



Equity First: **Transforming** **Journalism and** **Journalism** **Philanthropy in a** **New Civic Age**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



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Given the changing demographic of American communities (by the year 2045, [people of color will make up the majority of the U.S. population](#)), there is an opportunity for journalism organizations to reach audiences that have been historically ignored by the mainstream narrative. Now more than ever, the public has embraced credible journalism as an essential and vital service, and many news organizations have a unique chance to win the loyalty of new audiences.

Journalism's current cultural context provides an opportunity to rethink the role of grantmaker. Funders have an opportunity to move both the field of philanthropy and the industry of journalism forward by taking leadership in centering DEI within their institutions and grantmaking processes to support journalism with a truly community-centered approach, building long-term trust with its evolving communities.

THIS PROJECT

Frontline Solutions spoke with program officers, project directors, and senior leadership at eight foundations that include media and journalism in their grantmaking portfolios. In October 2019, Frontline and the News Integrity Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY (NII) convened a learning session with 16 of these leaders to discuss what kind of support they need in order to center DEI within their organizations, in their grantmaking strategies, and across the philanthropic and journalism sectors. What follows is an analysis of what Frontline and NII heard in these conversations and this learning session, as well as a list of resources and recommendations.

CHALLENGES WITH UTILIZING A DEI LENS IN JOURNALISM PHILANTHROPY

1. There is dissonance in the translation of the ethics and values of journalism to DEI best practices.

Journalism values and principles are grounded in accuracy: lifting the truth, taking power into consideration, and amplifying unheard voices and stories. Yet data from sources such as the annual [ASNE diversity survey](#) and research institutes such as [Pew](#) suggest that newsrooms continue to struggle with diversifying staff. Newsrooms that do not accurately reflect their changing communities risk offering coverage that lacks context and nuance — and losing credibility with the very audiences they are trying to reach and serve.

2. Change is difficult because journalism & philanthropy reinforce each other's hegemonic cultures.

Having the power to determine whose stories are told and how, while using the guise of objectivity to insulate journalism from community accountability, perpetuates unjust gatekeeping practices that abide by journalistic norms and criteria that have historically been established in white-led newsrooms. These practices favor cultural norms that may dismiss or exclude the lived experiences of communities of color.

3. Inclusion and equity are less tangible than diversity, and thus more difficult for foundations to address.

Many journalism funders have begun DEI journeys at their respective foundations by collecting data on demographic diversity from grantees, creating diversity committees to find ways to operationalize a healthy racial equity culture across all areas of the foundation, and convening with peer funders to share lessons and resources with each other.

However, many funders express hesitation regarding how to apply the collected data and practically implement tools to bring equity to their grantmaking. While the interest around implementing a DEI lens often begins with program staffers who are more connected to the on-the-ground work, successful implementation requires leadership and buy-in from all levels of the organization (namely the board, executive, and senior management) in order for transformative change to be sustained throughout the foundation. Given the hierarchical nature of foundations, transformative change presents a formidable cultural challenge counterintuitive to holding power where it already resides.

FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS TO REVOLUTIONIZE JOURNALISM

1. Redefine “Innovation” Using an Equity Lens: Experiment with Flexible Dollars

“Innovation” is a key cross-industry buzzword right now, with funders constantly looking to fund the next shiny thing. It is critical to reframe how we think about innovation so that the definition is grounded less in what funders think is intriguing and more in what consumers find helpful and uniquely informative. Journalism’s role is to empower consumers with information they can trust, not titillate funders. Foundations and newsrooms need to see DEI itself as an innovation, not a concept in conflict with innovation.

2. Reject the Scarcity Mindset: Work Harder to Find and Support Emerging Talent

The scarcity mindset—the belief that only a limited amount of funding is available, so it should only be given to outlets with a guaranteed return on investment—is deeply flawed. First, it privileges the status quo (white-led institutions, especially ones that are already well-resourced) over other options, widening the gulf between well-resourced institutions and struggling outlets. Second, it assumes a guaranteed return on investments that is not, in reality,

guaranteed. Legacy institutions do not have the winning track record that their unchallenged funding would indicate. Once foundations acknowledge that truth, it will be easier for them to consider taking more risks on untested outlets.

The goal of grantmaking must be self-determination and agency-building among communities of color. This includes considering prospective POC-led grantees that are not necessarily actively grantseeking, yet are incredibly relevant in their communities. These grantees may have never had access to mainstream resources or dollars. Foundations should work harder to source practitioners of color who have not been networked into mainstream funding opportunities and move away from the assumption that a broad, open call is sufficient.

3. Apply Data with an Intentional Equity Lens

Many foundations are collecting data from prospective and current grantees to establish baseline data on how grants and investments accurately reflect the needs of under-resourced communities. Thanks to various landscape analyses already completed by institutions such as [Democracy Fund](#), [Borealis Philanthropy](#), and the [Center for Community Media](#), journalism funders new to utilizing an equity lens now have baseline data..

Below are a few suggested next steps on what to do with the data:

- Audit existing portfolios to see where inequity persists — evaluate the alignment of impact to targeted communities
- Evolve entry and accountability requirements using a DEI lens
- Redefine impact

4. Equalize the Funder-Grantee Relationship

The following are further recommendations for improving funder-grantee relationships:

- When communicating with a grantee about expectations, be transparent and honest. Some standards and financial language come from a corporate, patriarchal view, and a less-resourced grantee who is new to working with foundations will appreciate candor and context.
- Grantees not only value dollars, but access to networks, including wraparound services to help them successfully execute on deliverables.
- In journalism philanthropy in particular, foundations should caution themselves against being too paternalistic around grantees' fund deployment and allocation.
- Avoid giving oxygen to whisper networks. Peer funders often share notes on grantees and heed other funders over practitioners, which fosters distrust between practitioners and funders and indeed can be an indication of white supremacy culture.

Whisper networks also get in the way of authenticity, honesty, and productivity between stakeholders. Communicate to grantees directly and with integrity.

5. Map and Reform Decision-Making Power with Regard to Moving Dollars

The uncomfortable truth around transformative change is that the power of moving dollars is very difficult for anyone to give up or share. And because grantees (including those led by people of color) recognize that hierarchical decision-making tends to occur at philanthropic institutions, both grantees and foundation decision-makers perpetuate toxic decision-making by framing need and relationship-building that prioritize authority figures and undermine healthy, community-led decisions.

It's worth navigating a difficult conversation for a foundation to determine how its board members, senior executives, program directors, and other middle managers and program officers are all held accountable, with specific attention paid to transparency around money-moving decisions. Many innovative grant decision-making models introduce collective resource decisions rooted in deliberative democracy principles, including participatory grantmaking.

IN SUMMARY

In the wake of the 2016 presidential election, journalism (and its relevance to changing communities) has become an urgent, critical area of investment for philanthropy. Four years later, not only has the field been a target of vitriol from the current administration, but the breakdown in trust between journalism and communities has been weaponized through mis- and disinformation campaigns specifically designed to undermine and discourage communities of color from participating in healthy democracy.

This, in addition to the continued financial and business struggles of the journalism industry, is a key opportunity for journalism funders to pivot towards innovative funding investments that center communities of color in unprecedented ways. This is the moment to go big or go home; we can't afford to waste time or resources when we are grappling with another presidential election, a pandemic, and a census count that may further devastate communities of color due to our inability to foster inspiring and uplifting civic conversations.

This report was completed by Frontline Solutions (Oct 2020) and commissioned by the News Integrity Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism.