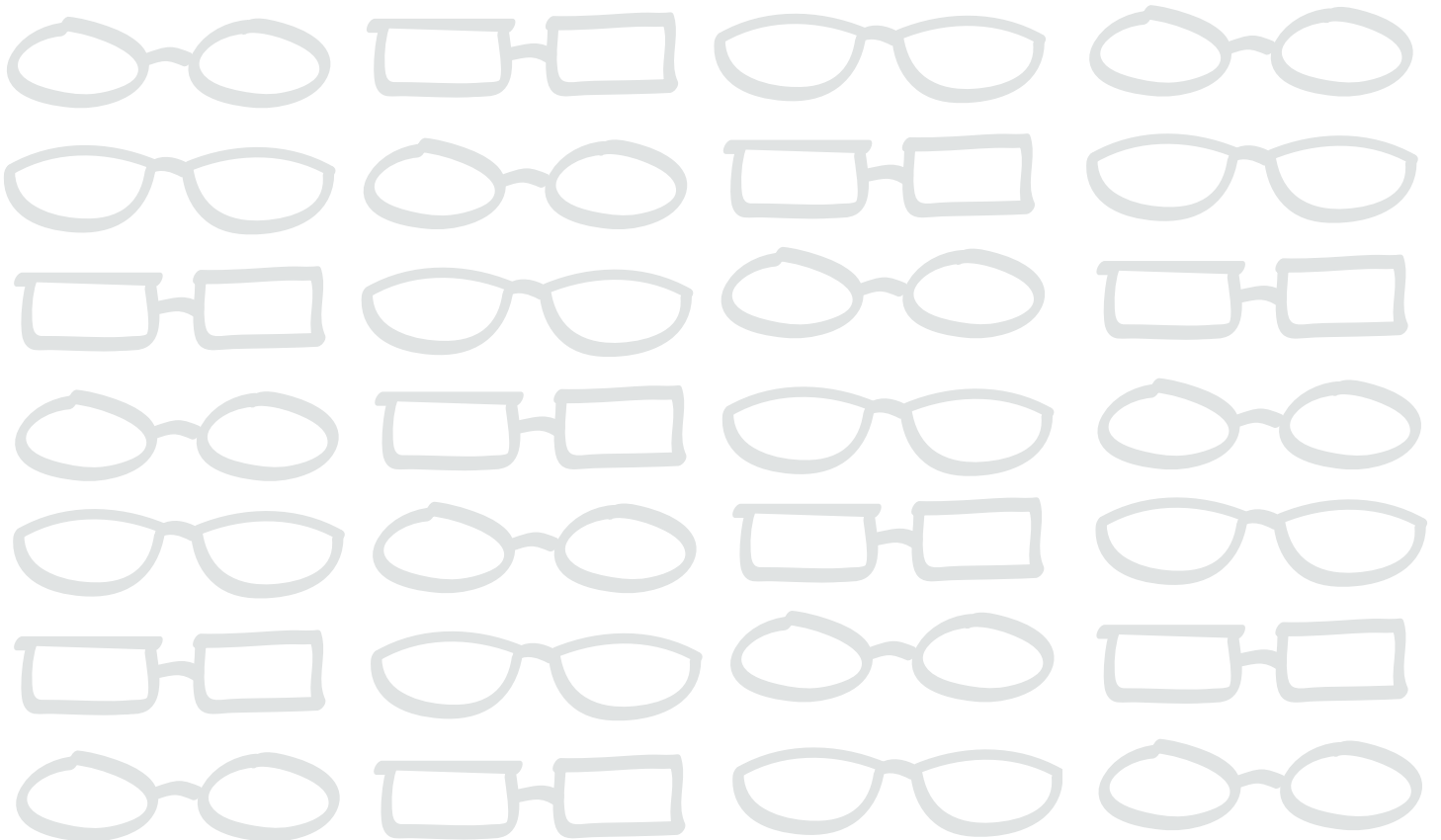


FUNDER PERSPECTIVES: ASSESSING MEDIA INVESTMENTS



How are funders evaluating the outcomes of the media productions and campaigns that they support? Over the past five years, this question has informed a growing array of convenings, reports and research initiatives within the philanthropic sector, driving the emergence of a small but increasingly visible field of analysts and producers seeking to both quantify and qualify the impact of public interest media.

These examinations have stimulated debate among both funders and grantees. Calls for the creation of a single media impact metric or tool have been met with both curiosity and skepticism. Those in favor of impact analysis cite its strategic usefulness in this moment of myriad new and untested media platforms, the importance of concretely tying mission to outcomes, and the need to justify media investments rather than programmatic ones. Detractors raise concerns about how an excess of evaluation might stifle creativity, needlessly limit funding to those projects whose short-term impact can be conclusively proven, or simply bog grantees down in administrative tasks that require entirely different skills, as well as resources.

However, these debates have taken place in somewhat of an information vacuum. To date, the conversation about media impact has been led by a limited group of foundations. Little substantive information is available about how a broader range of funders address questions of evaluation. This research project aims to help fill that gap.

