom leaders in 2017, only 13.4% were BIPOC.

Funders have adopted approaches to building a pipeline of journalists of color. The Chan Zuckerberg Initiative aims to increase diversity,

inclusion and representation in the University of Santa Cruz's science journalism program. Funders also support organizations like the Ida B. Wells Society for Investigative Reporting, which cultivates journalists of color; and the International Women's Media Foundation, which provides emergency grants to help Black journalists facing financial hardships or seeking mental healthcare.

In a 2019 piece on the Knight Foundation's blog, former director of Journalism LaSharah S. Bunting argued that funders hadn't sufficiently addressed "the institutional racism and unconscious biases that pervade many news organizations."

Bunting framed Knight's \$1.2 million investment in the Robert C. Maynard Institute for Journalism Education as "an attempt to help newsrooms rethink solutions to the diversity crisis." Knight's grant funded the institute's Equity and Inclusion Transformation Program, which embedded specialists in newsrooms "to help them better inform underserved communities and establish more equitable and inclusive workplaces."



"If news outlets are to survive, they must engage new and younger audiences who are increasingly more diverse. They need to be relevant to the people who live in their communities and attract and nurture a diverse workforce. They must commit to making comprehensive structural changes to their organizational cultures, putting the onus on all leadership and staff—not just the people of color."

— LaSharah S. Bunting, former director of Journalism, Knight Foundation

IP's 2020 survey found that fundraisers and philanthropic professionals in the journalism and media field want funders to do more to address diversity issues in the months and years ahead. IP presented respondents with a list of 11 funding strategies that merited "increasing commitment" from funders. Thirty-seven percent of respondents cited "centering racial justice" as the second-most urgent need, trailing only "climate change" (38%). (Respondents could select multiple strategies.)

Advancing gender equity. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation commissioned researchers at AKAS consulting to gauge women's role in the global news ecosystem as part of its larger gender equality work. AKAS' findings, published 2020, found that while women make up half of the population, they comprise **39% of journalists** and just 26% of journalism leadership globally. "Particularly in the U.S. and U.K., people think, 'Oh, we've dealt with that. Patriarchal norms are no longer an issue in our countries and we've reached gender equality,'" said AKAS co-founder Luba Kassova. "Actually we haven't, and these values are one of the key barriers to balanced representation of women in news coverage."

In response, funders are putting dollars behind advancing the role of women in news media across the U.S. and globally, boosting representation and supporting journalists experiencing threats of online and physical violence.

The International Women's Media Foundation's (IWMF) Howard G. Buffett Fund for Women Journalists was established in 2014 with a \$4 million gift from the Howard G. Buffett Foundation to support projects including educational opportunities, investigative reporting, and media development initiatives. The Channel Foundation which supports organizations

combating gender inequality around the world, cites “amplifying gender equality in media” as a key focus area. One grantee, the Global Press Institute, trains and employs local female journalists to produce ethical, accurate news coverage from the world’s least-covered places. The Gannett Foundation funds the Poynter Institute’s Leadership Academy for Women and Digital Journalism.

UNESCO’s survey, “Online Violence Against Women Journalism: A Global Snapshot of Incidence and Impact,” found that 73% of women journalists who responded had experienced online violence in the course of their work and 25% had received threats of physical violence. Launched in 1990, the IWMF’s Courage in Journalism Awards recognizes “brave journalists who report on taboo topics, work in environments hostile to women, and share difficult truths.”

The Ford Foundation funds initiatives tracking the sector’s progress in the area of gender equity, including a major convening featuring original research by Dean Iris Bohnet of the Harvard Kennedy School and her team and another on media equity and race. “This kind of field-facing work allows Ford to reach a wider audience of influencers in the industry, particularly for-profit media leaders who were eager to engage with and learn from evidence-based research,” said the foundation’s Morton and Chideya. Ford also funds the Disability Futures Fellows, which includes support for disabled journalists.

Addressing issues facing immigrant communities. According to the Knight Foundation, community media outlets serving immigrants and non-English speakers in the United States often lack the technical acumen and requisite

distribution capacity to effectively engage audiences. “They also remain largely invisible to mainstream media, public officials, the nonprofit sector, advertisers and philanthropic organizations,” [the foundation said](#).

Funders are ramping up capacity-building support for these organizations while supporting outlets exploring the plight of refugees, the pandemic’s effect on immigrants, and issues facing communities along the U.S./Mexico border.

Donor Collaborative Spotlight: Racial Equity in Journalism Fund

Since its launch in 2019, the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund (REJ) has awarded \$2.3 million in grants to news organizations serving communities of color. Inaugural grants were awarded to 16 organizations whose work focuses on Black, Native, Latinx, immigrant, refugee, poor and low-income communities. Housed at Borealis Philanthropy, REJ is a donor collaborative with support from the American Journalism Project, Ford Foundation, the Democracy Fund, MacArthur Foundation, the Google News Initiative, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, and the News Integrity Initiative at CUNY.

The Newmark Graduate School of Journalism launched the Center for Community Media in 2012 with the goal of supporting local media outlets serving immigrant communities and communities of color through research, training and networking. In 2020, the center announced it was expanding to serve national news outlets providing coverage of people and issues unrepresented in the mainstream media. The Democracy Fund and the Knight and Ford foundations provided financial support for the expansion.

