



The State of Philanthropic Giving for Journalism

The Lenfest Institute for Journalism

News Philanthropy Network

November 30, 2023

Jennifer Benz, Vice President, Public Affairs and Media Research, NORC at the University of Chicago

Jennifer Preston, Consultant, Media Impact Funders, Preston Strategic Advisors, LLC

Tom Rosenstiel, Professor, University of Maryland, and Senior Fellow, NORC at the University of Chicago





Section 1: Study Overview



The Study



The first comprehensive survey since 2015 of journalism funders and the field they support.

- What is the state of philanthropic funding for journalism?
- As philanthropic funding expands, are funders and newsrooms equipped to address potential conflicts of interest to protect editorial independence and public trust?



Who Participated?



- **129 funders** representing a mix of private foundations, community foundations, family foundations, and new funding vehicles.
- **293 nonprofit** news organizations, including **55** public media newsrooms.
- **164 for-profit newsrooms**, with **138** reporting philanthropic support in the last five years.



Key Findings



1. Philanthropic giving is growing at both nonprofit and for-profit news organizations.
2. Funders report increasing support to news outlets serving communities of color.
3. Addressing the local news crisis is a top priority motivating funding decisions.



1) Philanthropic giving is growing at both nonprofit and for-profit news organizations.



- **59%** of funders increased grantmaking in the last five years.
- A third of funders are new to journalism grantmaking.
- **38%** of funders provided philanthropic support at a for-profit news organization in the last five years.

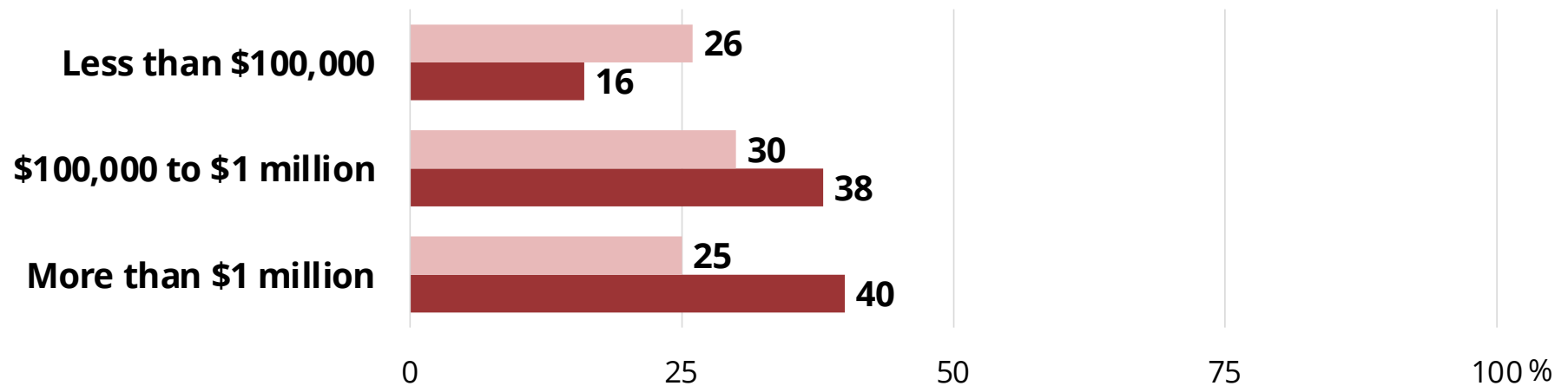


Funders are allocating more for journalism compared to 2018.



Percent of funders

2018 2022



Question: What was the approximate amount of grants and direct charitable activity dollars allocated for journalism and news media grantmaking each of the following years?

