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Citation: Bunce, M. (2016). Foundations, philanthropy and international journalism. *Ethical Space: the international journal of communication ethics*, 13(2/3), pp. 6-15.

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Foundation Funding and International News

The drive for solutions and impact

Keywords: foundation-funding, international news, news content, journalism practice

Amid tumbling circulations and declining advertising revenue, private foundations have emerged as a crucial source of funding for public interest news. A recent Foundation Center report (2013) found that between 2009 and 2011, 1,012 foundations in the United States made 12,040 media-related grants totalling a staggering \$1.86 billion. In addition to domestic news, foundations have poured considerable resources into the production of international news and, in particular, stories about development, aid and humanitarian crises that are seen to be commercially unviable.

Today, the largest dedicated providers of international development and humanitarian news are all supported by foundation grants: the *Guardian's* Global Development website is supported by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation; Alertnet is funded by the Thomson Reuter's Foundation; and IRIN, the world's first humanitarian newswire (which for 20 years was funded by the United Nations), is now an independent entity supported by private grants, most notably a pledge of \$25 million from the Jynwel Foundation. In addition, numerous foundations offer competitive grants for one-off reporting trips and projects, including: the Pulitzer Centre on Crisis Reporting, the

International Reporting Project, the Hewlett Foundation, and the Carnegie Corporation, to name a few.

Despite the import role of these foundations, we know very little about their motives, how they operate, or the implications of their funding for journalistic practice.

Browne notes there haven't been any systematic content analyses of the work produced by foundation-funded journalists (2010: 890). Nor has there been any ethnographic research exploring whether the logic of the charitable sector (or 'philanthocapitalism' as it is sometimes called) may enter into, and potentially alter, the norms of journalistic practice. Feldman (2007) wryly suggests that it would be hard to secure funding for such research.

This paper starts to sketch the ways in which foundations *may* influence journalism about international development. The first section draws on the emerging research about foundation-funding of domestic journalism in the United States. From this, it infers that foundations may influence:

- 1) the content of development news,
- 2) the objectives of development news, and
- 3) the yardsticks by which the success of development journalism is measured.

The second section illustrates how these influences play out in practice, by presenting a short case study of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, and the ways in which the organisation has implicitly and explicitly shaped news about international development.

Foundation funding and the content of news

At the simplest level, foundations may influence the subjects that receive coverage because they fund some news topics and not others. Ramirez (2001), for example, notes there are many grants and funding opportunities in the United States for making news on health care, science, and local economic interests, but this support is virtually non-existent for coverage of other issues such as immigration. As a result, the more an outlet relies on foundation initiatives for the cream of its editorial product, the more likely its coverage of other subjects, communities and viewpoints will be hemmed in.

In addition, researchers suggest that foundation funding *may* result in pressure on journalists to avoid certain topics, or adopt the political positions or interpretative frames of their funders (e.g. Brown 2010; Feldman 2007; Guensburg 2008; Ramirez 2001; Silverstein 2015). Some donors may make their intentions explicit. Michael Bloomberg, for example, is funding news on gun violence with the explicit aim of counteracting what he perceives to be NRA-dominated and sponsored mainstream media. For the most part, however, pressure from funders is likely to be indirect rather than overt. From the seminal work of Breed (1955) onwards, newsroom research has found that journalists internalise and reproduce the values of their employers without being explicitly instructed; this may be for a number of reasons including respect and esteem for editors, and the desire for career advancement. Asking journalists and editors whether their foundation funders influenced news content, Edmonds (2002) found:

Everyone involved emphatically says no, and in one sense they are right. It is extremely rare to find a non-profit funder who received the final say on news content, set specific ideological criteria by which news stories were developed, or demanded the inclusion or exclusion of a specific point of view. But the lack of overt editorial influence should not blind us to the more subtle, one might say cultural, ties that bind these news organizations to their funders.

These cultural binds might prompt journalists to adopt unconsciously the world-views of the funders. Bob Feldman (2007) has researched a number of left wing media groups that accepted funding from liberal foundations, and argues the news content at these outlets moved towards the liberal centre as a result of the associations: they avoid critiquing the activities of their funders, or the wider political economic structures that have allowed their funders to flourish. In addition, they avoid controversial news subjects or positions for fear of offending potential funders.

Foundation funding and the objectivity norm

Foundation funding may also indirectly impact the objectives of journalism, and what reporters are trying to achieve with their work. Traditional journalists place a very strong emphasis on the norm of objectivity and impartial witnessing, particularly in the United States. Foundations, however, often have a strategic objective in mind, and may want to *enact change* with their funding of the news: to help build communities, fight racism, change beliefs around climate change, encourage parents to vaccinate their children, and so on. One example is the Knight Foundation, which seeks to support participatory media and community cohesion. The organisation often starts by

identifying a community's information needs, and working backwards to determine the news they should fund (Lewis 2012: 329).

These projects may well result in worthy and important media content. Interestingly, however, their underlying philosophy is quite distinct from traditional reporting norms, which tend to reject calls to 'achieve' anything within news work, for fear of compromising journalistic impartiality. (Whether impartiality is achievable is another question; but it remains, nonetheless, the goal of most traditional, professional journalists working within international news).

With regards to development and humanitarian news, many foundations have specific, articulated goals. Some of these sit very comfortably with traditional journalistic norms. The Pulitzer Crisis Centre, for example, has a grant round that funds traditional, public-interest news content about crises that have been neglected in the main stream media. Some foundations, however, take a more political or solutions-based approach. For example, there is a current trend among funders to support news that offers a more positive narrative about development – focusing on how to solve problems, the progress that has already been made, and providing audiences with uplifting content. Managing editor of the humanitarian newswire IRIN, Heba Aly (2016) writes that many donors only want to fund development-orientated news, 'when it has an inspiring hero or flashy solutions: the village that bucked the trend or the new mobile app that will solve refugees' problems'.

Moving the yardstick: foundation funding and the new 'impact agenda'

Finally, foundation funding may shape news work by introducing a new measure of success: ‘impact’. Foundations want to know whether the programmes they fund are making a difference; and there has been increasing pressure over the last two decades on grant recipients to evidence their impact (see e.g. Flynn and Hodgkinson 2001). In the media sector, there is a growing consensus that view-counts of news stories do not, in and of themselves, constitute ‘impact’, and that donors want to see proof of news content that influences audiences, sways decisions makers, and may even change the unfolding of crises (Aly 2016).

Tying grant funding to ‘impact’ has a number of implications. These include: incentivising organisations to commit significant resources (from a limited pot) to monitoring impact activity; and incentivising forms of journalism that are more likely to achieve this goal. For example, journalists wishing to secure grants may be more likely to pitch stories about micro-level problems, on which progress and impact is easier to evidence, rather than addressing long-term thematic issues¹.

More generally, the ‘impact agenda’ may result in an even closer, more symbiotic relationship between journalists and aid/development practitioners. For years, politicians and NGOs have sought to influence the work of foreign correspondents, and through them, gain publicity for crises and charity work: a phenomenon that has long interested, and sometimes troubled, media academics (e.g. Cottle and Nolan 2007; Wright 2016). Under an ‘impact agenda’, journalists are asked to influence these NGOs and political actors in return. News outlets may ask their journalists to

¹ There is an interesting parallel here with the funding of university research, where some commentators believe the introduction of ‘impact’ assessment is incentivizing some forms of research above others, and sucking up considerable resources in monitoring and evaluation (e.g. Martin 2011).

expand their professional activities – for example, networking with policy makers and development specialists; appearing on panels and attending conferences, especially those hosted by elite development organisations such as the WHO or UNDP – with the goal of creating networks and visibility so that their published work has more influence. The impact agenda effectively places journalists on the same side of the fence as aid and development practitioners.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and development journalism

An examination of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (BMGF) provides preliminary evidence that foundation funding is shaping development news content and journalistic practices. The BMGF provides substantial funding to journalists and news organisations, much of which is targeted to development. This is primarily channeled through large grants to existing media – for example, the development pages of the *Guardian*, and competitive grant rounds for journalists working on development issues. A large portion of BMGF media funding is targeted at health reporting – for example, they fund the global health beat on National Public Radio (US); gave a US \$1 million grant to Harvard University for a Nieman fellowships in global health reporting; and fund HIV Prevention Reporting Fellowships in sub Saharan Africa. Their giving has, without doubt, increased the visibility of health within development media, particularly neglected diseases and crises (see Balasegaram et al 2008).

The BMGF places a premium on impact. Its funding schemes make it explicitly clear that its objective is agitating for change, rather than simply disseminating or analysing information. One of the foundation's flagship grant schemes is the 'Innovation in

Development Reporting' (IDR) Grant Programme. The application page for this grant states: 'Your project must have a goal: it can be very specific ("Get the authorities to change this law") or less so ("Raise awareness around this problem"). We want the projects and stories we support to have an impact, and for this reason it is important for us to know what you are trying to achieve' (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2015). This scheme has funded more than 82 projects to date, with an average grants size of 18,000 euros – the kind of resources that traditional media outlets simply do not have for development reporting. As a result, some of the most sophisticated storytelling about development today reflects the campaign and advocacy objectives of the foundation.

One particular goal of the BMGF is to change the narrative around development, and foster more positive reporting of success stories. In its call for grants under 'Aid is working: Tell the world' (Scott 2012), the foundation explains the need for more optimism: 'We are looking for proposals that help tell stories which "debunk cynical views about the effectiveness of aid and other investments in global development"' (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation 2012). California-based Link TV has been awarded US \$2 million to create a digital video library that spotlights progress in global development and health, while the ABC received \$1.5 million to travel the world reporting on various health crises and suggesting solutions (Carter 2010).

