

Examining the Journalism Philanthropy Model: A Literature Review

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Amid the decline of commercial local news in the United States, another model has emerged as a growing alternative: philanthropy-supported journalism. Although foundation-funded journalism is not a particularly new model, the field has seen an influx of charitable funds in recent years—since 2009, it has been estimated that foundations have invested more than \$11 billion in media and journalism projects worldwide. Despite this, there has been limited scholarly research on the impact of foundation-funded journalism. This literature review aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the current scholarship on journalism philanthropy, synthesizing interdisciplinary literature from sociology, journalism studies, and the political economy of communication. In doing so, this review considers both the potential opportunities and limitations of this funding model for journalism, and concludes by offering suggestions for further research on the topic.

Keywords: journalism, philanthropy, nonprofit news, journalism funding

In the last two decades, as newspaper advertising revenues have declined precipitously (Barthel, 2021) and thousands of local publications have shuttered (Metzger, 2024), American news organizations have sought alternative funding models to support the flailing journalism industry (Pickard, 2020). Amid short-lived and overstated promises of digital advertising and micropayments, one model has emerged as a growing alternative: philanthropy-supported journalism.

Although foundation-funded journalism is not a particularly new model—the American public media system, for example, has depended on philanthropic contributions for decades (Lashner, 1976)—the field has seen an influx of charitable funds in recent years. In total, the industry group Media Impact Funders estimates that foundation funders have invested more than \$11 billion in media and journalism projects worldwide since 2009 (Media Impact Funders, n.d.), and that foundation funding for journalism, specifically, quadrupled in that period (Armour-Jones, 2019). The foundation-supported model has been so successful that even *The New York Times* recently created a team within the company dedicated to soliciting philanthropic support (The New York Times Company, 2020).

Despite the significant influx in funding, there has been limited scholarly research on journalism philanthropy. Some scholars have voiced concerns about the potential impact of philanthropic funding for journalism (Browne, 2010; Scott, Bunce, & Wright, 2017; Wright, Scott, & Bunce, 2019), while others,

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particularly journalism studies scholars, have examined foundations' influence on the boundaries of the journalistic field (Lewis, 2012; Scott, Bunce, & Wright, 2019). With the exception of Benson (2018), there has been little in the way of political economic analysis on foundation-funded journalism in the United States or globally. In this review, I aim to provide a comprehensive overview of the existing scholarship on journalism philanthropy, synthesizing literature from sociology, journalism studies, and the political economy of communication. In doing so, I consider both the opportunities and limitations of this rapidly growing journalism-funding model. I conclude the review by offering suggestions for future research in this area, which, I argue, merits further scholarly analysis.

Before discussing the existing research on journalism philanthropy, it is instructive to define the bounds of this review. First, this article focuses primarily on the relationship between news organizations and institutional funders in the United States. The reasoning for this focus is twofold: first, the specific considerations of the heavily commercialized U.S. media system (Pickard, 2020), and second, the country's longstanding culture of private philanthropy (Ostrower, 1995). That said, global scholarship contributing to knowledge in the U.S. case is also considered (Browne, 2010; Myers, 2018; Schiffrin, 2017; van 't Hof & Deuze, 2023). Second, there is a robust body of literature on the changing relationships between journalism and international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), particularly examining how NGOs are increasingly participating in newsmaking processes (e.g., Conrad, 2015; Powers, 2018). Although this scholarship is closely connected to that of journalism philanthropy, the present review focuses primarily on a specific subset of NGOs that interface with journalism organizations through grantmaking and ownership structures. Relatedly, this review also excludes existing literature on the impact of government funding, including foreign development aid, on journalism and media projects.

Thus, in the sections to follow, this article will review the current scholarship on philanthropic funding of journalism and media in the United States, bringing together disparate literatures to argue that this topic necessitates further scholarly analysis. First, though, it is instructive to understand the economic crisis in local journalism in the United States and the subsequent rise of nonprofit journalism over the last two decades.

Local News in Crisis and Rise of Nonprofit News

Since 2005, approximately 3,200 local news publications across the United States have ceased operations (Metzger, 2024). As of 2024, the country has lost a third of its total newspapers—a grim landmark met a full year earlier than projected—with closures occurring at a rate of more than two per week (Metzger, 2024). The disappearance of local newspapers has led to the emergence of news deserts, or communities without access to the sort of credible, comprehensive news and information that feeds democracy at the grassroots level (Abernathy, 2020). Although scholars have critiqued the concept of news deserts for its “normative presumptions and its descriptive fuzziness” (Usher, 2023, p. 239), it is nonetheless a useful tool to illustrate the rapid decline of local news over the last two decades. It is estimated today, for example, that nearly 55 million people live in one of the 208 counties that are presently considered news deserts or one of the 1,563 counties with only a single source of news (Metzger, 2024). Scholars, including Pickard (2020), have argued that the market's inability to support the production and distribution of local journalism, a socially necessary public good, constitutes market failure.