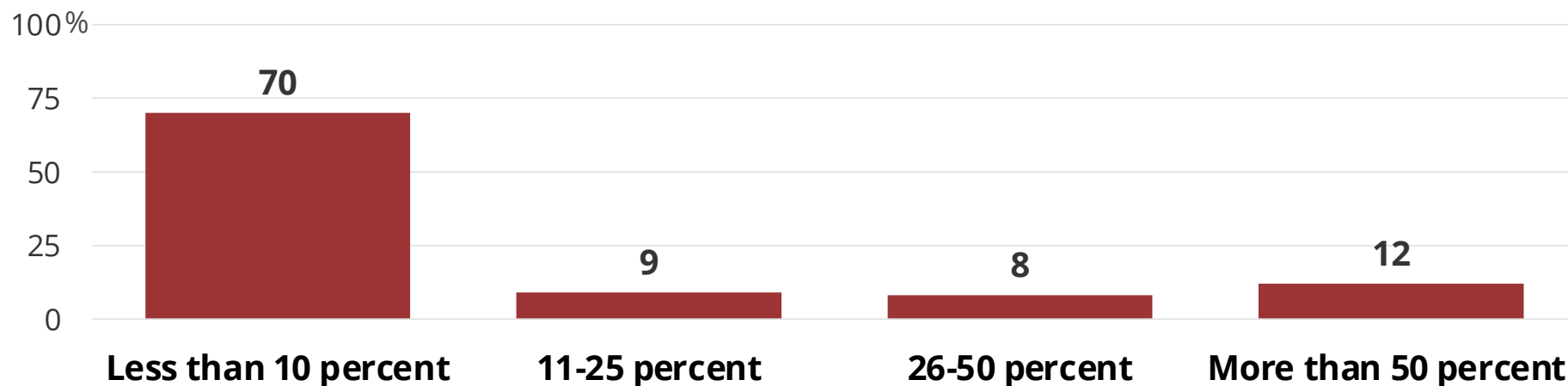
Source: NORC survey for Media Impact Funders and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism.



But for most funders, journalism is just a small part of what they do.



Percent of funders



Question: Last year, approximately what percentage of your organization's total funding went to journalism and news media grants?

Source: NORC surveys for Media Impact Funders and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism.



2) Funders report increasing support to news outlets serving communities of color.



- **57%** of funders support news organizations primarily serving historically marginalized communities of color.
- Of those, **73%** cite increased grantmaking in the last five years.
- About half of publishers primarily serving BIPOC audiences have seen increased funding for their work.



DEI is an important consideration for funders.



68%

Say ensuring racial equity and inclusion in the production of news is extremely or very important.

78%

Consider the diversity of a grantee's team, board, and leadership before making a grant.



3) Addressing the local news crisis is a top priority motivating funding decisions.



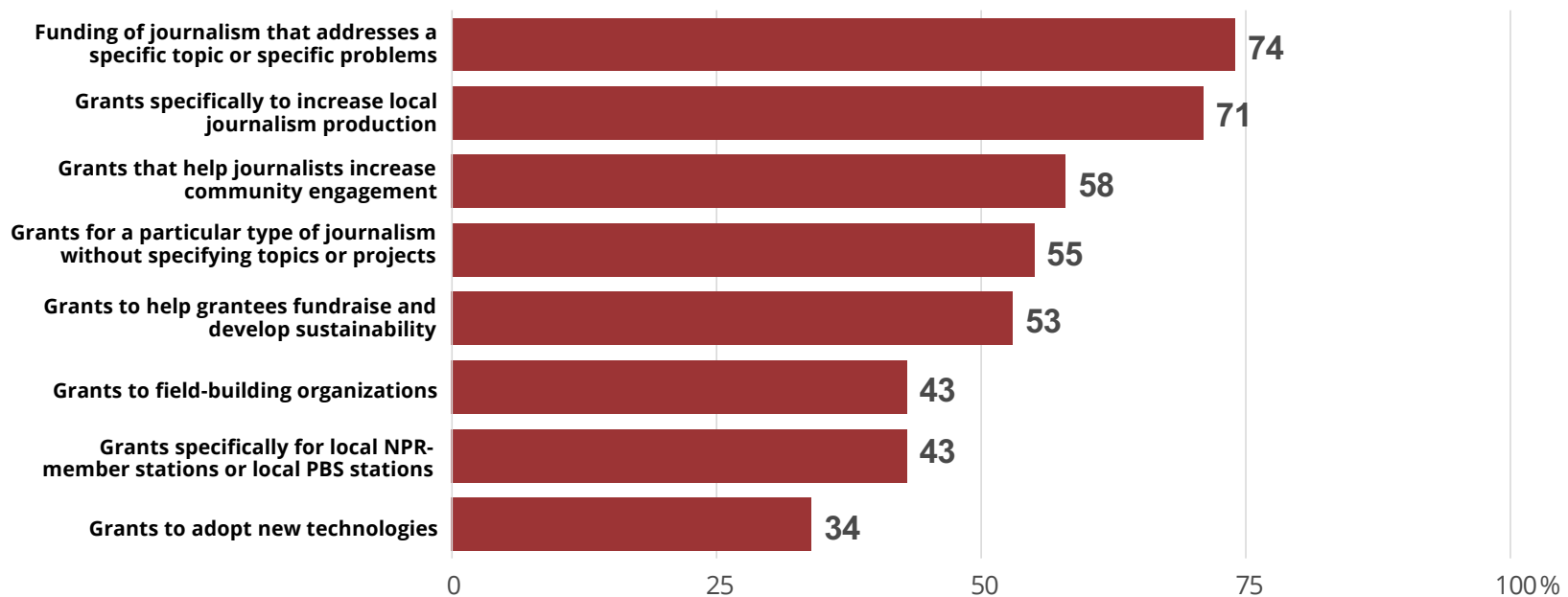
- **69%** of funders say addressing the local news crisis is an important factor in their funding decisions.
- **71%** make grants specifically to increase local journalism production.
- Half of community foundations say the quality of local reporting has deteriorated in the last five years.



