

FOUNDATION SUPPORT  
FOR INTERNATIONAL  
NON-PROFIT NEWS:

# MAPPING THE FUNDING LANDSCAPE

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September 2018



## KEY FINDINGS

In this short report, we describe the key features of the landscape of private foundation support for international non-profit journalism. Our findings are based on interviews with representatives of a range of relevant foundations, intermediaries and non-profit news outlets in 2017.

1. Very few foundations support international non-profit journalism.
2. Support for international journalism is a very small part of the funding profiles of all the active foundations and does not appear to be increasing.
3. By contrast, foundation support makes up a very large proportion of funding for many non-profit news organisations and intermediaries specialising in international news.
4. There are significant disparities between the amounts of support that different international issues receive.
5. Most foundations support international journalism because they are interested in media capacity-building, or bringing about social change through journalism.
6. Foundation-funded news outlet and the intermediaries that distribute such funding are often expected to provide evidence of the 'impact' of their work.
7. There are three main reasons for the limited amount of foundation support for international journalism:
  - a) It rarely aligns directly with the strategic priorities of a foundation (and so has to compete either with all other forms of journalism, or with numerous other ways of achieving the specific objectives of a foundation).
  - b) Many foundations and journalists are unwilling to accept or negotiate the risks and challenges involved in reaching a compromise on the nature of the beat being funded.
  - c) There are inherent difficulties associated with isolating and measuring the impact of international news.
8. Foundations rarely advertise 'open calls' for funding. Instead, support emerges from an informal process of relationship building and ongoing dialogue between foundations and non-profit news organisations/intermediaries

## INTRODUCTION

**It is rarely profitable for news organisations to cover important international issues like refugee flows, global health, resilience, humanitarian assistance, food insecurity and climate change. As a result, the only way many news organisations can now afford to regularly report on such issues is through support provided by private foundations.**

But it is difficult for journalists, foundations, their consultants, and other kinds of donors to get an accurate picture of who is doing what within foundation funding. There are rarely clear calls for funding, and support for international news is almost always subsumed within one – or often several – of foundation's main charitable purposes. Finally, foundation funding is often distributed for a foundation by an intermediary organisation, making it

even more difficult to identify. These issues may also explain why there have been few previous attempts to map such funding.

Nevertheless, journalists need to understand more about the nature of foundation funding in order to source financial support for valuable forms of international reporting in highly competitive, but often very unclear, funding environments. Foundations, the consultants who advise them, and other kinds of donors, also need to understand how the logics of foundation funding are leading to certain kinds of news flourishing – whilst others are struggling.

So the purpose of this report is to help a range of practitioners understand what is happening in foundation funding, position themselves more effectively, and identify important "gaps in the market". The findings we discuss here are drawn from an extensive international study carried out in 2017, which involved interviewing a range of representatives from the foundations, intermediary organisations and (largely) non-profit news outlets working in this area.

For the sake of clarity: our focus is on foundation support for non-profit international reporting, not for building the capacity of journalists abroad (i.e. media development), or transnational investigative reporting. In particular, we are interested in thematic areas, such as international development, global health, human rights, and humanitarian crises. The discussion also focusses on foundations based in Europe and North America and their support for English-language news. The role of bilateral donors, such as DFID and SIDA, is not discussed.

This research and short report is part of an ongoing academic research project into humanitarian news. The Humanitarian Journalism research project is investigating how the news media report on humanitarian crises, what shapes their coverage and what influences it has. This research is supported by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). The research team includes Dr Martin Scott (University of East Anglia), Dr Kate Wright (University of Edinburgh) and Dr Mel Bunce (City, University of London). For more information, see [www.humanitarian-journalism.net](http://www.humanitarian-journalism.net)



# 1.

## WHICH FOUNDATIONS SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL JOURNALISM?

**Domestic non-profit news outlets in the USA are currently experiencing a 'Trump bump', in the form of a significant increase in funding from private trusts and foundations. But journalists producing international coverage do not appear to be experiencing similar increases in foundation income.**

Only a small handful of foundations fund international news, and support for international coverage still forms a tiny proportion of the grant-making portfolios of most of these foundations.

The one major exception to this is the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF). They have a specific Global Media Partnerships portfolio, which aims to support media coverage of global health and international development issues. Recent grants from this portfolio include:

– Support for News Deeply to establish Women's Advancement Deeply (a single-issue site providing in-depth coverage of efforts to secure economic equality for women worldwide).