Migration is one of the key program areas for the MacArthur Foundation. Grants support research, policy and practical interventions to improve the lives of and protections for immigrants and refugees. Grantees include the Institute for Justice and Journalism and the GroundTruth Project's Global Migration, Refugees and Resettlement Reporting Fellowship.

After the pandemic hit, USC's Center for Health Journalism and the Kaiser Family Foundation began supporting work examining the effect of the crisis on immigrant communities and undocumented workers. And in March 2021, Ford Foundation announced it will partner with Borealis Philanthropy, National Association of Hispanic Journalists, and other organizations to launch Reclaiming the Border Narrative, an effort to "penetrate and shape the national attention on migration and the United States-Mexico border by supporting authentic storytelling by affected communities on the cultures and socio-political dynamics that comprise the region."

Closing the funding gap for LGBTQ+ communities. As noted previously, a 2019 Democracy Fund analysis found that only 8.1% of the \$1.1 billion that went to U.S. journalism organizations from 2013–2017 was specifically earmarked to serve populations that included racial and ethnic groups. Of this amount, less than 1% flowed to organizations focused on LGBTQ+ communities. "Of course, this kind of categorization does not capture the complexities of identity," the report's authors state. "To invest fully in changing structural and institutional inequity in journalism, funders must consider questions around how gender, ethnicity, and sexual identity intersect."

To this point, one of Borealis Philanthropies' Racial Equity in Journalism Fund grantees, the Bay Area-based El Tecolote, is the longest-running Spanish/English bilingual newspaper in California. It also focuses on the Bay Area's LGBTQ immigrants. Borealis' Powell called the outlet a good example of "intersectionality."

The Blade Foundation is the giving arm of the country's first LGBTQ newspaper, the *Washington Blade*. Launched in 2010, the foundation funds journalism projects focused on LGBTQ and scholarships for LGBTQ journalists. The National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association is an American professional association dedicated to unbiased coverage of LGBTQ issues in the media.

The association bestows an array of awards, including the Association of LGBTQ Journalists Excellence in Journalism Awards, which were established in 1993 to foster and recognize excellence in journalism on issues related to the LGBTQ community; and the Al Neuharth Award for Innovation in Investigative Journalism, which receives support from the Gannett Foundation.

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

"[There is a] *Huge increase in public reliance on news nonprofits, audiences up 3-10x, for Covid and other information [but] a collapse of commercial options in our field (news media), where there has been a global market failure. [There are] gradual shifts in public/funder thinking to realize news is now a public good, and the ways in which it is an essential service.*"

—Nonprofit executive director, Los Angeles, California

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

Private and family foundations focus on priorities like supporting local media, boosting equity, and providing general operating support.

The Shorenstein Center’s 2018 report of journalism funding from 2010–2015 found that national news nonprofits were “highly dependent on about two dozen institutional funders for nearly 70% of the grants distributed over the six-year period analyzed.”

John S. and James L. Knight Foundation was the top funder, accounting for 20% of philanthropy’s \$80.1 million in funding for local and state nonprofits during this period. The foundation is a prominent thought leader, rolling out initiatives focused on boosting diversity and exploring technology’s impact on democracy. “Knight also brings its convening power,” said Media Impact Funders’ (MIF) Stehle and Sachdev. “Every year, it gathers hundreds of place-based and community foundations at its Knight Media Forum to discuss the most pressing issues facing journalism and community information needs.”

The Ford Foundation’s Creative and Free Expression program focuses on supporting social justice storytelling communities as part of its overarching strategy to combat inequality. “Over the past three years, we have worked to align the journalism portfolio with these larger strategic goals and focused on funding media serving underserved news consumers, a group which includes people with disabilities, people of color, Indigenous Americans, and low-income and rural

white Americans,” said Margaret Morton, program director, Creativity and Free Expression, and Farai Chideya, program officer, Creativity and Free Expression, in a statement to IP. “We believe that our democracy requires an information ecosystem that serves us all.”

The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation’s grantmaking for journalism complements its work in advancing culture and the humanities. This includes grants earmarked for the preservation of media from historically underrepresented and underfunded cultures and populations. In June 2020, the foundation’s board of trustees approved a plan to boost giving in 2020 from \$300 million to \$500 million. Later in the month, the foundation, which has a \$6.5 billion endowment, announced it would prioritize social justice in all of its grantmaking.

The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation “is a big player, but perhaps not recognized in the same way as Knight,” said MIF’s Stehle and Sachdev. “MacArthur has been influential in this field because of how they approach their grantmaking, which is done with substantial long-term general operating support. And their thinking on general operating funds has influenced other funders to do the same.”

Kathy Im, MacArthur’s director of journalism and media, told IP the foundation is most concerned with “the proliferation of disinformation and the media and political environment that allows it to spread and flourish,” and “the lack of diversity and inclusion inside newsrooms, particularly in leadership roles, and the feeble institutional response to the vitriolic attacks experienced by women and people of color reporters.”

Many funders also provide integral support to investigative journalists in the form of fellowships,

commissions and residencies. Funders supporting the field in those ways include the Heising-Simons Foundation, Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, the Fund for Investigative Journalism, and the International Women’s Media Foundation.