In addition to shuttered newsrooms, repeated cycles of layoffs and cutbacks have resulted in publications that can best be described as “ghost newspapers”—newspapers that exist as shells of their former selves, both in terms of reporting capacity and readership (Abernathy, 2020, p. 9). Scholars (Susca, 2024) and journalists (Benton, 2023; Coppins, 2021) alike have illustrated how hedge funds, private equity firms, and national chains have gutted the local newspaper landscape in the last two decades, bleeding outlets dry and leaving behind ghost newspapers in their wake. Coppins (2021) detailed how the hedge fund Alden Global Capital, for example, gets rich by “strip-mining” (para. 13) local news outlets:

The model is simple: Gut the staff, sell the real estate, jack up subscription prices, and wring as much cash as possible out of the enterprise until eventually enough readers cancel their subscriptions that the paper folds, or is reduced to a desiccated husk of its former self. (Coppins, 2021, para. 13)

Susca (2024) echoed Coppins (2021) in arguing that, while much attention has been paid to the rise of the Internet in destabilizing the advertising-based revenue model, “newspaper companies beholden to private investment funds and the financial industry itself should get more of the blame over what has transpired in these years” (Susca, 2024, pp. 80–81). Moreover, the phenomenon of ghost newspapers illustrates just how destructive the commercial journalism industry has become.

In the age of seemingly ubiquitous digital journalism and platform-mediated news consumption, a small-town local newspaper might seem quaint at best or antiquated at worst. However, a substantial body of research has documented the positive impact of local news outlets and the detrimental consequences when publications disappear. When local news outlets close, civic engagement decreases (Shaker, 2014) while political polarization increases (Darr, Hitt, & Dunaway, 2018), and community ties are weakened (Mathews, 2022). Other studies have documented declines in the financial health of municipal governments when their local news outlets close, demonstrating the watchdog role of local journalism in their communities (Gao, Lee, & Murphy, 2020). Finally, communities are not equally impacted by the decline of local journalism—research has shown that gaps in access to critical news and information are correlated with socioeconomic factors, meaning that low-income communities are disproportionately affected by a lack of local news (Hamilton & Morgan, 2018).

In response to the cratering of local commercial news, journalists, academics, and industry experts have explored the noncommercial, nonprofit journalism model as a potentially viable alternative. Nonprofit news organizations such as *The Associated Press*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *Mother Jones* have existed in the United States for decades, but the model has seen a renaissance of renewed interest in the years following the 2008 global financial crisis (Ferrucci, 2020; Konieczna, 2018). According to the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN), a nationwide consortium of nonprofit news organizations, more than a third of their 400+ member newsrooms were founded in the last five years (Roseman, McLellan, & Holcomb, 2022).

Notably, the term “nonprofit journalism” refers to a wide array of news- and information-focused organizations (Konieczna, 2019). Building on definitions provided by the Pew Research Center (Mitchell, Jurkowitz, Holcomb, & Anderson, 2013) and the Legal Information Institute (n.d.), the present study understands nonprofit news organizations as entities that operate for purposes other than generating profit,

have federal tax-exempt status,¹ and participate in the production and distribution of journalism. As not-for-profit organizations, these newsrooms are eligible to receive charitable contributions and are freed from the commercial pressures faced by for-profit and legacy newsrooms (Pickard, 2020). As I explore in the next section, a significant portion of this charitable revenue comes from institutional philanthropy.

Defining Journalism Philanthropy

The precise definition of the term “philanthropy” is debated (Barman, 2017; Daly, 2012), but the concept generally refers to the “private giving of time and valuable resources for public purposes” (Salamon, 1992, p. 10). Building on this definition, journalism philanthropy can be understood as the private giving of time and resources to benefit journalistic causes, including, but not limited to, nonprofit news organizations, industry groups, research, education, and training. Although philanthropy refers to charitable giving of all kinds, including online donations and crowdfunding, for this review, I focus primarily on the institutional funders of journalism, generally private foundations and corporations.² Given this focus, I use the terms “journalism philanthropy” and “foundation-funded journalism” interchangeably.