Methodology: Media Impact Funders (MIF) is a member-supported network of foundations that give grants for media production, platforms, campaigns, infrastructure-building, and policy in order to effect social change across a wide array of issues, including healthcare, education, the environment, social justice and more. In 2013, MIF partnered with The Foundation Center to more clearly define the scope and scale of the media funding field. The resulting 2013 report, *Growth in Foundation Support for Media in the United States*, identified more than 1000 foundations that had given \$10,000 or more to support media projects between 2009-2011.

MIF culled this list to identify foundations that either gave five or more media grants, or grants totaling more than \$250,000 in this period, and created a survey designed to reveal the ways in which such funders are employing evaluation methods. A key goal of this survey was to gauge the demand for further media impact tools and sharing of best practices.



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In September 2014, survey requests went out to a list of 405 funders who were identified through this research process. In the end, 30 foundations provided survey responses, 22 of which agreed to have their names included publicly in this report. (See Appendix A below for a list of named foundations that participated, and Appendix B for more details from the survey data.)

MIF Research Director Jessica Clark then followed up with 11 of these funders for in-depth interviews to help deepen MIF's understanding of how they are conceptualizing and implementing impact evaluation.

Respondents: While the response rate for this the survey was relatively low at 7.4%, the foundations that did respond include a number of the largest and most visible within this sector. However, nearly half of the survey respondents work at smaller foundations, with 10 or fewer employees. As such, this sample is not representative of the field at large, but rather provides a useful snapshot of impact assessment practices across a variety of funders with different approaches to the impact question.

Limited response may in itself reflect that media impact methods are not top-of-mind for many funders who are more focused on issue-specific program goals than on media itself. While most of the foundations have been funding media for some time, only 10% of respondents answered yes to the question "Do you consider yourself primarily a media funder?" Only 23% of the respondents make grants in a dedicated media program, with others reporting that they fund media through other program areas (33%), through a combination of media-specific and other program areas (27%) or other options outside of these choices, including partnerships and general programs (22%).

Findings: Both the survey results and the interviews revealed that while individual funders have made progress in defining their own approaches to media impact analysis, methods have not yet stabilized across the field. In fact, given the diversity of goals, formats, topics and genres identified by these respondents, it's unlikely that a single field-wide methodology will be adopted.

A distinctive feature of philanthropy is the degree to which every foundation is free to pursue its programs according to its own objectives. This seems doubly true in the area of media impact. A foundation may fund programs in education, health, environment or the arts, among many other topics. In the field of media, it may support documentary films, journalism, public media or interactive games, to name a few categories. Once these choices are made, that foundation in turn



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

may choose how or whether to evaluate outcomes. Given these multiple layers of complexity, concerns that many funders will line up behind one unreasonably narrow definition of impact seem unwarranted.

However, the difficulty of establishing universal impact metrics does not mean that progress is not possible in this arena. The foundations surveyed seek to learn from and share best practices with one another. They are eager to establish comparable analysis rubrics within more specific fields of production, such as social issue documentary or nonprofit news sites, and to more frequently compare notes on how impact relates to capacity building, collaboration, and media ecosystems, among other topics.

Conclusions: Media funders are still looking at questions of media assessment through many different lenses. The survey results indicated that the two biggest challenges facing this field are lack of consensus about what constitutes “impact” (33%) and lack of clarity about methods/measures within the media field (30%). Rather than a weakness, however, this may prove to be a strength. The diversity of approaches allows for small groups of like-minded funders and grantees to develop and test tools and methodologies specific to their shared goals. Rather than a single tool or approach, the field may end up with a suite of relevant approaches to be applied in various instances. MIF will continue to track this emerging field, and will work with funders to continue related conversations that help to hone more targeted methods.

SURVEYING THE FIELD

IMPACT: A RISING CONCERN

Over the past year, Media Impact Funders (MIF) has been actively tracking and showcasing emerging methods for evaluating the impact of a range of public interest media products and projects, including documentaries, news, games, visualizations, interactives, strategic issue campaigns, and more. We've convened funders, grantees, and leading analysts, and have curated related tools, analysis and debate in the [Assessing Impact of Media](#) section of our website.

In the process, MIF has regularly engaged with a core group of funders who are leading the conversation about how best to determine the impact of philanthropically funded media projects. Through grants and investments, they have supported a wide array of associated convenings, research centers, demonstration projects, reports, and tool building. These include:

- Large foundations such as The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, The John and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Ford Foundation, which fund media productions and strategic campaigns across a range of genres, objectives and platforms;
- Smaller foundations, such as the Fledgling Fund, which have effectively focused their attention on improving impact in a particular field of production such as documentary;
- Private investors, who form organizations such as Impact Partners or Participant Media to support “double-bottom line” media productions.

Together, these overlapping initiatives have succeeded in raising the profile of tools and methods for gauging media outcomes, and supporting a growing field of practice. Several organizations focused on related questions have been formed or rebranded within the last five years, among them the Media Impact Project at USC Annenberg, The Harmony Institute, the Center for Media and Social Impact (formerly the Center for Social Media), and of course, Media Impact Funders itself (formerly Grantmakers in Film and Electronic Media).

Grantees have taken notice — organizations such as the Center for Investigative Reporting have begun to hire “embedded” analysts, and sessions at conferences and in closed-door conversations among public interest producers now regularly include the truism that “funders want metrics.”