“Over the past three years, we have worked to align the journalism portfolio with these larger strategic goals and focused on funding media serving underserved news consumers, a group which includes people with disabilities, people of color, Indigenous Americans, and low-income and rural white Americans.”

—Margaret Morton, program director, Creativity and Free Expression, Ford Foundation

Corporate Funders

Corporate foundations approach philanthropy from a different vantage point than private foundations, community foundations, and individual donors.

“A lot of corporations have questions about ‘what do you have in terms of programs that I can put my name and logo on now?’, and that’s just different than a private foundation,” said Ben Cameron, Jerome Foundation president and former manager of community relations at Target. “A private foundation isn’t looking for market share; corporations, though, have a bottom-line responsibility to shareholders.”

While it can be somewhat misguided to paint all corporations with a broad brush, these funders are generally driven by a common set of motivators,

such as how a gift aligns with its broader social agenda, burnishes its brand, complements pre-existing investments, and creates a pipeline of future journalists. Fundraisers who create proposals that align with these types of motivating factors may be more likely to attract corporate donations.

Corporate funding represents a relatively small portion of the larger journalism and media philanthropic ecosystem. The Shorenstein Center’s 2018 “Funding the News” report listed the top 25 U.S. foundation funders of public media by amount of grants from 2010–2015. Authors cited only two corporate foundations in its list—Newman’s Own Foundation (No. 19) and MetLife Foundation (No. 20). The two foundations provided a combined 4.7% of the \$303 million in total funding.

Tech and media companies provide the bulk of corporate funding for nonprofit journalism and media organizations these days. Two of the largest players in the space are tech giants Facebook and Google, which, according to critics, bear a considerable amount of responsibility for journalism’s precarious financial state.

Mark Zuckerberg’s company launched The Facebook Journalism Project in 2017 to “strengthen the connection between journalists and the communities they serve.” Upon announcing the project’s \$300 million investment in local news in 2019, Campbell Brown, VP Global News Partnerships, said, “There are two key areas where we hope to help: supporting local journalists and newsrooms with their newsgathering needs in the immediate future; and helping local news organizations build sustainable business models, through both our product and partnership work.”

In March 2018, Google launched the \$300 million Google News Initiative to support publishers and

combat misinformation. “People come to Google looking for information they can trust, and that information often comes from the reporting of journalists and news organizations around the world,” said Chief Business Officer Philipp Schindler. “And while the demand for quality journalism is as high as it’s ever been, the business of journalism is under pressure, as publications around the world face challenges from an industry-wide transition to digital.”

Since 2018, Facebook and Google have pledged a total of \$700 million in funding for journalism, not counting other “undisclosed” funds and in-kind contributions, leading some experts, like [Nikki Usher](#), associate professor of journalism in the College of Media at the University of Illinois, to worry the financial support may compromise outlets’ editorial independence. “Journalists routinely pounce on similar conflicts of interest when they occur in government or science, or in virtually any other institution, and for good reason,” Usher said. “When we need critical reporting about Big Tech more than ever, we should all be concerned that Facebook and Google are funding the news.”

Other tech companies that have provided support for nonprofit journalism and media organizations include Dropbox, Craigslist Corporation, AppNexus, Mozilla and Betaworks.

Media companies provide philanthropic support to nonprofit journalism outlets as part of their broader philanthropic efforts. The Hearst Foundation, Inc. was founded in 1946 by William Randolph Hearst, the American businessman, newspaper publisher, and politician known for developing the nation’s largest newspaper chain and media company, Hearst Communications. While the foundation’s website notes that it has

been “independent” from the Hearst Corporation since 1975, its board is composed mostly of Hearst executives, so this brief discusses it as a corporate funder. One of the foundation’s initiatives, the Hearst Journalism Awards Program, awards scholarships to students in college-level journalism, with matching grants to the students’ schools.

Corporate Giving Spotlight



The Newman’s Own Foundation is committed to supporting independent media, grassroots journalism, and emerging journalists. Recent grantees in this space include ProPublica, the Ground Truth Project, and the Marshall Project. Since its inception in 1982, the foundation has given over \$550 million to charity.

The Gannett Foundation, the philanthropic arm of Gannett Co., Inc., the largest U.S. newspaper publisher as measured by total daily circulation, funds the Sports Journalism Institute Boot Camp at the Arizona State University’s Cronkite School.

Philanthropic support from media corporations—like that of the broader corporate sector—lags behind that of institutional grantmakers and individual donors. A search of the terms “journalism” in the Hearst Foundation’s [online grant database](#) yields four grants averaging \$175,000 each for the years 2017 through 2020. In 2019, the Gannett Foundation awarded [\\$2.9 million](#) in contributions, gifts and grants. However, 43% of this amount went to the Rochester Area Community Foundation.

Media companies’ support for journalism organizations reflects key corporate priorities like building a pipeline of journalists and reaching new

audiences. For example, the Scripps-Howard Foundation, the philanthropic arm of E.W. Scripps Company, provided \$3 million in grants to launch investigative reporting centers at Arizona State University and the University of Maryland.

Other active funders include the Thomson Reuters Foundation and the TEGNA Foundation, the funding arm of the Virginia-based media and digital company TEGNA Inc., which funds training for “the next generation of diverse journalists and education and development opportunities for journalists and other professionals in the media field.” Corporations also support journalism and media outlets through donor-advised funds housed at community foundations.