While the sheer volume of journalism philanthropy has swelled over the last two decades (Armour-Jones, 2019; Westphal, 2009), it remains a relatively small proportion of the larger philanthropic field in the United States. Of the estimated \$500 billion given to U.S. charities by individuals, foundations, and corporations annually (Lilly Family School of Philanthropy, 2023), media philanthropy accounts for around \$1 billion (Media Impact Funders, n.d.). The Future of Media Project (2021) at Harvard University identified some of the largest institutional funders of nonprofit news in the United States through their media index. This includes news-oriented philanthropies, like the American Journalism Project and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism. The index also identified corporate philanthropic funders, like the Google News Initiative and the now-defunct Meta Journalism Project. Other longstanding philanthropies with journalism-funding initiatives—but that do not exclusively fund journalism—include the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, among many others. In addition to these national philanthropic entities, community foundations are increasingly becoming involved in funding local news outlets in their respective regions (Media Impact Funders, 2021).

This influx of philanthropic funding from national, local, and regional entities has been instrumental in growing the nonprofit news sector. According to an annual survey of INN member newsrooms, 85% of nonprofit newsrooms’ revenue comes from charitable giving (Roseman et al., 2022). Of that total, approximately 30% comes from individual giving—through membership programs, one-time gifts, major donors, and the like—while 53% comes from institutional funders. By any measure, journalism philanthropy

¹ Importantly, this definition also includes organizations that are in the process of receiving their tax-exempt status from the IRS and thus have a fiscal sponsorship agreement with a qualifying not-for-profit organization. For more information about fiscal sponsorships in nonprofit journalism, see Institute for Nonprofit News (n.d.-a).

² In some cases, the lines between institutional funders and high-level individual funders are blurred, particularly when major donors make charitable contributions through a family foundation, as in the case studies by Scott et al. (2019) and Wright et al. (2019).

is essential to the growth and continued survival of the burgeoning nonprofit, noncommercial news sector. However, as noted previously, journalism philanthropy is not limited to funding for nonprofit news organizations. In recent years, for-profit publications like *The Seattle Times* and *The Minnesota Star Tribune* have also sought philanthropic support for their work (Grove, 2024; Hare, 2021). In short, foundation-funded journalism has become prevalent across the industry.

Philanthropic giving for media and journalism is, however, not equally distributed. One study found that eight dollars out of every ten in foundation funding for journalism supported only 25 nonprofit news organizations (Nisbet, Wihbey, Kristiansen, & Bajak, 2018). This concentration of funding also reflected a disproportionate focus on certain reporting topic areas over others and “deep geographic disparities in funding that favors the East and West Coasts” (Nisbet et al., 2018, p. 64), a finding reinforced by Usher’s (2021) analysis. Beyond geography, patterns of concentrated journalism funding extend to other dimensions of structural inequality. One analysis of journalism philanthropy in the United States found that, of the total institutional funding given to news organizations between 2013 and 2017, only 8.1% went to journalism efforts that promoted diversity, equity, and inclusion, including projects and newsrooms designed to serve certain racial and ethnic groups (Polyak & Donnelly, 2019, p. 9). Although these trends appear to have shifted somewhat in recent years—a 2023 survey of journalism funders, for example, found that six in ten respondents reported having made grants to news organizations focused on serving communities of color (Preston, Rosenstiel, Connelly, Broaddus, & Benz, 2023, p. 1)—it is nonetheless necessary to be cognizant of the structural factors that shape giving patterns in journalism philanthropy.

Finally, discussions of institutional philanthropy are often tied to broader conversations about growing economic inequality (Maclean, Harvey, Yang, & Mueller, 2021). Extensive political economic scholarship in recent years has documented the increasing concentration of wealth in the upper echelons of society (e.g., Piketty, 2014). As Theine and Grabner (2020) noted, this body of research “points to increased economic inequality with a small cosmopolitan elite acquiring larger shares of income and especially wealth, while the majority gradually gets lower shares of both” (p. 22). If history is any indication, according to Maclean et al. (2021), these conditions “are ripe for philanthropy to take centre stage, pioneering solutions to chronic problems” (p. 331). Although a robust discussion of the interconnections between economic inequality and elite philanthropy is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note the systemic factors at play. With this understanding, I turn to a review of the current literature.

The Journalism Philanthropy Model: Reviewing the Literature

In the last 15 years, the body of literature on journalism philanthropy, or foundation-funded journalism, has grown slowly but steadily (Browne, 2019). Much of the existing scholarship emerged from a journalism studies tradition to consider the impact of foundation funding on 1) journalistic autonomy and 2) news production. In this review, I argue that while the existing literature provides insight into how journalism philanthropy shapes journalism as a practice, there is a need for further scholarship exploring how philanthropic funding affects journalism as an institution. An institutional view entails understanding journalism “as a large-scale phenomenon whose primary effect is wielding power, primarily to shape public opinion, and controlling the distribution of informational or symbolic resources in society” (Zelizer, 2004, p. 36). But first, I will review the literature about journalistic autonomy.

