

Funding the News: Foundations and Nonprofit Media | Shorenstein Center

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June 23, 2018

The 2016 U.S. elections triggered a flurry of activity and debate across the philanthropic world, and few domains sustained more attention than the news media. Talk of increased funding for nonprofit journalism initiatives began almost immediately after Election Day. The attacks on the press by newly elected President Donald J. Trump stimulated what has been called a “Trump bump,” as foundations and wealthy donors aimed to reinvigorate a deeply struggling news media system and to counter a wave of extreme populism and intolerance fueled by fake news.

The election, however, also brought into sharper relief long standing and troubling trends. Debates about the future of news in today’s turbulent democracy play out against a complex historical backdrop. For decades, newspapers produced the journalism that did the most to inform public debate and to hold those in power accountable. Even as the media system rapidly evolved over the past 20 years, studies found that newspapers remained at the core of the country’s information ecology, serving as the major source for original reporting on problems, corruption, and policy debates, with this coverage shaping broader discussion, from television news to social media to interpersonal conversations.

During this period, however, most newspapers also suffered a catastrophic collapse in revenue, a greatly diminished workforce, and a corresponding loss in editorial capacity. In most regions of the country, because of the decline of local newspapers, the information needs of voters were frequently not being met. In these communities, people too often lacked a trusted local source of news that could explain, contextualize, and vet conflicting claims and interpretations. Absent quality local sources of news to rely on, it became that much easier for news consumers to turn to their ideologically preferred outlet, whether a cable news network, a talk radio show, an online site, or a fake news story circulated by way of their social media feeds.

[...]

The grant decisions made by foundations in the years leading up to the 2016 elections are of historic importance, presenting a guide to what has been done in the past and a roadmap for where philanthropy needs to go today. Like any study, our research has several limitations and caveats which we highlight. However, based on our extensive cross-checking of the data, and the comments of more than a dozen relevant experts on a draft report, we are confident that our analysis comprehensively and accurately identifies major patterns in foundation funding, helping to facilitate discussion and planning about the enormous challenges our democracy currently faces.

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