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“An important topic to keep raising is inviting foundations to rethink perpetuity and/or significantly increasing their payout rates. It will be interesting to see what happens with the 10% payout campaign. More critical reporting on foundations’ reluctance to provide multi-year unrestricted funding. Bringing the lens of complex, adaptive systems into how foundations view their work and approaches.”

—Foundation professional, San Francisco, California

Corporate support for journalism and media frequently takes the form of sponsorships, which, as noted in the “Who’s Getting” section of this brief, constitute a significant portion of public media outlets’ revenue model. Unlike a philanthropic gift, a sponsorship is a business transaction, akin to advertising, in which the sponsor pays or gives the organization money in exchange for something “that will help them make more money, be it through alignment with the property,” or through sales, brand development,

public relations or employee engagement, according to the Partnership Group.

For example, WNET’s website notes that its corporate sponsors enjoy “many executive, employee and client perks,” including private screenings, on-air challenges, and volunteer opportunities. The PBS home page has dozens of commercials from its corporate sponsors, including Target, Raymond James and IKEA.

Community Foundations

“While not on scale with larger national funders and not often making headlines for their work, community foundations have played a critically important role in advancing quality news and information, and are increasingly key partners in inspiring news collaborations, bringing their local expertise and convening power to the table,” said Media Impact Funders’ (MIF) Sarah Armour-Jones.

According to Candid’s Foundation Maps for Media Funding, 26 U.S.-based community foundations gave \$2.6 million in journalism grants in 2009. By 2014, that number had more than doubled to \$6.5 million. Four years later, 80 community foundations gave \$26.3 million—an increase of 1,000% since 2009. All told, 140 community foundations have given \$109 million in journalism grants (excluding journalism education) to 597 recipients between 2009 and 2019.

According to a 2020 Media Impact Funders (MIF) report titled “[Community Foundations & Journalism: Funding Data from 2009-2019](#),” the top 10 community foundations for journalism funding are the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, San Francisco Foundation, Foundation for the Carolinas, Boston Foundation, New York Community Trust, Rochester Area

Community Foundation, the Pittsburgh Foundation, Seattle Foundation, Miami Foundation and Tulsa Community Foundation.

These foundations made \$78.5 million in journalism-related grants between 2009 and 2019, which represents 72% of total journalism grants made by community foundations. The Silicon Valley Community Foundation (SVCF) gave \$44.4 million in journalism grants—40% total giving—from 2009 to 2019, according to MIF. The next nine-largest community foundations in this space have given \$34 million combined.

MIF's Armour-Jones noted that "because community foundation grants are reported without the distinction between donor-advised giving, the available data makes it hard to determine how much local journalism is being supported by staff who oversee discretionary funds and how much is directed via donor-advised funds."

The SVCF has been working to support local media since 2014 thanks to an initiative funded by the Knight Foundation that helped community foundations define their support of local journalism ecosystems. The foundation has partnered with New American Media to launch a fellowship for journalists of color working on the implementation of Common Core education and with Renaissance Journalism to support the Bay Area Media Collaborative, which focused on the region's housing crisis.

With support from the Knight Community Information Challenge, the funder launched the SVCF Local Journalism Fund in March 2020 to build stronger and more engaged communities and address inequities faced by communities of color, including Black and Indigenous residents.

The foundation allocated \$500,000 in funding for its inaugural round and announced grantees in May. "We believe that accurate and inspiring community stories play an important role in informing, engaging and activating individuals and groups to participate in our democracy," Mauricio Palma, SVCF's director of community building, told IP. "Our fund will strengthen local media nonprofits working to amplify untold or under-told stories created by, about, and for communities of color."

Community Foundation Spotlight



SVCF's Local Journalism Fund supports media coverage of "hyper-local issues that address the gap in news and information reaching underserved communities." The fund is part of its long-term strategy for systemic change in Silicon Valley. Funding priority is given to BIPOC-led organizations with annual budgets of less than \$1 million. Recent grantees include the India Currents Foundation, Mosaic Journalism, and the South Pacific Islander Organization.

Journalism experts expect community foundations to be a growing force in the months and years ahead. American Journalism Project CEO Sarabeth Berman told IP her organization has "been partnering with several community foundations to help them assess their communities' information needs and craft business plans to incubate new nonprofit newsrooms that can fill the void left by the decline of commercial news and play a powerful counterweight to misinformation."

Similarly, a 2021 report from Report for America found that "one of the most notable trends is

community foundations creating structures designed to make philanthropic support broader and more enduring.” The report identified at least 10 cases nationally in which community foundations “have now set up special funds to attract and manage support for local journalism over the long term.”

Experts advise fundraisers to reach out to their local community foundations to discuss any discretionary funding opportunities, explore potential partnerships or collaboration, and identify ways to alert individual donors about the outlets’ value to the broader region.

Major Donors

Major individual donors tend to earmark gifts for university journalism education programs, initiatives to combat misinformation, independent journalism organizations, and public media. Donors often hail from the fields of tech, finance and entertainment, and are driven by the idea that a robust and independent news ecosystem can cultivate a healthier body politic.