Several scholars have explored the intersection of foundation-funded news and journalists' autonomy in various contexts, albeit with somewhat conflicting findings. Bunce (2016), for example, suggested that philanthropic funding might "result in pressure on journalists to avoid certain topics, or adopt the political positions or interpretative frames of their funders" (p. 4). Scott et al. (2019) argued that this phenomenon is already well-documented. As they wrote, studies (e.g., Schiffrin, 2017) have revealed "instances of foundations seemingly interfering directly with their grantees' editorial decision making: compromising their operational autonomy by encouraging them to cover (or not cover) certain stories, or to report on them in particular ways" (Scott et al., 2019, p. 2036). However, in her research, Myers (2018) found that journalists do have considerable agency in these funder-recipient relationships and can push back on funders when necessary. Similarly, van 't Hof and Deuze's (2023) interviews with foundation professionals in the Netherlands indicated that funders are keenly aware of the powerful position they occupy within the world of journalism and are mindful of trying to avoid influencing their grantees' journalistic autonomy (p. 13). Through in-depth interviews with U.S.-based journalism funders, Ha (2024) found that "most foundations, intermediaries, and grant recipients acknowledge and honor editorial independence" (p. 11) but that the precise definitions of editorial independence varied across organizations.

Similar concerns could be expressed about another major journalism funder: advertisers. Indeed, Ferrucci and Nelson (2019) found that philanthropic funders' influence on journalism resembles that of advertisers' influence throughout much of the 20th century, albeit with one key distinction. Although commercial newsrooms have long maintained a firewall—or, at least, the impression of one—between business and editorial functions, the authors argued that this boundary is more difficult to maintain with foundation funders. Konieczna (2022) noted that this is due, at least in part, to a divergence in respective end goals. As she wrote, advertisers have historically supported journalism almost inadvertently by buying ad space and/or time from news outlets with the goal of reaching prospective customers. By contrast, foundations fund news organizations "precisely because of what journalism is and what it does" (Konieczna, 2022, p. 93). Thus, Konieczna (2022) continued, "the goal of these funders is explicitly to have an impact on society—whereas the goal of advertisers, is, ostensibly, to sell more products" (p. 93). Philanthropic funders' emphasis on creating impact—and current scholarly understandings of how that emphasis affects their grantee newsrooms—is explored in-depth later in this review.

Whether or not funders directly influence editorial decision making, other scholars have argued that philanthropic funding can nonetheless impact *perceptions* of journalistic autonomy. In her case study of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF), Bunce (2016) found that this concern was especially pressing when foundations were also involved in funding the very reporting topics covered by the news organizations they were actively financing, thus creating a perceived conflict of interest. In the case of BMGF, the foundation-funded reporting on development and global health, they also funded NGOs engaged in development and global health work on the ground. As Bunce (2016) described, "journalists who receive funding from the foundation worry that audiences think they are compromised, and unable to report on its activities" (p. 10). This perceived influence, according to Ferrucci and Nelson (2019), is concerning at a time when Americans' trust in the media is at an all-time low. As they argue, "foundations might solve the profession's immediate financial crisis while exacerbating its long-term credibility crisis" (Ferrucci & Nelson, 2019, p. 47). A recent survey of U.S. adults, however, found that respondents consider foundation-funded journalism considerably more trustworthy than advertising-funded news and information (Ha, 2024).

Further journalism studies scholarship has contended that funders' potential influence on journalism extends beyond editorial autonomy—real or perceived—to include news production processes. Scott et al. (2019), for example, argued that philanthropic funding shapes news production in three key ways: 1) by expanding the boundaries of professional journalistic practice to include noneditorial activities like fundraising, marketing, and engagement; 2) by encouraging journalists to adopt more outcome- or impact-oriented role perceptions; and 3) by incentivizing the thematization of news topics (p. 2049). In her earlier study of international development news, Bunce (2016) posited that foundation funders might influence (1) the content of news, simply by choosing to fund coverage of certain topics and not others; (2) the objectives of news, by aiming to enact change rather than simply inform audiences; and (3) the measures of success, by privileging impact and journalism that is "making a difference" (pp. 4–7). Nelson and Dahmen (2023) argued that news publishers are increasingly willing to pursue editorial experiments "not necessarily because it is what journalists think that audiences want but because it is what journalists know that funders want" (p. 11). In other words, these studies and others suggest that "foundations are changing journalism from the outside . . . by modifying the logics of news production" (Konieczna, 2022, p. 92).