– Funding for the continued development of BRIGHT Magazine (an online publication aiming to reinvent storytelling about health, education, and social impact through solutions journalism).

– Renewed funding for the Guardian's Global Development site, which produces news, features, debate, multi-media and photography on issues relating to global development.

The only other significant donor in this field is the MacArthur Foundation. In 2016, they awarded \$25 million in unrestricted, five-year general operating grants to 12 different news organisations in order to support accountability and explanatory reporting. Most of these grants focussed explicitly on investigative and/or international reporting. For example, the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting received \$2.5 million in general operating support and Public Radio International received \$1.75 million for its news program, The World. It is worth noting, though, that all of these journalism grantees were based in the US.

Other foundations active in this area, which give less financial support to international journalism, are the UN Foundation and Humanity United. In order to raise awareness of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the UN Foundation supported the establishment of the SDG News aggregator site – Global Daily - and the Global Development Watch section of the LA Times. The UN Foundation also supports UN Dispatch, which provides commentary and coverage on the UN and UN-related issues. The principal focus of Humanity United is on human trafficking and the prevention of atrocities in parts of Africa. They have supported media coverage in both of these areas. The most high-profile example is their support for the Modern-day Slavery in Focus section of the Guardian.

Other active foundations in this area include the Ford Foundation, Knight Foundation, Omidyar Network, Open Society Foundations and the Rockefeller Foundation. In every case, support for international journalism makes up a very low percentage of overall funding. Even the support provided by the BMGF's Global Media Partnerships portfolio is estimated to represent only around 1 percent of the Foundation's total annual output (Paulson 2013).

There is little indication that foundation support for thematic international news is increasing. New entrants in this area are rare. The sudden appearance and subsequent withdrawal of the Jynwel Foundation from this field in 2015 is a notable exception.



# 2.

## WHY DO FOUNDATIONS SUPPORT INTERNATIONAL JOURNALISM?

**Journalists say they find it hard to establish what foundations want to fund. This is understandable, as foundations rarely issue explicit calls for funding, and their strategic priorities are often more flexible than bilateral donors.**

To make things even more confusing, the charitable purposes that underpin a foundation's main funding streams can vary dramatically to one another, so there may be very different priorities at work within the same foundation.

Foundations generally support either media capacity building or journalism for specific kinds of social change (Rosenstiel et al 2016). According to a survey of news organisations and donors by the American Press Institute, when asked to choose what was closest to their funding mission, just over half of funders who answered the question (54 percent) said they are mostly interested in strengthening a free press. But 4 in 10 (44 percent) said they engage in funding of media to advance other larger strategic goals (Rosenstiel et al 2016). We will now discuss each of these rationales as they relate to non-profit international journalism.

### MEDIA CAPACITY-BUILDING

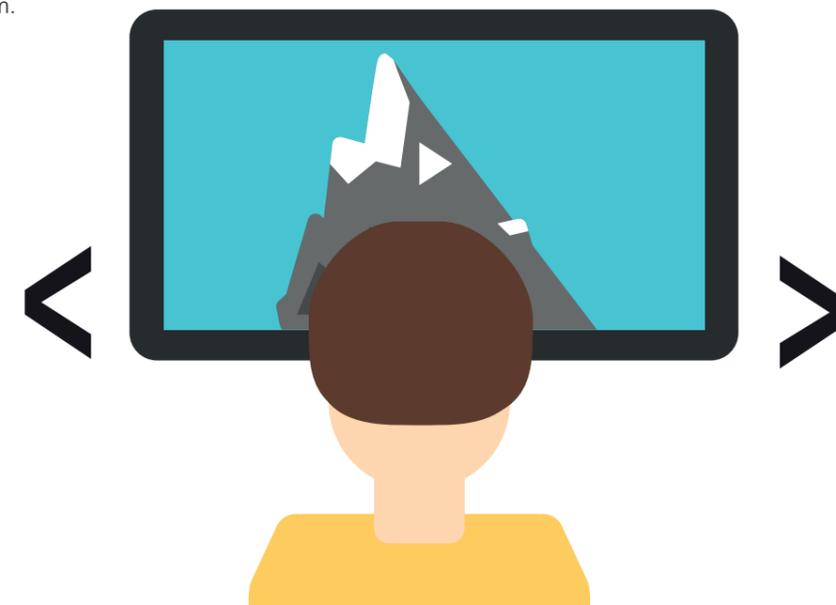
There are a number of foundations, such as the Knight Foundation, MacArthur Foundation and Open Society Foundations, with a charitable purpose that relates directly to the media. In other words, they aim to support the development of the media itself – or media development. Such foundations have a tendency to provide core funding, or to offer general operating support grants to news organisations, rather than restricted support for particular projects.