However, what this means in practice remains less clear. Even among the funders who have been meeting and collaborating for years, only a limited consensus has

emerged regarding the best methods to assess how and why media matters. Do funders truly want metrics? If so, how are they using them? In order to learn more about impact analysis on the ground, we decided to ask foundations how they are addressing these questions.

SURVEY HIGHLIGHTS

The survey responses indicate that this small but significant group of media funders are thinking about how to assess media initiatives, but largely do not have a shared understanding of the best ways to measure impact. Nor do they have structured processes for sharing lessons learned through impact evaluation methods. Most commonly, impact analyses are either shared internally (36%), or no standard process has been developed for sharing results (47%).

In addition, much of the evaluation burden is falling to grantees, who are often funded on a per-project basis and may often be lacking the tools, resources, and perspective required to conduct a comprehensive and objective impact evaluation.

One of the primary difficulties of establishing a common set of tools and methods for impact analysis is the diversity of focus and subject matter across the media funding field. Conversations about impact that try to land on a single formula or metric don't just end up comparing the proverbial "apples and oranges," but an entire fruit basket of different shapes, sizes and textures.

Our survey revealed that:

- *Funders' demographic targets differ:* 64% of the funders we surveyed focus on media projects that target national audiences, with smaller numbers also reporting local (33%), regional (40%) or international (30%) targets.
- *They have diverse goals for their media investments:* Only 23% of respondents make grants in a dedicated media program, with others reporting that they fund media through other program areas (33%), through a combination of media-specific and other program areas (27%) or other options outside of these choices, including partnerships and general programs (17%).
- *The media they support addresses many topics:* Standout topics include education (47%), health (40%), and environment (37%). Labor, science, and technology come next (at 10% apiece), while housing (7%) and crisis response (3%) fall to the bottom of the list.
- *They support projects across many different types of platforms:* The most prominent categories include Web (80%), radio (73%), and TV (70%). Transmedia is the smallest, at 23%.
- *Their investments engage audiences in different ways:* Journalism (63%),

public media (50%) and documentary (47%) are the most commonly funded genres. Engagement campaigns are also popular (41%). Feature films (13%) and games (10%) fall to the bottom.

- *They seek various outcomes:* The most common impact funders are looking to create with media projects is “educating audiences” (70%), followed by “increasing awareness of a particular issue or topic” (67%). Less common motivators include “changing media users’ attitudes or behavior” and “empowering media users to express themselves,” at 20% apiece.

IN SEARCH OF CLEAR SOLUTIONS

In addition to the necessity of focusing media evaluation to match their own foundation’s target audiences and missions, a number of funders noted the importance of further tailoring evaluation for each project.

“Impact in this space is situational and depends on context and overall goals,” wrote Ellen Friedman, the Executive Director of the Compton Foundation. “Each project might require a different assessment method — and a mix of qualitative and quantitative approaches is likely to be useful for most of us.”

Some funders prefer to allow grantees to develop methods from the bottom up. “We’d like to see more of our grantees approach measurement like ProPublica — being clear about their mission and goals and then assessing their work against what they say they intend to accomplish. Tracking it carefully and honestly, in order to learn and adapt along the way,” noted Molly de Aguiar, Program Director of Media & Communications at The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation.

Not all funders are equally concerned with these questions. Ten percent of the survey respondents indicated that they “rarely” or “never” evaluate media grants. When they do, at the very least, they’re curious to discover if the work they support is connecting with audiences — respondents most commonly track reach (75%) and engagement (64%).

Notably, however, we found that due to a variety of constraints, many funders are not measuring the indicator that they identify as the most impactful: long-term social change. Identifying and addressing those constraints will be an ongoing challenge for this evolving field.

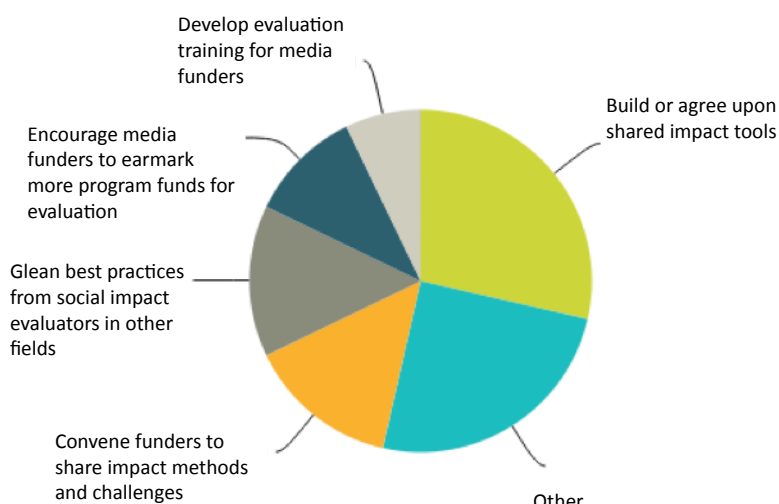
Despite these complexities, many of the funders we surveyed are enthusiastic about facing this challenge, finding peers who share their goals, and discovering ways to use impact analysis to improve their practice.

