

"How a Philanthropic Network Can Save Journalism"

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It's hardly breaking news that high-quality journalism is facing severe economic challenges. Nor is it news that many philanthropies are grasping at ways to draw more attention to important problems.

As veterans of the worlds of media, public policy, and philanthropy, we propose an endeavor to put more philanthropic might behind supporting effective journalism. Some worthwhile experimentation has been done in this area. The time has come for a broader and more systematic effort.

The newspaper industry's troubles have gone from being bad news to almost old news.

Even the recent bankruptcy filing by the Tribune Company, owner of the *Chicago Tribune*, caused few shock waves amid industrywide turmoil that has a host of metropolitan dailies up for sale or in need of restructuring.

Less discussed is what this means for the role of good journalism in our society. The sad truth is that unless the financial landscape changes significantly, even more journalists will be forced to cut back on their valuable work.

It is difficult to overstate the importance of a vibrant and driven media in our democracy. As Benjamin Franklin said, "A Bible and a newspaper in every house, a good school in every district — all studied and appreciated as they merit — are the principle support of virtue, morality, and civil liberty."

While the Internet provides us access to more information than ever before, when newspapers and magazines are forced to cut back further through buyouts and layoffs, our public debate will suffer as we lose the insight and new knowledge journalists provide.

We need a new approach that can guarantee that smart, talented Americans produce more thoughtful journalism.

The practice of philanthropies' supporting journalism is slowly spreading.

ProPublica is already an established investigative nonprofit organization. National Public Radio and the Public Broadcasting Service frequently air segments and series financed by foundation grants. The Kaiser Foundation is hiring reporters to follow health care.

All those endeavors are worthy, but if this trend of one-offs continues, individual philanthropies will be learning about the news media and hunting for journalists in a highly inefficient manner.

We propose an arrangement that creates a standing forum where talented journalists and respected news organizations can collaborate with interested philanthropic sponsors.

Here's one way it could work. An umbrella nonprofit group could be set up and solicit interest from news organizations and established journalists. Philanthropies would be allowed to post on a Web site specific topics of which they would like to sponsor coverage.

Member news organizations could respond privately and directly via the site about how and when they would cover a topic, and see if the philanthropy wants to provide money.

The ground rules would be simple — from the news organization side, a willingness to accept money from philanthropies, and on the philanthropic side, a willingness to accept standard editorial practices. That is, beyond identifying the subject matter, foundations would have no control over the content that is produced. The relationships would be fully disclosed in the coverage.

On the news-media side, the possible benefits of this model are obvious.

Journalism and journalists would have a new source of needed financing without sacrificing much independence or control of their voice. After all, many newspapers and magazines already have private publishers.

Foundations also would clearly benefit. Many have struggled to make a difference in the complex, multiplayer policy-making environment. As foundations seek attention for social problems that may be less marketable in the fast-paced age of cable, the chance to support compelling journalism should be a worthy option.

For many foundations the current approach, which often leaves new ideas languishing on a shelf, has been less than satisfying.

The biggest winner would be policy makers and our democracy. With a flood of talented journalists unleashed on important problems and challenged to report them to the public, we might see some issues currently deemed "too boring" for coverage getting a more compelling and thought-provoking take.

Foundations and the print news media both support the public good. Foundations are not in danger of disappearing anytime soon, but they do struggle to drive the development of public policy.

Newspapers and magazines have the opposite problem. They continue to exert impact in our civic discussion and in politics, but their survival is under grave threat.

As we face a series of crises, including the economy, climate change, and destabilizing international conflict, there is no better time to help strong reporters get involved in observing our world and adding knowledge and understanding to a policy debate.

Philanthropic sponsorship can make the important work of journalists possible in a way that heightens the focus on major policy issues.

There are few better or more urgent ways to help ourselves and our world get better information. The idea at least deserves a try.

Foundation-sponsored journalism would represent a marriage of opportunity and need. The result could be good for us all.

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