Another way foundations potentially alter the logics of news production is by rewarding journalists and newsrooms that demonstrate impact. As Scott et al. (2017, 2019) and Bunce (2016) demonstrate, foundations' focus on demonstrating impact—and the repercussions of that focus for journalism practice—is an ever-present theme in much of the existing literature. Unlike commercial journalism, which generally measures impact by audience size (Browne, 2019), foundation-funded news describes impact as having "an effect on individuals, organizations, and society" (Pitt & Green-Barber, 2017, p. 17). Importantly, impact in this sense can range from macro-level changes in public policy or political discourse to micro-level changes, like shifts in individuals' attitudes or behavior. Although measuring and evaluating impact is a norm in the larger field of philanthropy, according to Konieczna (2022), the idea of quantifying journalism's impact "sits less comfortably" (p. 96) with journalists "and is one of the major points of contention between foundations pushing the boundaries of journalism, and the field they're affecting" (p. 96). In their earlier study, Konieczna and Powers (2017) used discourse analysis to examine how the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), a U.S.-based nonprofit investigative newsroom, described the impact of their work. The authors identified four distinct ways the organization referenced the impact of its work and argued that the "focus on impact—promoted, at least in part, by the organization's foundation funders—is encouraging ICIJ staffers to conceptualize differently what they are doing for democracy" (Konieczna & Powers, 2017, p. 1542).

On a more critical note, Benson (2018) argued that philanthropic funders' dual emphasis on impact and sustainability puts news organizations in a difficult position. His study, discussed in further detail below, uncovered an inherent tension between these two supposed metrics of success in the nonprofit journalism sector. As he wrote, "foundations place many nonprofits in a Catch-22 bind because of competing demands to achieve both civic 'impact' (via circulation of free content) and economic 'sustainability' (via paying audiences and corporate sponsors)" (Benson, 2018, p. 1060). In other words, he contended that funders encourage nonprofit newsrooms to freely distribute their reporting to achieve real-world impact, while simultaneously requiring that the newsrooms develop earned revenue streams to wean them off foundation funding. These expectations, according to Benson (2018), are fundamentally at odds and risk replicating the shortfalls of a commercial news industry that has long underserved non-elite audiences (p. 1070).

Several scholars have joined Benson (2018) in considering how news philanthropy is shaping the contours of the journalism industry. A small body of journalism studies literature, for example, has drawn on a Bourdieusian perspective to examine how journalism philanthropy contributes to the renegotiation of the boundaries of the journalistic field (Lewis, 2011). Specifically, literature in this area has explored how news philanthropy shapes “the boundaries of journalism itself, or the ways in which journalism is understood, valued, and practiced” (Scott et al., 2019, p. 2035). Lewis (2012) applied this approach to a case study of the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, arguing that by focusing on three key themes in their funding—innovation, digitization, and transformation—the organization renegotiated the boundaries of journalism in the digital age through its grantmaking. Given that the Knight Foundation has been one of the major philanthropic funders in the space for decades (Future of Media Project, 2021), these findings are significant in illustrating how funders can shift the boundaries of the journalistic field.

In their recent study, Creech and Parks (2022) extended this line of inquiry to consider how private philanthropy can open up the journalistic field to external influence, particularly from technology companies. The authors focused on the practice of venture philanthropy, a term that is often used interchangeably with philanthrocapitalism, which describes an approach to philanthropic giving informed by market-based logics and mirrors patterns of for-profit investment in the business world (Bishop, 2006). In the nonprofit journalism world, venture philanthropy is epitomized by journalism-focused funding initiatives at technology companies like Meta and Google. Drawing on a metajournalistic discourse analysis, Creech and Parks (2022) argued that venture philanthropy “comprises a[n] ideological intervention that conflates journalism’s economic and public value, revealing how technology companies exert cultural and social power akin to their increasing logistical control of the digital public sphere” (pp. 72–73). In other words, through venture philanthropy, the authors contended that values prevalent in the dominant ideology of the tech industry—namely entrepreneurialism and innovation—become similarly embedded in the expanding journalistic field.