A number of foundations are experimenting with analysis while keeping one eye on their peers. “We are following closely the importance of impact measurement across the field, and efforts like this to try to get a more systematic approach. I guess we’re going to be in the learner/student mode on this one,” observed David Haas of the Wyncote Foundation.

The survey results indicated that the two biggest challenges facing the media impact field are lack of consensus about what constitutes “impact” (33%) and lack of clarity about methods/measures within the media field (30%), and that an important next step is to “build or agree upon shared impact tools” (29%).

“Each foundation’s board and staff will have unique goals and relevant impact metrics for the media work they undertake,” wrote one survey respondent who declined to be named. “Building a versatile impact toolkit that can be shared and customized for each foundation’s needs would be a great contribution to the field.”

What is the most important thing we need to do next in order to deepen understanding of media impact methods in philanthropy?



FUNDER PERSPECTIVES

GOING DEEPER

In the interview phase of our research, MIF spoke with funders about shifts within their own understanding and implementation of media impact evaluation, key insights, and the most important next steps in formulating a shared understanding of media impact across the field. The interviews revealed that:

- *Funders agree that the challenge of finding the impact of their media investments is an important one. However, each funder we spoke with defined impact a bit differently depending on their foundation structure and mission.*

Examples ranged from working across the foundation towards a clearly defined “mega-goal” (The Skillman Foundation), to funding across ecosystems or institutions and allowing grantees to drive and define their own impact (The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation and The Wyncote Foundation), to funding journalism education that will shape the next generation of public interest reporting (The Tow Foundation).

Funders such as Sandy Herz, Director of Global Partnerships at the Skoll Foundation, are eager to compare notes with other funders who share their transformative vision for media impact. The foundation has developed a model shaped like a funnel moving target audiences from awareness (of social entrepreneurs and their solutions to the significant world problems) to engagement (with individual social entrepreneurs addressing specific issues) to impact (on those issues).

“At the wide end of the funnel we target awareness, and there are standard measures you can apply across a number of partners: How many stories were created? How many people did it reach? How much did you pay for it? But then from those broad audiences, you can move down the funnel and engage specific subsets around targeted media initiatives. When it works, those efforts spawn very specific opportunities to drive impact, sometimes with a target audience of just a few people at the narrow end of the funnel. But that’s what it’s all about at the end of the day,” said Herz.

“What I find is when I am in broader conversations with other funders, they are very much at the wide end of the funnel — awareness and reach are the easiest common denominators across the work of everybody who uses film for social change,” she noted. “But for Skoll, we’re really specific in that we’re investing in connecting and celebrating social entrepreneurs in order to have a large-scale impact on the world’s most pressing problems, so we care most about the narrow end of the funnel.”

- *Matching metrics to mission is a difficult but necessary process.*

“You have to be really clear about what your objectives are in terms of media,” observed Martin Collier, Executive Director of The Glaser Progress Foundation. “If you pick a particular objective that you’re trying to achieve and then use media as a tool for achieving that objective, even though there are difficulties in terms of attribution, you can still begin to approach a metric, a system that works, that tells you whether or not you’re making progress. . . . It’s not unique to media. In a sense, it plagues nonprofit, nonmarket investment outcomes in general.”

- *Several funders emphasized that they are not “funding media for media’s sake” but rather funding social or systemic change and using media to advance specific goals.*

“We are oriented around social change in support of health and justice for all, but we see communications as really central to reaching a broad audience in California about why we think that matters,” said Mary Lou Fulton, Senior Program Manager at The California Endowment. “Our grantees, our communities where we work — everyone can and should participate. . . . In our strategic goals for the initiative that the foundation’s work is centered on, we have five ‘drivers of change,’ and narrative change is one of those five drivers. So it’s really embedded as part of our strategy. It’s not an afterthought.”

- *While many foundations work across a constellation of issues, at least one foundation that MIF interviewed has clearly identified an overall program objective, and is finding ways to plug media funding into the mix.*

“There’s no commitment to a free press that’s part of our mission,” said Bill Hanson, the Director of Communications and Technology at The Skillman Foundation. “We fund media when it’s more connected to improving the lives of children in Detroit . . . the issues that we care about have to do with children and graduation from high school and college. Media can be an important partner in tackling those issues.”

- *A number of funders are juggling media projects that demand different types of impact analysis.*

“For media projects that are part of a programmatic strategy (such as reducing the harm caused by alcohol, as in the [RECOVER ALASKA](#) project), impact is very important. We do formal third-party professional evaluation to measure change in public attitudes where that is the purpose,” explained Diane Kaplan, President and CEO of the Rasmuson Foundation. “But for purely creative work where we are supporting a filmmaker or producer’s work, impact is measured on carriage, viewers, or listeners rather than changing attitudes.”

- *While many expressed a desire for simplicity in impact assessment, others noted the impossibility of devising a silver bullet solution.*

“The key is that it’s not a one-size-fits-all,” said Collier. A related challenge for funders working in this emerging environment is devising frameworks to compare impact data across multiple media organizations and projects. In the absence of standardized impact models or tools, they are finding that case studies are valuable.