In such cases, support for thematic international news usually occurs when news organisations or intermediaries with a pre-existing international focus are successful in securing funding that is intended for the development of journalism per se. Put another way, a focus on international news is usually the result of the preference of the grantee rather than the foundation.

For example, the Knight Foundation is a long-time supporter of the International Centre for Journalism

(ICFJ) because of the capacity-building aspect of the international news coverage it funds, rather than because it has a particular commitment to supporting international journalism. This explains why foundation support for thematic international journalism amongst such foundation is relatively rare: because news organisations with a pre-existing focus on international issues are competing with all other (non-international) journalism for funding.

The MacArthur Foundation appears to be an exception in this area, though, because it does have a particular commitment to providing (unrestricted) funding to international news. Kathy Im (2016), MacArthur's Director of Journalism and Media has explained that, 'unrestricted funding is especially vital to helping well-led non-profit news organizations experiment and innovate, and enables journalists and editors the independence to pursue important stories that do not make commercial sense, particularly in the costly realms of investigative and international reporting'.



## JOURNALISM FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

Secondly, and more commonly, there are foundations (or funding streams within foundations) that support thematic international news coverage in order to help achieve specific (non-journalistic) objectives. Such objectives may include promoting a particular SDG, tackling a specific health issue or facilitating a change in government policy. These foundations are far more likely to provide restricted, or project funding, rather than general operating support.

In these cases, providing support for thematic international news often represents a degree of compromise between two competing issues: (1) an inclination to instrumentalize journalism and direct it towards achieving specific pre-determined goals and (2) norms of journalistic impartiality and objectivity (held by both journalists and many foundations) which emphasise journalistic autonomy in determining the subject and focus of news.

By accepting foundation funding to cover a particular international news 'beat', journalists can claim to be retaining their editorial independence because they are still free to choose to write whatever stories they wish, within that beat. At the same time, foundations are helping to facilitate change in a specific area by enabling the media to raise the profile of a particular issue area. Given this, such compromise can be acceptable to both.

However, this compromise can also create a number of risks and tensions. Firstly, procedures must be put in place to ensure that journalists retain – and are perceived to retain – full editorial independence when accepting foundation funding. Indeed, one of the main risks of this

form of funding is that the credibility of both organisations may be damaged if foundations are perceived to be compromising the autonomy of news outlets. Such reputational risks are particularly high when foundations make media grants on issues where they do policy work, where there may be the possibility of a conflict of interest.

Secondly, an understanding must be reached about the nature and boundaries of the funded news beat and how narrowly that beat is defined. The more tightly or narrowly the beat is defined, the closer such funding may get to crossing lines of journalistic independence. Similarly, there is a danger that news organisations may be inadvertently encouraged to shift the focus of their coverage towards the perceived priorities of foundations, in an attempt to secure funding. Journalists have to ask whether they would have covered this particular beat if the funder had not specified it.

It is worthwhile noting, though, that very few of the international news organisations we spoke to accepted foundation funding to pay for an investigation into a specific problem. According to the survey by the American Press Institute, such directed grants appear to be much more common in other areas of journalism.

In all, 41 percent of non-profit media outlets said they received offers from funders to conduct specific investigations. Of those, more than 80 percent said they accepted such offers. Of the 12 single-issue media outlets that have been offered funding for a specific expose or look into a specific issue, all but one of those surveyed accepted the offer (Rosenstiel et al 2016).

These negotiations over the precise nature of the beat being funded can take place either directly with a news organisation or between a foundation and an intermediary organisation (see below). However, in some cases, the decision to compromise can also happen internally, within a foundation, before negotiations with a news organisation or intermediary even begin.

Thirdly, the pathway to impact that foundations adopt needs to be broad enough and flexible enough to account for the uncertainties inherent in supporting independent journalism. Given that journalists retain editorial freedom and can choose which stories to cover (within a pre-defined beat) and how to cover them, foundations must accept that may end up supporting some coverage that may not be entirely relevant to their core objectives. For example, if a foundation has a particular concern for a specific global health issue but agrees to support coverage of a general 'global health' beat, it must accept that not all coverage will help raise awareness of the issue it cares most about.

In summary, another explanation for the limited amount of foundation funding in this area is that many foundations and journalists are unwilling or unable to accept the risks and challenges involved in reaching a compromise on the nature of a thematic beat.