Along the lines of Creech and Parks’ (2022) study, an emerging body of scholarship has begun to critically consider the larger implications of platform technology companies acting as journalism funders. Together, companies have committed hundreds of millions of dollars to journalism programs and media partnerships around the world in the last decade, although Meta has scaled back its funding in recent years (Scire, 2022). Drawing on journalism innovation literature (Lewis, 2011, 2012), Hermida and Young (2024) considered how the Google Innovation Challenge incentivized newsrooms to pursue certain approaches to innovation over others (p. 10). The authors argued that the initiative perpetuated a commercial orientation that “frames innovation as primarily a financial issue, and the audience as the solution despite the fact that readers have never historically paid for the full costs of news” (Hermida & Young, 2024, p. 3). Importantly, they noted, this orientation also “aligns with Google’s own business interests, given calls from the news industry and pressure from governments for the company to do more to fund journalism” (Hermida & Young, 2024, p. 11).

Scholars and practitioners have long expressed hesitations about the potential repercussions of journalism philanthropy writ large from both private foundations and corporate entities. In an article subtitled “reasons to be wary of charitable support,” Browne (2010) levied a cautionary tale of an overreliance on foundation funding for news. His analysis drew on examinations of what he described as three “foundation-funded journalistic non-profits” (Browne, 2010, p. 890): ProPublica in the United States,

the Centre for Public Inquiry in Ireland, and Transitions Online in Eastern Europe. Based on these case studies, Browne (2010) argued that philanthropic funding could be positive for journalism if two conditions were met: namely, that "the ultimate source of the subsidy was both (1) always clear to readers and (2) democratic and responsive to the wider public" (Browne, 2010, p. 901). The results of Browne's (2010) analyses, however, gave "at least some reason for concern as to whether these conditions can be met, or whether such support brings new worries for the credibility and viability of journalistic institutions" (p. 901).

One such concern, discussed by both Browne (2010) and other critical scholars (Creech & Parks, 2022), is that philanthropy is linked with larger systems of power (Maclean et al., 2021). This critique was at the crux of Benson's (2018) study, which analyzed the professional and educational composition of governing boards of directors of (1) nonprofit news organizations, (2) commercial news organizations, and (3) major journalism funders in the United States. His findings indicated that "financial elites dominate the oversight at all three types of organizations, though to a slightly lesser degree at foundations and nonprofit news" (Benson, 2018, p. 1060). As a result, he argued, "philanthropic support mostly reinforces and extends an upper middle-class, pro-corporate orientation in mainstream American journalism" (Benson, 2018, p. 1060). He concluded that "foundations provide the shaky bridge whereby nonprofits can find their footing between the elite and mass sectors, without fundamentally challenging this stratified media system or the broader finance-led capitalist order upon which it depends" (Benson, 2018, p. 1074).

Recently, some scholars have begun to consider how structural inequities manifest in journalism philanthropy. Usher (2021) sought to understand how "the big sort" (p. 67)—which they described as "a geospatial realignment where power, inequality, and even identity are increasingly tied to physical geography" (p. 5)—has manifested itself in local journalism, but more specifically, in patterns of news philanthropy. Drawing on a quantitative and geospatial analysis of foundation-funded news in the United States, they concluded that journalism funding is, for the most part, not going where it is most needed. Rather, these resources are being directed toward communities that are already over-served by the existing news and information infrastructure—namely, large cities and regions that politically lean Democratic. According to Usher (2021), understanding how these systemic inequities manifest in news philanthropy matters "because they reveal blind spots; places that need the money the most may not be getting the assistance" (p. 230).

Relatedly, scholarship on foundation-funded journalism to date has mostly neglected questions of race and ethnicity, despite empirical evidence of racial disparities in philanthropic funding for news (Polyak & Donnelly, 2019) and in philanthropy more broadly (Dorsey, Kim, Daniels, Sakaue, & Savage, 2020). Clark and Powell's (2023) recent study argued that the existing literature on journalism philanthropy fails to account for how questions of "race, ethnicity and other markers of identity factor into the disbursement and acquisition of funding" (p. 119), particularly in a U.S. context. Guided by a theoretical framework rooted in critical race theory, the authors sought to understand how philanthropic interventions impacted the health and sustainability of news organizations founded by people who identify as Black, Indigenous, or People of Color (BIPOC). Their findings revealed that, while BIPOC leaders generally welcomed support from philanthropic entities, the funding was (1) often insufficient to meet their communities' information needs and (2) placed an increased burden on newsrooms to meet specific grant requirements. Clark and Powell's

(2023) study is an important contribution to the literature, but further research examining questions of race in journalism philanthropy is merited.