- *Small, local, and family foundations are less likely to undertake extensive formal evaluation—instead working hand-in-hand with grantees to define success.*

“At this early stage our information is primarily anecdotal,” said Andrea Sholler, the Associate Director of The Tow Foundation, which has funded journalism research centers at CUNY and Columbia University designed to foster journalism innovation and entrepreneurship. “We maintain very close relationships with the schools, meet with many of the program participants, attend the symposiums and forums and, particularly with regard to The

Tow Center for Digital Journalism, have seen first-hand how the work we have supported is increasingly being integrated into the general curriculum of the schools.”

- *There is much more critical thinking still to be done about the impact of funding media projects in context, rather than measuring the impact of a single project or outlet.*

“I think of impact as the degree to which the groups we fund and the way we fund them strengthens trends in effectiveness and reach of what we consider to be the most important public media work,” said David Haas, Vice Chair of the Wyncote Foundation and MIF Board Chair.

“The strengthening of the field, or the networks of people working on things, is where we look to have our influence. Part of that is identifying key leadership and enterprises or specific projects that strengthen or deepen a broader range of work.”

- *Similarly, there’s still much to be learned about how multiple media projects influence particular issues over time.*

“I, too, have watched this push for metrics among funders, particularly in the art, culture and media space,” said Compton Foundation Executive Director Ellen Friedman. “I certainly want to resist a pure metrics play, because what we don’t fully understand or appreciate is that when you’re funding the kind of broad culture change work that many of us want to support . . . it takes multiple and repeated exposure to begin to shift the narrative overall. It’s not just one film.”

- *Numbers alone are insufficient to unearth or communicate impact.*

Several interviewees talked about the inadequacy of quantitative metrics. Instead, they are working to, as Kelly Born of The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation described it, “move past [unique web visits] and get to more elevated metrics,” such as how journalism projects are engaging users and providing them with the context needed to make informed decisions about civic issues. “I think it would be interesting to see some basic survey questions that people have used across different issue areas to try and get at these questions,” Born said. “I feel like we are all reinventing the wheel all the time.”

- *This is a continuing conversation.*

A number of interviewees requested opportunities to get together and discuss what other funders are doing, rather than focusing on the work of grantees “I think there could be even more of the in-the-weeds, funder-to-funder digging in about the different starting points from which we’ve all come to this,” said MacArthur Foundation Program Officer Lauren Pabst, “Not to convince anyone of one model or another—but just to have that conversation—would be helpful.”

See the [MIF website](#) for examples of several high-impact media projects mentioned by our interviewees profiled in the Network Media section, as well as case studies from The California Endowment’s [Communication Strategies That Fast Track Policy Change](#) research initiative.

NEXT STEPS

We see a nascent pattern emerging across these disparate results that may help to clarify best practices for this volatile field. Rather than a field-wide model of “collective impact,” in which different entities work to arrive at shared goals and outcomes, it is clear that there are several clusters of related but distinct activity in the media funding space.

Instead of attempting to consolidate the insights from these communities of practice into a master tool or framework, it may be more useful to acknowledge the challenges they share, and hone in further on how the differences between them reveal different types of outcomes. Organizing funders around discrete impact roles may also allow for more productive sharing of methodologies and tools.

Over the next phase of this research, Media Impact Funders will continue to convene small groups of funders in both formal and informal settings to facilitate conversations that will amplify existing work in the media impact space and support tool-building efforts where they can be most effective.

APPENDIX A: PARTICIPANTS

This report was authored by Media Impact Funders Research Director Jessica Clark, with research support from Katie Donnelly of Dot Connector Studio. Patricia Caesar, the president of St. James Strategy Consulting, worked with MIF to design the survey and analyze research findings. Media Impact Funders Executive Director Vince Stehle served as the primary advisor to the process.

Many thanks to our partners at The Foundation Center for providing vital data about the media funding field, to our board members for offering initial feedback on the survey questions and inviting peers to participate, and to our colleagues at The Fledgling Fund and the Open Society Foundation for giving us valuable advice on the different ways that media funders are conceptualizing impact. Thanks also to independent researcher Susan Abbott and Minna Aslama Horowitz, a researcher at the Media Lab for Finland's Aalto University, who provided helpful perspectives on how the U.S. media funding environment differs from those of other countries, and the ways in which this shapes competing impact definitions.

We are also grateful to all of our survey respondents and interviewees for their time. Foundations that agreed to be named include:

- The Booth Ferris Foundation
- The California Endowment
- Compton Foundation
- Donald W. Reynolds Foundation
- The Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation
- The Glaser Progress Foundation
- Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation
- The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation
- The Sidney Hillman Foundation
- Jerome Foundation
- The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation
- The LEF Foundation
- The Kendeda Fund
- The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
- Park Foundation
- Rasmuson Foundation
- The San Francisco Foundation
- The Skillman Foundation
- Skoll Foundation
- The Tow Foundation
- Wyncote Foundation