Another key reason for the relative lack of journalistic support is that, in such cases, foundations support numerous other non-journalistic activities – such as network building, advocacy, research and training. As a result, news organisations are effectively competing against all other, non-journalistic ways of achieving the particular objectives of a foundation. Furthermore, the compromise discussed above may put journalism at an acute disadvantage because the impact of raising the profile of a particular topic or issue-area through the media is notoriously difficult to isolate and measure. Indeed, this was the main reason why the UK Department for International Development (DFID) stopped providing support in this area in 2011. A review of its portfolio of development awareness work stated that, 'the link between these programmes and poverty reduction is not strong enough to satisfy our rigorous criteria for development impact' (Dominy et al 2011:2).

## TENSIONS AND EXCEPTIONS

Trying to establish what foundations want to fund is often very confusing for journalists: foundations' funding streams are numerous, complex, and their strategic priorities vary considerably from one another, even within the same foundation. What is clear is that most foundations do not have an explicit remit to support international journalism: they tend to be more interested in building the capacity of media in general, or in using journalism to try and stimulate social change. So the norms and aims of non-profit news outlets don't align exactly with foundations.

This is a problem for news outlets seeking foundation funding, given the fierce competition they face from many other non-journalistic organisations, whose objectives may align more precisely with foundations, and which may be willing and able to provide foundations with more obvious examples of social 'impact'. To gain foundation funding, news outlets may have to make compromises – and both foundations and news outlets may be unwilling or unable to make these compromises. Together, these two factors explain why few foundations currently fund international journalism.

The nature of foundations' priorities also leads to disparities in the kinds of international journalism which receive funding. Some of the most commonly supported topics include human trafficking and modern day slavery, (supported by Humanity United, the C&A Foundation), land and property rights, (supported by the Omidyar Network) and global development, (supported by the BMGF and the UN Foundation). International issues that generally receive less foundation funding include humanitarian assistance, food insecurity human rights and press freedom itself.

It is worth pointing out, though, that some foundations do have theories of change that align directly with thematic international journalism. In other words, for them, supporting thematic international journalism does not represent a compromise on their instrumental objectives or an unintended outcome of supporting journalism in general. The Rockefeller Foundation is perhaps the best example of this. They suggest that, 'supporting field-building is in our DNA: from seeding the development of the field of public health in the early twentieth century to our working growing the field of impact investing in the early twenty-first century'.

Most recently, The Rockefeller Foundation has supported media coverage in the areas of Resilience and Urbanisation, in order to raise the profile of these subject areas in general, rather than to bring about particular kinds of social change. High profile examples include their support for the Resilient Cities section of the Guardian and Zilient; a relatively new site providing news about resilience and a community for relevant practitioners. However, such support is still extremely limited in scale and restricted to very specific subject areas.



# 3. GRANT GIVING AVENUES

## INDIRECT SUPPORT

When foundations do provide support for thematic international news, it is often channelled via intermediaries such as the *Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting* and *GroundTruth*. These intermediaries are a longstanding and incredibly influential part of the wider ecosystem of international journalism. In 2016 alone, the Pulitzer Center helped to subsidize 118 reporting projects, resulting in over 600 stories in more than 150 media outlets. Similarly, before it closed in February 2018, the International Reporting Project (IRP) had supported over 650 journalists to travel to 115 countries.

Collectively, then, these organisations are responsible for supporting thousands of international news stories each year and for the career development of hundreds of international journalists. Moreover, given there are only a relatively small number of these organisations, they represent important gatekeepers within the field of international news. Surprisingly, though, their role in supporting international news is often overlooked. In most previous studies of international journalism, they are rarely even mentioned.

## DIRECT SUPPORT

Foundation support for thematic international news is increasingly provided directly to news organisations. This direct support comes in two forms. Firstly, foundations can support an expansion in coverage of a specific subject area, within an established news organisation. In general, the subject area is more narrowly defined within more specialist news organisations. By contrast, thematic funding for larger news organisations with more mainstream audiences is usually more broadly defined. For example, the Guardian, the LA Times, El Pais and NPR all have specific sections or blogs, supported by foundations, which focus on Global Development in general, rather than any specific development issue.

The Guardian has been by far the most successful news organisations at obtaining foundation funding for news with an international dimension. In the past few years, it has received funding from: The BMGF to report on Refugees and Global Development, the Conrad Hilton Foundation to cover Early Childhood

Development, the Ford Foundation, to report on Inequality, the Rockefeller Foundation to report on Cities and Humanity United, to cover Modern Day Slavery. The Guardian's success derives from having a combination of a relatively large reach, an audience with relatively high levels of trust and engagement and a social mission that aligns fairly closely with the mission of many of the most active foundations in this field.