In this area and others, journalism and communication scholars might consider turning to existing scholarship from the fields of organizational studies and sociology, which have broadly established records of research in the field of philanthropy (Barman, 2017; Harrow, 2010; Maclean et al., 2021; Ostrower, 1995). Some scholars have drawn on interdisciplinary theoretical frameworks to understand relationships between nonprofit news organizations and their funders—Browne’s (2010) article, for example, drew on sociological literature about the role of foundations. While the study of philanthropy itself is still relatively young, Barman (2017) nonetheless outlined the existing sociological literature on the social bases of philanthropy, much of which could be extended or adapted to study the foundations funding journalism.

Altogether, there is a consensus in much of the interdisciplinary literature that institutional journalism philanthropy is understudied. Although the studies discussed here—and particularly those published in recent years—have begun to examine these funders and their impact, I argue that the topic demands further scholarly analysis. Of particular value are analyses that consider the structural impact of journalism philanthropy, further examining how philanthropic funding is shaping journalism as an institution (Zelizer, 2004). This scholarship should also explore the extent to which foundation-funded news might risk replicating the pitfalls of commercially funded news. Before discussing directions for future research, though, I will briefly explore two key opportunities and two key limitations of foundation-funded journalism.

Opportunities for—and Limitations of—Journalism Philanthropy

While much of the existing literature on journalism philanthropy has been skeptical of the model, it is nonetheless important to consider both its opportunities and limitations. The first key opportunity, and perhaps the most notable strength of journalism philanthropy, is that the model allows for the funding of a particular strand of journalism that has never been financially viable. In other words, foundations often fund investigative journalism, which is sometimes referred to under the broader umbrella of public service journalism (Konieczna, 2018). As many scholars, including Hamilton (2016), have demonstrated, investigative journalism produces innumerable positive externalities that benefit society and strengthen democracy, but has itself long been financially subsidized by other, more profitable forms of reporting (Benson, 2018). As the commercial news model has declined over the last two decades, so too has commercial newsrooms’ capacity to produce investigative and enterprise journalism (Westphal, 2009). Thus, as Benson (2018) noted, foundation-funded nonprofits “can sometimes end up having more public affairs and investigative reporters on the ground than their much larger commercial counterparts” (p. 1068). Foundation funding, then, is essential to ensure the continued survival of newsrooms dedicated to investigative and public service reporting, such as *ProPublica* and *Reveal* from the Center for Investigative Reporting, both of which were recently honored with a Pulitzer Prize, the most prestigious award in American journalism (Rubin, 2020).

Relatedly, the second key opportunity of the journalism philanthropy model is that foundation funding frees news organizations from commercial imperatives. As scholars have demonstrated (Pickard, 2020), the commercially dominant journalism industry in the U.S. degrades both the quantity and quality of news to “capture users’ attention and generate advertising revenue” (p. 78). Unlike most for-profit,

advertiser-supported newsrooms—and particularly those owned by predatory hedge funds (Coppins, 2021; Susca, 2024) and national commercial chains (Benton, 2023)—foundation-funded newsrooms are free from profit-maximizing imperatives that serve only to generate revenue for shareholders. Instead, these news organizations are able to reinvest resources in their news operations (Pickard, 2020, pp. 94–95). However, as other scholars have argued, funders must also be cognizant that the journalism philanthropy model does not merely enact a new set of imperatives (Browne, 2010).

Turning to the first of two key limitations, foundation-funded journalism can leave grantee newsrooms vulnerable to influence from donors. While, at its best, news philanthropy is motivated by an agenda that advances democracy and high-quality journalism, some funders may have motives that risk compromising newsrooms' credibility (Koniczna, 2022, p. 93). This concern is exemplified by a study by Wright et al. (2019), which examined how a humanitarian news outlet navigated the revelation that a major funder was accused of embezzling billions of dollars. While journalism industry groups have published guides on the ethics of accepting funding, particularly from murky or anonymous sources (Preston et al., 2023; Rosenstiel, Buzenberg, Connelly, & Loker, 2016), and INN maintains strict membership standards around funding transparency (Institute for Nonprofit News, n.d.-a), so-called "tainted donors" (Wright et al., 2019, p. 690) remain a possible liability.

The second key limitation of the journalism philanthropy model is the persistent fear that foundation funding will eventually disappear as prominent funders lose interest and move on to the next worthy cause. While this concern has not yet borne out—indeed, the funding trends discussed earlier in this review show the opposite, that journalism philanthropy has continuously increased in the last decade—it nonetheless remains pervasive throughout the industry. As Koniczna (2018) summarized, "it remains unclear how long donor interest will last, and how or whether the nonprofit news sector can become sustainable beyond that" (p. 90). For this reason, numerous scholars, including Cagé (2016), Pickard (2020), and Minow (2021), have called for public policy interventions to sustain local journalism if and when foundation interest dissipates. Indeed, institutional philanthropy may have a strategic role to play in advancing those public policy solutions, as the Carnegie Corporation of New York and the Ford Foundation did in establishing the American public broadcasting system in the mid-20th century (Lashner, 1976).