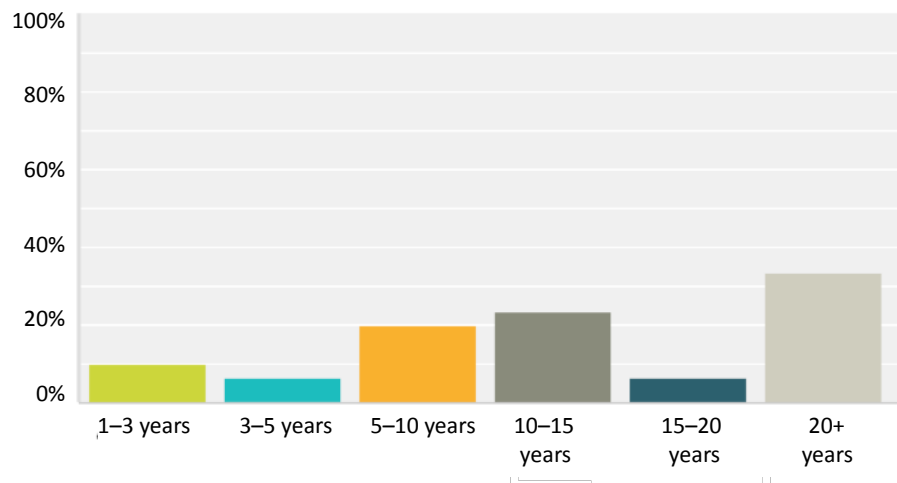
APPENDIX B: SURVEY RESULTS

About the Respondents

Nearly half of the survey respondents work at smaller foundations, with 10 or fewer employees.

Most of the foundations have been funding media for some time:

How long has your foundation been funding media projects?



Funding Strategies

Most respondents do not define themselves as media funders.

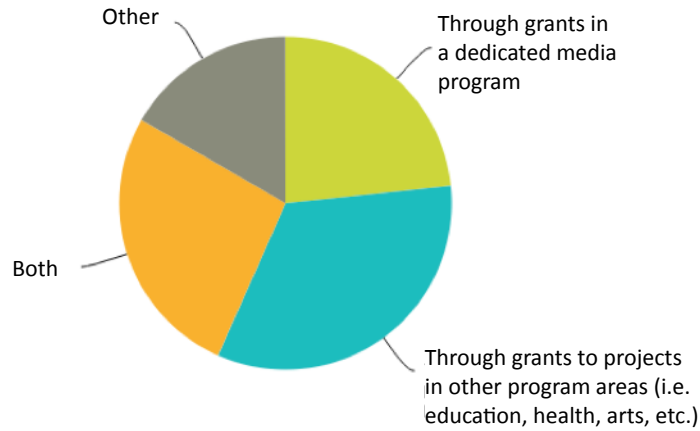
Only 10% of respondents answered yes to the question “Do you consider yourself primarily a media funder?”

The bulk of the respondents fund on a national level.

64% of funders focus on national initiatives, with smaller numbers also reporting local (33%), regional (40%), or international (30%) funding.

Most respondents do not fund media initiatives through a dedicated media program:

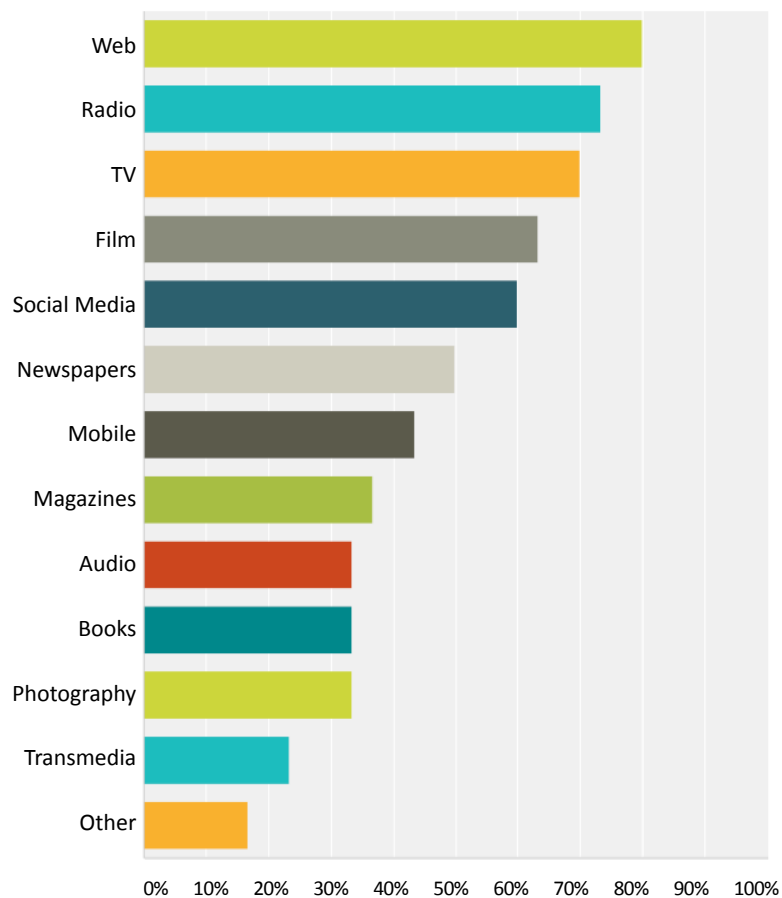
How does your foundation make media grants?