Local news sits atop a diverse list of funding priorities



Percent of funders who make each of the following kinds of grants



Question: Funders: Does your organization currently make any of the following kinds of grants to journalism and news media organizations?

Source: NORC survey for Media Impact Funders and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism.

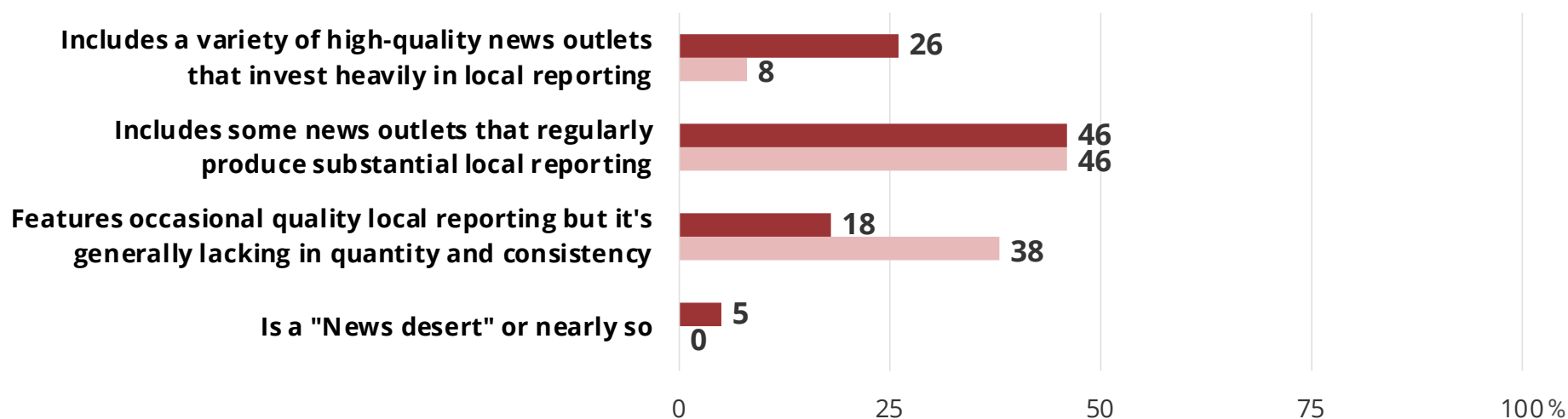


The closer a funder is to the community, the more concern they express about the decline in local journalism.



Percent of funders

■ Funders overall ■ Community foundation funders



Question: Which of the following statements best describes the local news environment in the community your organization primarily serves? The news environment we serve:

Source: NORC surveys for Media Impact Funders and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism.



Section 2: Navigating Ethics, Transparency, and Conflicts of Interest



Guidelines are needed to help everyone navigate the potential for real or perceived conflicts.



- **57% of funders** donate for journalism on topics where they also do policy or advocacy work.
- **64% of funders** do not have written guidelines about their involvement in editorial content.
- **23% of nonprofits** make case-by-case decisions to accept funding for coverage of a topic when the funder is also engaged in advocacy work on that issue.



More for-profits are getting funding, but they're far less likely than nonprofits to have guidelines for transparency.