In 2018, Craigslist founder Craig Newmark gave \$20 million to the CUNY Graduate School of Journalism’s foundation to enhance the school’s mission of training journalists, diversifying voices in media, and encouraging innovation and entrepreneurship. The CUNY Board of Trustees renamed the school the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at the City University of New York in recognition of the gift.

“This is a generous and welcome gift,” tweeted financial journalist [Felix Salmon](#) regarding the announcement. “But it’s utterly bizarre to name a journalism school after the man who almost single-handedly destroyed local newspapers.” To his point,

a 2013 study conducted by researchers at New York University’s Stern School of Business and Harvard Business School found that newspapers [lost about \\$5 billion](#) in classified advertising revenue to Craigslist from 2000 to 2007.

Newmark’s defenders have countered that he seized an opportunity that shortsighted leaders of newspaper operations failed to recognize and that he has backed up his commitment to independent journalism with significant and consistent support. The debate underscores the ongoing tension in nonprofit journalism operations, which increasingly rely on the very same tech funders that, according to some analysts, are responsible for the larger media world’s current difficulties.

Newmark, meanwhile, kept the gifts flowing. In 2019, he gave \$10 million to the Columbia Journalism School to bolster journalism ethics and provided seed funding for the News Integrity Initiative. “A lot of people have been deliberately misinformed,” he told IP. “My focus is on people

Major Donor Spotlight: Craig Newmark



“A lot of people have been deliberately misinformed. My focus is on people who are doing things like better understanding disinformation, where it’s coming from, and how to counter and disrupt it [and to] promote an honest press and counter disinformation.”

—Craig Newmark, founder, Craigslist and Craig Newmark Philanthropies

who are doing things like better understanding disinformation, where it's coming from, and how to counter and disrupt it." Organizations that focus on efforts to "promote an honest press and counter disinformation" can learn more about grant opportunities via the Craig Newmark Philanthropies website.

The journalism philanthropy of eBay founder Pierre Omidyar flows through several channels, including the Democracy Fund, the Omidyar Network and First Look Media, which serves as an umbrella for several entities receiving support, including The Intercept, an investigative reporting outfit, and the Press Freedom Defense Fund.

While many billionaire donors have reputations of being opaque and inaccessible to small nonprofit organizations, Newmark and Omidyar's respective giving vehicles are relatively transparent and accessible to advancement teams. In contrast, fundraisers may find it more difficult to engage mega-donors who typically restrict their giving to nationally renowned outlets or institutions with which they have long-standing relationships.

For example, in 2018, NPR President Emeritus Jarl Mohn and his wife Pamela gave \$10 million to the public radio station's 50th-anniversary capital campaign. Mohn hoped to raise over \$200 million for NPR by "building relationships with donors who believe in the importance of NPR's fact-based journalism and want to invest in the next chapter in the network's history."

The same year, actor, filmmaker and comedian Seth MacFarlane announced a \$2 million donation to support NPR's Collaborative Journalism Network, which aims to better connect the outlet's 1,800 journalists with local newsrooms. A year later, the network received a \$4.7 million grant from former

Google CEO Eric and Wendy Schmidt to create two new regional newsrooms—one in California and a Midwest hub connecting member stations in Missouri, Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska.

In 2018, the Media School at Indiana University received a \$6 million gift, earmarked for training in a "heartland news desert" from alumnus and journalist Michael I. Arnolt. A year later, the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill announced a \$25 million endowment gift from alumnus Walter Hussman, Jr. and his family to support efforts to enable the newly renamed Hussman School of Journalism and Media to better prepare students for careers in journalism, public relations, advertising and communications.

Another influential donor is Laurene Powell Jobs, whose giving vehicle, the Emerson Collective, is an investor in Axios, controls The Atlantic, and supports nonprofit organizations like Mother Jones, the Marshall Project and ProPublica. "Our involvement in media is not to turn a profit," Jobs said in September 2020. "It's important that everyone know that great journalism should not be for free. It's a civic good."

As noted, donors also provide support through donor-advised funds housed at community foundations and DAF sponsors like Fidelity, Schwab and Vanguard. Those DAF managers move a large portion of the charitable funds directed to nonprofit journalism, an important fact for fundraisers to consider, even if strategizing to receive those funds is nearly impossible.

Billionaires have also stepped up to purchase besieged for-profit outlets. In 2013, Amazon's Jeff Bezos bought the *Washington Post* and Red Sox owner John Henry bought the *Boston Globe*. A year later, businessman Glen Taylor purchased the

Minnesota Tribune. In 2018, physician Dr. Patrick Soon-Shiong bought the *Los Angeles Times*. While these purchases are sometimes couched in philanthropic language, they remain for-profit entities outside the focus of this brief.

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“There seem to be a lot of big funders who care about local news, but would rather fund research papers and self-aggrandizement than actually funding the local news.”

—Fundraiser, Brooklyn, New York

Associations & Intermediaries

Media Impact Funders (MIF) aims to strengthen connections among members and surface funding opportunities through networking, advocacy and data gathering. Membership in this network is open to all philanthropic organizations that fund journalism projects. While MIF does not distribute grants itself or host collaborative funds, its [Foundation Maps for Media Funding](#) serves as an invaluable tool for organizations by showing the full scope of philanthropically funded media projects worldwide since 2009.