Funding crosses many topics and genres. Standout topics include education (47%), health (40%), and environment (37%), while labor, science, and technology (at 10% apiece), while housing (7%) and crisis response (3%) fall to the bottom of the list. In terms of genres, journalism (63%), public media (50%) and documentary (47%) are the most commonly funded genres. Engagement campaigns are also popular (41%). Feature films (13%) and games (10%) fall to the bottom.

Funding also crosses many platforms:

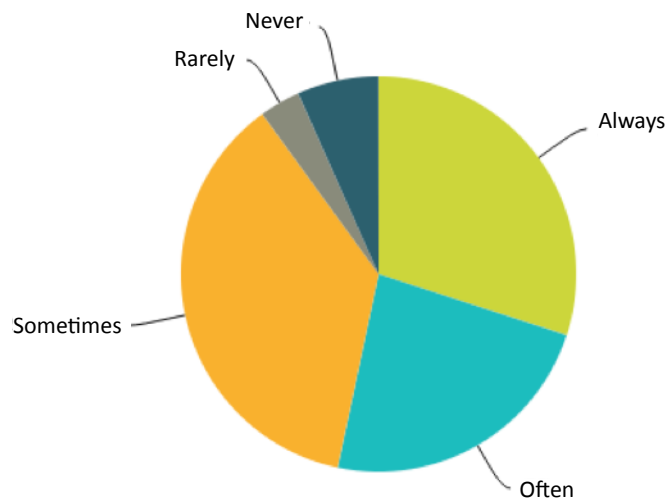
What platforms do the media projects you fund use?



Impact Strategies

Funders do not consistently evaluate grants:

How often do you formally or informally evaluate the impact of your grantees' work?



Funders do not evaluate impact for a variety of reasons.

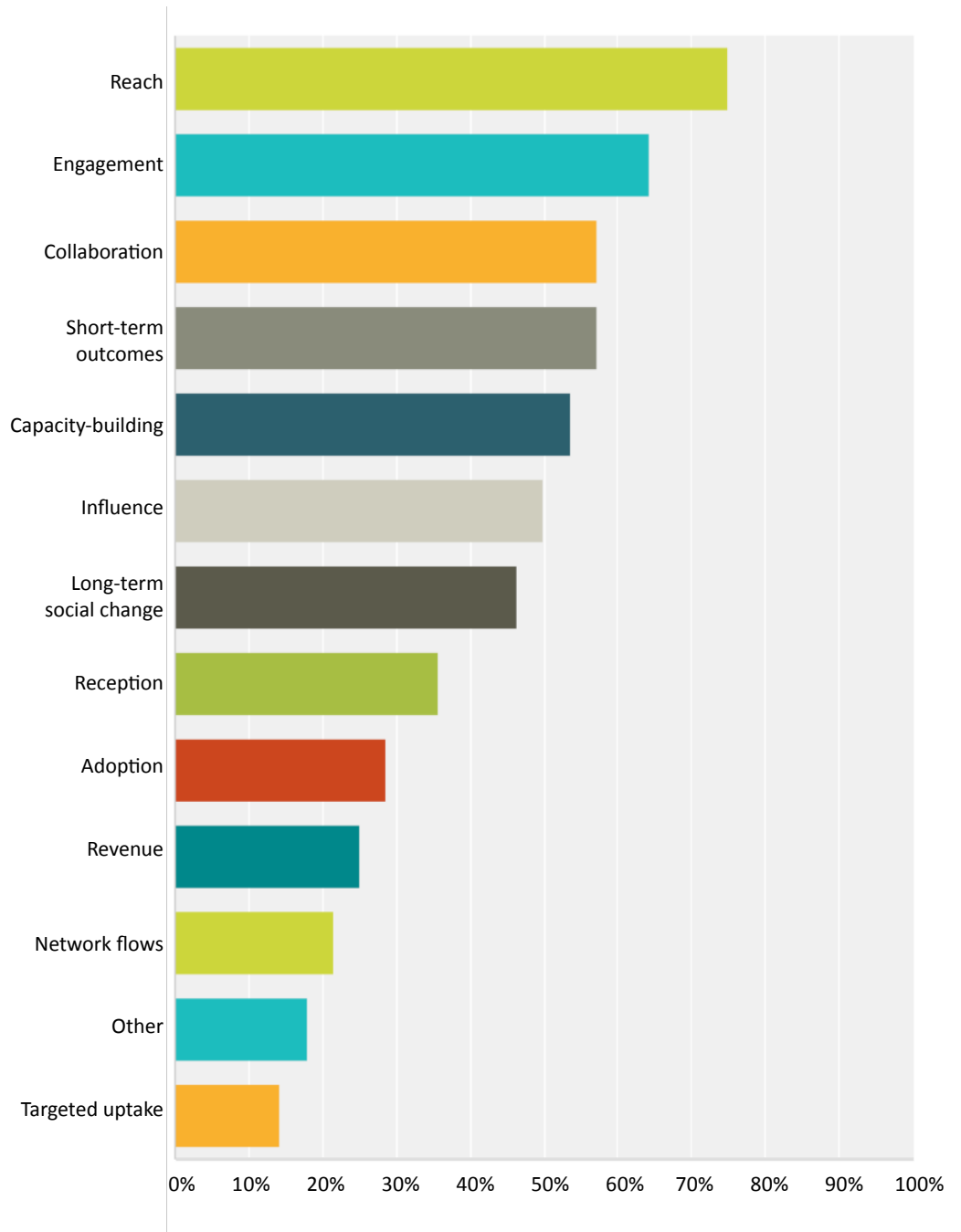
These reasons include limited resources, lack of experience, and a preference to invest directly in productions, among others.