- **86%** of **nonprofit newsrooms** list all or some donors on their website vs. **46%** of **for-profit newsrooms**.
- **68%** of **nonprofit newsrooms** have a publicly available policy for disclosing donors vs. **14%** of **for-profit newsrooms**.



Funder input on editorial content is rare.



70+%

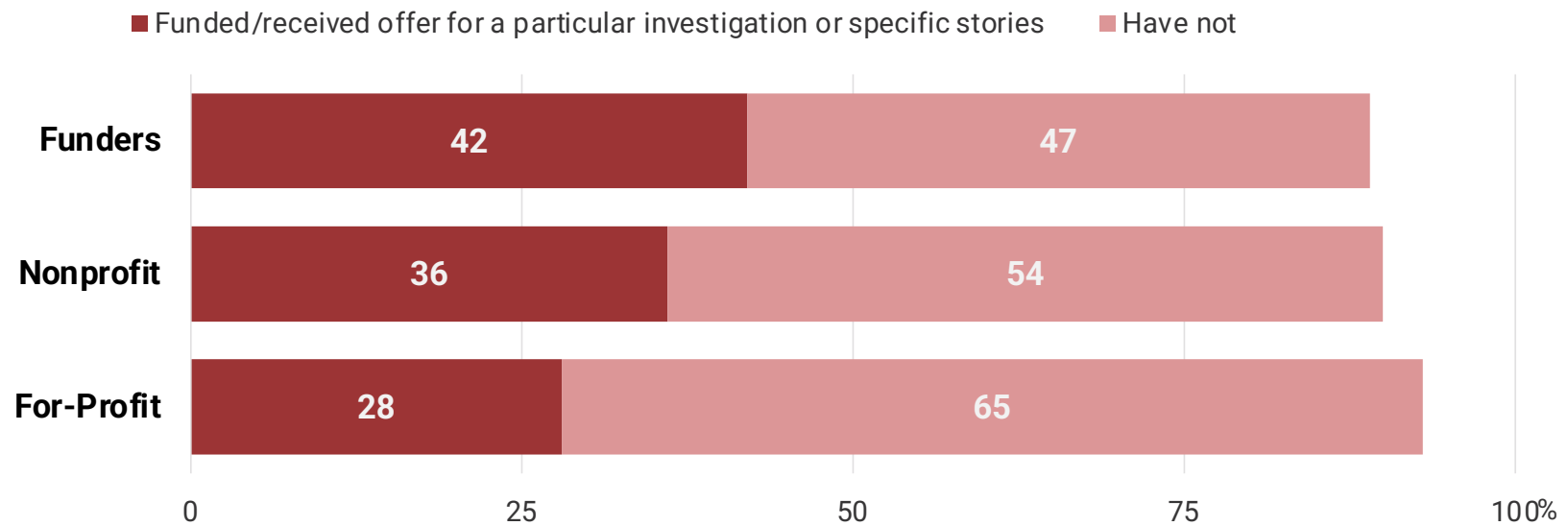
Newsrooms who say they never make editorial changes based on funder input, up from **51%** in 2015.

66%

Funders who say they never talk to grantees about specific stories or coverage plans.



Most news organizations say they haven't received offers to fund specific news content.



Questions: Has a foundation ever offered to fund an investigation or specific series of stories on an issue or problem, as opposed to ongoing coverage of a general topic area? Has your organization ever funded a news media organization to produce an investigation into a particular problem or do specific series of stories?

Source: NORC surveys for Media Impact Funders and The Lenfest Institute for Journalism.



Potential Conflicts of Interest



What happens when a funder offers philanthropic support for an investigation or specific series of stories?

- **69%** of nonprofit outlets offered did accept the funding, **down from 80%** in 2015.
- **83%** nonprofit outlets accepted because it was on “our list of things to do” or worthwhile
- **79%** of for-profit outlets offered did accept the funding, **up from 57%** in 2015.





Practical Tips Informed by the Research Findings

Recommendations from Jennifer Preston



How might your newsroom's priorities align with funding trends?



- 1) Show commitment to journalistic excellence, editorial independence and serving existing, new and historically underrepresented communities.
- 2) Incorporate civic and community engagement. Review ahead of time what this means to avoid perception of donor influence and advocacy.
- 3) Consider collaborating with other news organizations that will expand reach and impact.
- 4) Ask for dollars to support operational needs from fundraising to technology. Funders get it. This can be a tricky request, however, at for-profit newsrooms. Project funding might be best.
- 5) Think about your verticals when looking for funding. For example, a local education funder who doesn't fund journalism explicitly is a great prospect to support education reporting.