A number of commentators have expressed concern that journalists receiving funding from the BMGF are not willing to criticise the foundation's work in their reporting (Curtis 2016; Doughton & Heim 2011). This may flow from the cultural ties Edmonds (2002) identifies, or from fears of missing out on funding in the future – a

particular challenges for journalists who are freelance, and have precarious employment. It is important to stress that these concerns have not been evidenced at this stage, however: there has not been any systematic research on the impact of foundation funding on international news content.

One way in which BMGF funding does influence news content, however, is that it creates a *perceived* conflict of interest. Journalists who receive funding from the foundation worry that audiences think they are compromised, and unable to report on its activities. *Guardian* Health Editor Sarah Boseley explains the challenges:

I am shying away not because I will find something bad, but because it will be too good... I don't want it to look as if I am doing them any favors. ... I only do stories on issues that I'm interested in, and I invariably find the Gates Foundation is putting money into it. Once or twice, I drew myself back from covering them, so it's a disincentive to cover them. It's not a difficulty that I expected to find (quoted in Bristol and Donnelly 2011:9)²

It is important to note that Boseley was speaking on behalf of herself and not the *Guardian*. Other journalists at the *Guardian* certainly have been critical of the BMGF (e.g. Birrell 2014) and there has been a high profile 'Keep it in the ground' campaign at the newspaper, which openly pressured the BMGF to divest from fossil fuel.

Nonetheless, any reluctance on behalf of BMGF-founded journalists to critique the foundation is significant, given its enormous power in the development sector. Only

² This anecdote also illuminates how many layers the BMGF operates on, and just how hard it is to avoid their reach in the development sector. Boseley is here quoted in the report: "Taking the Temperature: The Future of Global Health Reporting" (Bristol and Donnelly 2011), funded by the Kaiser's Global Health Policy Project, which is, in turn, supported by the BMGF. That is to say: The BMGF does development work. It funds the journalists who write about its development work. And it funds the researchers who analyse the journalists who write about their development work.

ten countries spend more on aid than the BMGF (Brown 2015). Its annual global health expenditure has, at times, been larger than that of the World Health Organisation (Birn 2014), and through the sheer size of its grant-making and its active advocacy, the Gates Foundation influenced priority-setting in the WHO and beyond (Martens and Seitz 2015: 62). Despite this import, the foundation is not subject to the same accountability and scrutiny that aid programmes run by governments are. At present, the foundation is obliged to only report its high level financial figures to the US government and its programmes are not subject to independent or public evaluation (Curtis 2016:4).

Moreover, some of the approaches and solutions proposed by the BMGF are controversial; the organisation is infamous for pursuing biomedical and technological ‘fixes’ to health and development problems, and some researchers have suggested its focus on quick-win solutions - e.g. developing vaccines or disseminating insecticide-treated bed nets - neglects bigger, structural and political obstacles to development, e.g. weak public health systems (Martens and Seitz 2015: 61). More generally, the preference for technological solutions over those that address systemic social, may divert attention from issues such as structural inequality, corruption, and human rights abuses (Curtis 2016: 16).

If BMGF-funded journalists are reluctant to critique the foundation, this is particularly significant, given the wider lack of resources for development reporting and the limited number of news outlets in a position to provide alternative perspectives. Surveying the media-philanthropy landscape, Tom Paulson writes for the *Humanosphere*:

What I am fairly certain of is that as journalists and news organizations come to depend increasingly on philanthropies like the Gates Foundation for financial support, it is even more important than ever that we stay focused on our main job – arguably, pushing for critical analysis and accountability – and tread carefully when asked to strategically partner with even the most well-intentioned humanitarian in promoting a cause ... or solution.

Conclusion

Foundations provide a very important source of funding for international development news, which is generally neglected by the market. Even if shortcomings or conflicts of interest can be identified, none of these issues should be regarded as reasons to dismiss foundations as potential sources of funding for journalism which, as Browne writes ‘has never been pure and cannot afford to be choosy’ (2010: 891). However, the increasing role played by this funding does raise important issues that require further research. The urgency of this inquiry is further underlined by the fact that foundations and philanthropy are due to play an even greater role in the global development sector moving forward, as laid out in 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN 2015, article 41 and 45).

This paper’s survey of the emerging research on foundation funding of journalism, and preliminary commentary on the BMGF, suggests a number of specific areas for future research. These include: the extent to which the topic priorities of foundations shape the subjects that receive coverage; whether foundation funding silences

investigative and critical journalism; and whether this funding changes the norms and objectives of journalists working on the development beat. More generally, is the logic of the charity sector entering into, and changing, the way that some forms of international journalism are done? The implications of this ever-closer relationship between journalists and aid practitioners may change the way both fields operate.

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Stand first?

News stories about international crises and development are expensive to make and frequently neglected by the mainstream media. This article looks at the private foundations that are stepping in to finance its production, and their impact on news content and journalistic norms.