The Council on Foundations, a nonprofit leadership association of grantmaking foundations and corporations, provides nonprofit journalism funders and organizations with legal and tax guidance, research and networking events through its [Nonprofit Media program](#). The foundation does not distribute grants itself or host collaborative funds for journalism organizations.

The Institute for Nonprofit News’ [Network Philanthropy Center](#) provides a comprehensive approach to help nonprofit news organizations build and grow sustainable, diverse revenue from philanthropy. The [American Press Institute](#) is a

nonprofit organization that helps news organizations understand and engage audiences, grow revenue, improve public-service journalism, and succeed at organizational change. Neither organization distributes grants.

The [Lenfest Institute](#), one of the sector’s most influential grantmakers, works with organizations to build viable, replicable models for sustainable local news enterprises through its three core focus areas: high-impact journalism, news technology and innovation, and diverse, growing audiences. In 2020, the institute launched the [News Philanthropy Network](#), a community of practice to support those focused on fundraising to support journalism.

[Local News Lab](#), a project of the Democracy Fund, is dedicated to identifying creative experiments in sustainable journalism, including promising philanthropic news, initiatives and partnerships. While the Democracy Fund is a prominent funder, it does not distribute grants through the Local News Lab.

The [Contributor Development Partnership](#), which receives support from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and Boston’s WGBH, is a self-described “fundraising alliance.” Rather than directly awarding grants, it provides tech and marketing support, data analytics and best practices to help public media and television stations raise money and better serve their local communities.

Fundraising Now

“Journalism funded by philanthropy is surging,” says Nancy Lane, the Local Media Association’s chief executive. “Philanthropy is a leader in reinventing business models for news.” Fundraising from foundations – including solicitation from newly established charitable entities organized to support fledgling for-profit newspapers – is becoming a more prevalent part of the news business. And while many nonprofit journalistic enterprises reported to IP that fundraising is increasing, others pointed to major challenges in the medium- and long-term outlook.

As traditional advertising revenues have plunged, alternative models—including nonprofit news-gathering organizations like the Center for Investigative Reporting, which relies heavily on philanthropic support—have stepped into the breach. They aim to provide the type of journalism that few media outlets can afford to do. More local newsrooms are going nonprofit, too, seeking stability that ads can no longer provide, competing for the attention of the relatively small pool of foundations devoting resources to nonprofit media.

In addition to its Lab For Journalism Funding, the Local Media Association last year launched [NewsFuel.org](#), a website that allows media outlets to search for existing revenue opportunities, including grants, stipends, fellowships and more. At the same time, foundations and other donors can use the site to search for news organizations and journalism projects that need their support.

The United States has lost 2,100 newspapers, a fourth of its total, since 2004, according to a 2020 report by the University of North Carolina’s Hussman School of Journalism and Media. The “expanding news desert,” as the report called it, has

fueled a sharp rise in misinformation campaigns—literally a matter of life and death in the pandemic—and is driving sharp partisan divides that threaten civil discourse and lawmakers’ ability to govern effectively. “When something goes away, something else fills the void, and that might be misinformation,” says Karen Rundlet, who manages the journalism program at the Knight Foundation. “There are fewer good guys and more bad actors.”

Increasingly, local for-profit news organizations are partnering with philanthropies to raise money. A good example is the *Record-Journal* in Meriden, Connecticut, a 154-year-old newspaper headed by Liz White, the fifth-generation publisher of the family-run publication. White participated in a new training program offered by the nonprofit Local Media Association’s [Lab for Journalism Funding](#). The *Seattle Times*, which has a robust team of journalists supported by charitable contributions, served as the faculty. After the training, White and her colleagues embarked on a five-month “listening tour” involving research and conversations with community leaders, including Maria Campos Harlow, the head of the United Way of Meriden & Wallingford Connecticut, who also serves on the board of the local community foundation.

The result: The Latino Communities Reporting Lab, which provides fact-based information in English and Spanish to the area’s rapidly growing Hispanic population, now comprising 36% of the area’s residents and 59% of its students. Supported by the Meriden-Wallingford Community Foundation, which serves as a fiscal sponsor able to accept grants, the *Record-Journal* has so far raised \$120,000 in contributions, enough to hire two bilingual journalists and an intern. Since starting in March, they have produced English and Spanish content in print, digital, social media, text and

video, drawing a whole new audience. More than 70% of the readers of the new online content, for example, are new to the Record-Journal.

“We are really excited, and this has gained momentum even faster than we anticipated,” says White. As for fundraising, she adds, “I think of it as one piece of the puzzle. If community needs and the foundation and the media company can have aligned goals, this can work.” Seeking additional donations, the *Record-Journal* has a goal of raising \$540,000 annually, which would cover costs including hiring more bilingual journalists and other expenses like marketing, technology and translation.

Another outlet, [The Conversation](#), part of a global group of news organizations, opened its nonprofit American branch in 2014. The independent news organization is dedicated to unlocking the knowledge of academic experts for the public good. Articles written by academics are rigorously edited by The Conversation’s team of journalists and distributed free of charge to publications around the world. Since its founding, its staff has expanded from six to 33. And during the pandemic, the number of readers has exploded. Since February 2020, readers grew from 9 million that month to 25 million readers in February of this year.