The opportunities and limitations briefly summarized here are merely the tip of the iceberg about the complex dynamics at play between newsrooms and their philanthropic funders. As I have argued throughout this review, further research on the journalism philanthropy model that considers its structural implications is necessary. Below, I suggest several directions for future scholarship on this topic.

Directions for Future Research

Given the relatively slow emergence of research on the journalism philanthropy model over the last two decades, many areas of study are ripe for further analysis. One of the most pressing theoretical needs for journalism philanthropy research is the development of a typology or framework that clarifies and distinguishes between different kinds of institutional funding. The reasoning behind the call for a typology is twofold. First, one weakness of the existing research in this area is the tendency to group many different players in the nonprofit journalism space—including newsrooms,

industry groups, NGOs, and foundations—under the broader umbrella of “nonprofits” (Conrad, 2018) or “meta-organizations” (Lowrey, Deavours, & Singleton, 2023). These conceptualizations, however, flatten the important distinctions between these various industry players and, crucially, erase the complex and delicate power dynamics that exist between nonprofit news organizations and their funders. Thus, a typology would allow scholars to differentiate funding entities, like foundations, from other nonprofit groups in the industry.

Second, a typology would allow scholars to closely examine the funding mechanisms used by philanthropies to support journalism and explicate their unique qualities. While the distinctions between individual and institutional funding are well established, as discussed above, there is little scholarly understanding of the various ways in which institutional funders support journalism initiatives. And as Creech and Parks (2022) argued, “it would be a mistake . . . to assume that all kinds of funding are the same, or even ideologically aligned” (p. 73). The implications of each funding strategy should be elucidated, as well as their impact on newsrooms. Such a typology must also consider foundation ownership of newsrooms as another distinct type of philanthropic support for journalism. This specific iteration of the journalism philanthropy model is important to understand because it has allowed some legacy newsrooms to transition to nonprofit ownership (Schmidt, 2019). Despite this, the foundation ownership model has yet to be extensively examined or understood in the academic literature.

To date, there is also a dearth of literature assessing the impact of philanthropic funding on news content. A content analysis-based study, for example, could explore how foundation-funded journalism outlets cover certain topics—such as public health, education, and many others—as compared with coverage of the same issue areas from advertising-supported commercial newsrooms. Quantitative scholars could also conduct longitudinal studies to examine if and how newsrooms’ coverage changes over time because of philanthropic funding. Such analyses would provide the needed high-level empirical data on the impact of foundation funding on the larger journalism industry and assess the extent to which foundation-funded news meets communities’ critical information needs.

Perhaps one of the most methodologically rich areas for analyzing foundation-funded journalism is through in-depth interviews, ethnography, and participant observation. As Bunce (2016) noted, ethnographic research (apart from Conrad, 2018) on the potential influence of foundation funders on journalism has been limited. In-depth interviews and participant observations might also examine how fundraising professionals working within nonprofit news organizations act as intermediaries between journalism funders and grantee newsrooms. This would include studying those working in business-side roles—such as chief development officers, development directors, grant writers, and other institutional fundraisers—that regularly interface with both journalists and foundation funders. As of yet, despite their integral role in these funding relationships, this group of development professionals has not yet been examined in relation to journalism philanthropy.

Conclusion

In the review of this literature, I have attempted to contextualize the emergence of the journalism philanthropy model, precisely define both the concept and the scope of this analysis, and summarize the

existing interdisciplinary scholarship, including highlighting the model's opportunities and potential limitations. The underlying premise of this essay, of course, is that the rapid growth and relative prominence of the journalism philanthropy model merits further scholarly analysis. Specifically, I call for scholarship that adopts an institutional view of journalism and advances structural analyses of philanthropy's impact on journalism and media. Altogether, while foundation-funded journalism frees newsrooms from commercial logics, funds essential public service news and information that the market simply cannot supply, and allows for the reinvestment of resources back into news operations, its potential limitations must also be considered. Moreover, I contend that scholars, practitioners, and funders themselves must be cognizant that journalism philanthropy does not replicate the harms of the longstanding commercial news model. It is my hope that this literature review will provide the basis for further scholarship on the topic and highlight the importance of this research.

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