For-profit newsrooms: What you need to know, based on findings.



- 1) While most funders say they prefer funding nonprofit newsrooms, 38% supported for-profit newsrooms in the last five years.
- 2) Start with community listening to identify topic/beat or geo area. Incorporate community engagement and collaboration.
- 3) Offer pathways for funders via fiscal sponsorship ahead of application. Don't let tax status be a barrier. There are ready solutions to receive funding.
- 4) Community service v. bottom line: Do not backfill positions eliminated during layoffs with philanthropically supported interns, fellows or staff.
- 5) Make philanthropically-supported journalism publicly accessible and available on multiple platforms, i.e. WhatsApp? Be creative with your "paywall."



What four funders said about why they fund journalism:



- 1) "By supporting journalism, we are building a better community. That is the mission of our community foundation"
- 2) "Funding journalism to shine a light on issues of ____ justice and ____rights is a critical component of this mission."
- 3) "To increase stories about the experiences and perspectives of _____, including to change hearts, minds, and policies."
- 4) "Journalism can drive systems change by illuminating power dynamics and community-driven solutions, changing hearts and minds about topics close to our mission, and prompting decision makers to direct resources to the communities we serve. We expect our journalism grantees to engage, reflect and better serve those communities. "



Adopt best practices and written guidelines for donor transparency.



- 1) Apply and adopt 2017 API Guidelines and INN's Community Guidelines
- 2) Make public the names of donors contributing more than \$5K annually on your website, annual report. [Bonus: Use as an opportunity to thank your donors, too!]
- 3) Disclose written guidelines on donor transparency, ethics policies, mission statement, conflict of interest policies and overall fundraising policies.
- 4) Explain why donor transparency is important. That said, anonymous donations, in culture of philanthropic giving, can be considered a good thing. In journalism, not so much in order to avoid appearance of "dark money," and donor influence. Let's discuss!



Adopt best practices and written guidelines to avoid donor influence.



- 1) Adopt best practices and written guidelines via 2017 API guidelines and INN's community guidelines.
- 2) Do not relinquish legal and ethical responsibilities to funders or the public.
- 3) Never allow pre-publication editorial review. Never accept directed conclusions from funders.
- 4) Do not promise legislative or other policy outcomes in advance. This is different than projected impact on raising awareness and community and audience engagement strategies.
- 5) If staffing levels allow, donors should have a regular point of contact who is NOT a member of the newsroom team.
- 6) Consider creating an internal ethical review process to determine whether to accept funds for a specific beat that the funder might have policy or other advocacy related goals.



When to say no to philanthropic support:



- 1) A funder makes a request for an "investigative" series on a specific topic.
- 2) A funder's request is "too prescriptive" on reporting/audience approach and funder wants check ins on what you're finding beyond what you're publishing.
- 3) A funder might set unreasonable expectations and deadlines that you know that you can not meet or afford to deliver with the level of support you received.
- 4) In some cases, a funder might request you hire all "new staff members" for a designated project. Pause. This can create problems if core operations are not sufficiently funded....and end up costing you money and major headaches.



Your ideas! And what funders can do to make things better.



- 1) Create "a funding portal where news organizations could post projects and requests that a wide group of funders could review."
- 2) Keep application process simple. More unrestricted, multi-year operating support. Note: Unrestricted funding to for-profit newsrooms is tricky.
- 3) Journalism funders, please help other funders increase the role, support and amount of philanthropy for journalism.
- 4) Please embrace working with "messy, overworked and understaffed organizations. Make them feel safe."



Get in Touch



Jennifer Benz

Vice President, NORC at the University of Chicago
benz-jenny@norc.org

Jennifer Preston

Consultant, Media Impact Funders
Principal, Preston Strategic Advisors LLC
jepresto@gmail.com

Tom Rosenstiel

Eleanor Merrill Scholar on the Future of Journalism, University of Maryland
Senior Fellow, NORC at the University of Chicago
tom.rosenstiel@gmail.com



Thank you to our funders:

The Lenfest Institute for Journalism, the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, Arnold Ventures, and Media Impact Funders.