THE CONVERSATION

“We were able to grow revenue through continued fundraising during the pandemic, due to the continued appetite for expert explanatory journalism at a time it was desperately needed.”

—Bruce Wilson, chief innovation and development Officer, The Conversation

“We were able to grow revenue through continued fundraising during the pandemic, due to the continued appetite for expert explanatory journalism at a time it was desperately needed,” says Chief Innovation and Development Officer Bruce Wilson, adding that some articles go through as many as 30 edits to make them accessible to lay readers. In addition to revenue from college and university members who pay \$15,000 to \$40,000, depending on their size, The Conversation, which did not seek donations prior to 2018, received \$450,000 from individual donors and another \$1.6 million from foundations in its most recent fiscal year, which ended on June 30.

The Conversation, the Associated Press and the Religion News Service—all nonprofit news organizations—received a \$4.9 million grant over an 18-month period from the Lilly Endowment to increase coverage of religion for the general public. The Lilly Endowment renewed its support in January with another two-year grant of \$4.7 million to The Conversation and AP, while the Religion News Service got a separate grant to continue its coverage. Among other things, the money has allowed the Associated Press to add eight new religion journalists and The Conversation to hire two of its own. Before 2017, the Associated Press had made no concerted effort to seek contributions, says Lisa Gibbs, AP’s director of news partnerships, who has hired two new staffers to support fundraising efforts.

“Philanthropic support is driving innovation,” says Gibbs. “The philanthropic focus on outcomes and public interest helps media outlets connect more closely with their communities. There are things we’re able to do with philanthropy that we could never do with regular revenues.” At AP, adds Gibbs, “the pandemic heightened appreciation of the importance of journalism in an era of rampant

misinformation, a polarizing presidential election and a racial reckoning. An incredible news cycle helped make the case clearer that the decline of local news and the rise of misinformation are related.”

Before the pandemic, the [PBS Foundation](#), the fundraising arm of the Public Broadcasting Service, was raising \$25 million to \$30 million annually. In fiscal year 2021, which ended on June 30, the foundation raised close to \$60 million. The foundation had “the best year ever on top of the best year ever” in 2020, says Executive Director Brian Reddington. He credits the increased fundraising returns to a “rediscovery of PBS through the pandemic. Audience size increased dramatically” as people stuck at home turned to television with an added appreciation for PBS news and other offerings.

Similarly, [National Public Radio](#) has seen contributions rise during the pandemic. In its fiscal year ending on September 30, NPR raised \$32.1 million in 2019 and \$35.2 million last year. NPR has been “incredibly lucky to receive incredible support from board members and some foundations, including \$1.5 million in emergency grants,” says Leora Hanser, NPR’s chief development officer, who is also president of the NPR Foundation, the network’s fundraising arm. Members of the NPR Foundation board, she adds, also doubled their support last year. “In the pandemic,” says Hanser, “our success at NPR is in large part due to providing independent, fact-based information, including a daily podcast about COVID.”

But other nonprofit news organizations described a less optimistic fundraising situation. In 2020, the Center for Investigative Reporting raised \$9 million, helped by a loan from the Payroll

Protection Program, which provided \$953 billion in federal aid to help businesses keep workers employed during the pandemic. That support will be gone next year, “a source of stress” for Chief Development Officer Kate Looby. She says the center, which is also known as [Reveal Reporting Networks](#), is not seeing a lot of new donors coming in, an issue it must confront.



“Organizations have a right for general operating support and multi-year funding. The more that organizations feel brave enough to ask for that, the better, even if they don’t always get it.”

—Hillary Pennington, executive vice president of programs, Ford Foundation

“We need more money to do the work of the scale needed at this time,” says Looby, noting that about 65% of the news organization’s contributions typically come from foundations and another 25 to 30% from affluent donors. “The problem of declining local news and increased disinformation requires that we nonprofit, fact-based organizations need to be growing and reaching new audiences where they are. We cannot have democracy without a thriving, fact-based press.”

Some nonprofits have recently started new efforts to teach fundraising to for-profit and nonprofit news outlets. Last year, for example, the Lenfest Institute for Journalism, the nonprofit parent organization of the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, created by the late cable television entrepreneur Gerry Lenfest, established the [Lenfest News Philanthropy](#)

Network. The goal of the network, a membership organization that is free to join, is supporting fundraising across the news industry. Starting with 40 members, the network has quickly grown to nearly 1,000 people working in journalism. The group aims to serve its members in much the same way as the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education caters to fundraisers in higher education.

“Philanthropy can be the biggest and fastest-growing revenue source for news organizations,” says Annie McCain Madonia, Lenfest’s chief advancement officer. Since the Lenfest Institute for Journalism was established in 2016, she says, it has raised more than \$80 million. Annual fund contributions have grown from \$1 million in 2016 to \$5 million last year. While individual donors account for most contributions, the institute also receives money from local and national foundations that appreciate the need for accurate, fact-based journalism; their grants range from \$5,000 to \$500,000 annually.

“There is a lot of misinformation out there, which is frustrating and frightening,” Madonia says. “There is a fear of loss—and urgency. Donors want to fill the gap” between a dearth of reliable information and a well-informed populace.