Secondly, foundation funding in this area can be used to help establish entirely new, often digital-only, non-profit news organizations, focussed on specific international issues. News Deeply, for example, is an online journalism and technology company, specializing in single-issue news websites related to important global issues. Its single topic sites include Syria Deeply, Refugees Deeply, Malnutrition Deeply and Women's Advancement Deeply and are supported by a range of foundations including the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation and the BMGF. These news hubs are aimed at niche, specialist audiences, and focus on building conversations between specific communities.

# 4. HOW DO FOUNDATIONS DECIDE WHICH NEWS OUTLETS TO FUND?

**Foundations say they don't have open calls for funding because they don't want to influence news organisations' editorial agendas. So instead, partnerships with news organisations emerge from an informal courting process.**

Foundations are alert to accusations that they alter the editorial content of news organisations. They claim that this is one of the reasons why they don't issue calls for funding, unlike bilateral donors. As one interviewee put it, 'if we say we want to do something, then suddenly everyone else wants to do it too. So we hold our cards close to our chest'. Instead, foundation grants for journalism generally emerge from a two-stage process.

First, news organisations and foundations engage in an informal process of relationship building or becoming known and trusted by each other. Second, they establish an ongoing and more detailed dialogue about their respective missions and current priorities.

This dialogue takes place through phone calls, email exchanges, meetings and at events and conferences. The purpose of this dialogue is to establish if there are any areas of common ground, or an 'alignment', between their respective interests. As one interviewee put it, 'it is about identifying the areas of mutual interest where we would love to be able to do more journalism and they would love us to be able to do more journalism, and we go from there'.

If sufficient alignment is believed to have been achieved and if there is willingness on both sides to work together, they will begin to discuss the precise details of a possible grant. This process can take a relatively long time, however. Given this, there also appears to be a tendency for foundations to support news organisations with whom they already have established relationships.

Second, many of the foundations operating with rationales that are more instrumental want to know whether the journalistic programmes they fund are 'making a difference'. As a result, news organisations in negotiations with funders are increasingly expected to provide evidence of the 'impact' that their work is having. In the media sector, there is a growing consensus that page-views of news stories do not, in and of themselves, constitute 'impact'.



Therefore, foundations increasingly want to see evidence that news content might have influenced audiences, other media or set the agenda for decision-makers. This in itself may alter how news organisations work. For instance, the search for 'impact' may lead to a greater focus on journalism that is easily liked or shared on social media.

It is important to note, though, that the emphasis placed on (demonstrating) impact does vary significantly between foundations. However, it also appears to be the case that those foundations that are most active in this area are amongst the most concerned with (generating and measuring) impact.

The extent to which individuals within a foundation have a familiarity with journalistic norms and values appears to have a significant influence over the way in which negotiations with news organisations or intermediaries are conducted. Many of the most active foundations in this area have

founders and/or institutional cultures that are closely connected to either journalism or communications/technology. Indeed, many of the individuals who are directly responsible for awarding journalistic funding within a foundation have a journalistic background. Funding for thematic international news is also often administered by the communications department of a foundation.

Most funding in this area is awarded to non-profit news organisations. One exception is the Omidyar Network, which does make for-profit investments. Most support is also relatively short-term. As one foundation representative put it, 'none of us are going to fund anything in perpetuity'. There is certainly no typical amount to the size of grants awarded in this area. Grants range significantly in size, from minor, ad hoc support for individual journalists to make a single trip, to grants of several million pounds to establish an entirely new news site.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Foundations that fund international non-profit journalism may consider supporting thematic areas that are particularly underfunded, such as humanitarian assistance, food insecurity, human rights and press freedom itself.
2. Given the dependence of many small non-profit news outlets on foundation funding, foundations need to be particularly mindful of the effects that their support can have on the landscape of international journalism (even if such support only forms a tiny proportion of their grant-making portfolios).
3. Foundations should understand that requiring news outlets to report on impact is likely to have its own impacts on news organisations. There are considerable opportunities for foundations willing to consider funding international journalism, as a public good in its own right.
4. News outlets seeking foundation funding for international journalism need to be aware that pursuing partnerships with foundations can be a particularly time-consuming and unpredictable process.
5. News outlets, non-profit intermediaries and foundations should all aim to be as transparent as possible about the nature of their partnerships.

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