With federal legislation introduced in both the House and Senate seeking to provide aid to hard-pressed local news organizations in the form of tax credits for both for-profit and nonprofit organizations, another potential income stream may be entering the mix, even if it is a long shot on the funding horizon. For example, in July, Sen. Maria Cantwell, a Democrat from Washington, introduced the [Local Journalism Sustainability Act](#), which would provide a tax credit of up to \$250 for

consumers who subscribe to local newspapers or donate to local nonprofit news organizations, a payroll tax credit of up to \$25,000 for commercial and nonprofit news outlets to help pay journalists, and a tax credit of up to \$5,000 for small businesses to advertise with local news publishers.

According to Institute for Nonprofit News, revenues from individual giving to nonprofit newsrooms jumped by 41% in 2020. Website traffic and newsletter subscriptions also increased. In a survey of 264 organizations, almost two-thirds reported an increase in individual giving, and about half of those saw hikes of more than 50%. Major donors make up the largest chunk of individual giving. Nonprofit newsrooms also attracted more first-time contributors than ever before, and small-dollar gifts rose by almost 50%. The report said the NewsMatch fundraising platform has helped drive the increase in individual contributors.

Collaborative Spotlight

LocalMedia Association

The Local Media Association centers its work on the business side of local media focusing on areas such as reader revenue, brand content, and philanthropically funded journalism. Its charitable arm, the Local Media Foundation aims to “provide local media companies the strategies and resources for meaningful innovation and impactful journalism.” Since early 2020, the foundation has launched five news media collaboratives including Word in Black, Oklahoma Media Center, LMA Covering Climate Collaborative, Solving for Chicago, and Amplify Ohio.

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Philanthropic leaders IP spoke with were nearly unanimous in their belief that the sector's top three priorities are: cultivating local news, combating misinformation, and supporting organizations and journalists of color. That said, experts called on philanthropy to address other critical funding gaps across the larger ecosystem, such as the lack of funding for local climate change coverage, intersectional grantmaking, and international journalism outlets. While these causes have yet to reach "critical mass" across the funding ecosystem, they nonetheless represent a growing area of opportunity for the field.

IP's August 2020 survey of philanthropic and fundraising professionals presented a list of 11 funding strategies and asked which ones merited increased attention and commitment from the philanthropic sector. Of the respondents who said their work focused on journalism and media, the top strategy was "climate change" (38% of respondents), followed by "centering racial justice" (37%) and "grassroots movement building and cross-movement organizing" (34%). (Respondents could choose multiple strategies.)

"There have been cases of grantmakers supporting climate coverage," said Frank Mungeam, chief innovation officer of the industry trade organization Local Media Association. "At the same time, I think it's fair to say climate reporting has been underfunded in the past."

Mungeam attributed this trend to funders' preoccupation with other critical issues like news deserts, the loss of local investigative reporting, and the need for more social justice reporting.

"The biggest gap and the biggest opportunity to drive meaningful change is at the local level," he told IP.

Mungeam oversees the Covering Climate Collaborative (CCC), a partnership that will support 25 news organizations that cover the local impacts of climate change. The collaborative, which received early support from the Walton Family Foundation and the Society of Environmental Journalists, will provide stipends to fund climate reporting at regional news organizations. Mungeam anticipates demand for climate coverage will grow, citing a September 2020 study by the Yale Program on Climate Change Communication, which found that 78% of respondents expressed interest in news stories about the impacts of global warming on their local community.

"I think part of the reason we've reached a tipping point in demand for more and broader-based climate reporting—and the funding to support that reporting—is the emerging recognition that climate effects are present and intertwined with the other critical issues we face," Mungeam said. To meet the moment, Mungeam encouraged funders to de-silo climate issues and adopt a more intersectional grantmaking approach.

The Democracy Fund's Stearns picked up on this theme as it pertains to funders' other top priorities. "One of the most challenging limitations in the space is that misinformation has quickly become siloed as a standalone funding area," said the Democracy Fund's Stearns. "When, in fact, combating misinformation (and supporting local news, for that matter) ought to be a concern for

every funder because of the broad effects it has on our society, democracy and every other issue that funders seek to address.”

The American Journalism Project’s Berman concurred. “If you care about the environment, you should give to the media,” she said. “If you care about healthcare, education and local issues, you should give to the media. We need to show that trusted news is essential to every goal a philanthropist has.”

Kathy Im, the MacArthur Foundation’s director of journalism and media, implored fellow funders to do more for international journalism organizations. “As more resources were devoted to domestic and accountability reporting, support of international journalism waned markedly, causing some international journalism organizations to adjust their missions to cover more domestic news,” she said. “The wars, terrorism and major events will be covered by the major outlets, but the sustained, nuanced, and intelligent coverage of transnational issues—such as migration, climate change, global health—is the area where nonprofit journalism organizations excelled and this work is severely underfunded.”

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“There is a much greater emphasis on funding local journalism and/or local media outlets. This translates to diminished interest in funding national platforms.”

—Fundraiser, New York, New York

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¹Based on available grantmaker data from Candid. Excludes federal funding and funding by higher education institutions

²Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations.

³This table, created in April 2021 based on Candid giving data spanning 2014–2018, removes from the list the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB), which is organized as a private nonprofit, but whose annual budget is composed almost entirely of federal “grants” (totalling \$445 million in 2021) appropriated by Congress, not from private philanthropy.

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project, each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. If you have comments or information you’d like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.org.