Funders are seeking a variety of outcomes.

The most common impact funders are looking to create with media projects is “educating audiences” (70%), followed by “increasing awareness of a particular issue or topic” (67%). The least common motivators include “changing media users’ attitudes or behavior” and “empowering media users to express themselves,” at 20% apiece.

Reach is the most common indicator that funders track:

When you do evaluate the impact of media projects that you fund, what do you track?

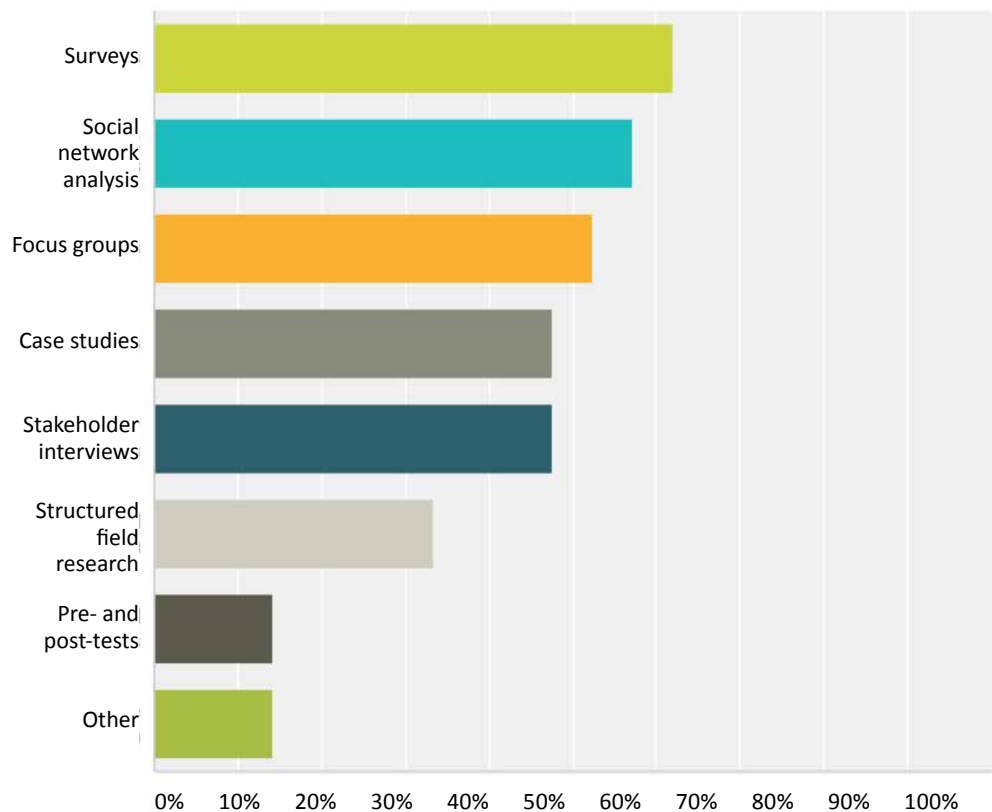


However, funders say that long-term social change is the most important indicator.

Long-term social change was the most highly regarded indicator, followed by short-term outcomes, collaboration, engagement, and reception. Significantly, reach, the indicator that funders track most frequently, is sixth on the list. Respondents indicated that revenue is the *least* valuable indicator to assess impact.

Evaluation methods most commonly include survey data and social network analysis:

Do you or your grantees use any of the following methods to gauge shifts in awareness, attitude, or likelihood to take action among users of the media projects that you fund?



While funders are more likely to use surveys and social media analysis to measure impact, they deem stakeholder interviews as the most useful method.

Stakeholder interviews beat out all other methods as most useful, followed by surveys. Again, here is a clear gap between what funders track and what they note are valuable indicators to track. This discrepancy calls for further research.

Funders are relying heavily on free tools to analyze data.

Google Analytics is the most commonly cited tool for analysis.

Grantees are often conducting evaluation themselves.

Most commonly, grantees are the ones conducting evaluation (47%) themselves. No respondent reported working with external evaluators, although several added comments indicating that they use external evaluators sometimes or in combination with other methods.

Funders see project-based funding as most impactful.

58% of funders report that project-based funding is the most valuable strategy for impact. Multi-year funding comes in second (46%). No funder marked “funding competitions” as a useful strategy.

Funders are not inclined to share evaluation results with one another in any standardized way.

Most impact analyses are shared internally (36%), or no standard process has been developed for sharing results (47%).

Some funders are aiming to build the field’s capacity for impact measurement.

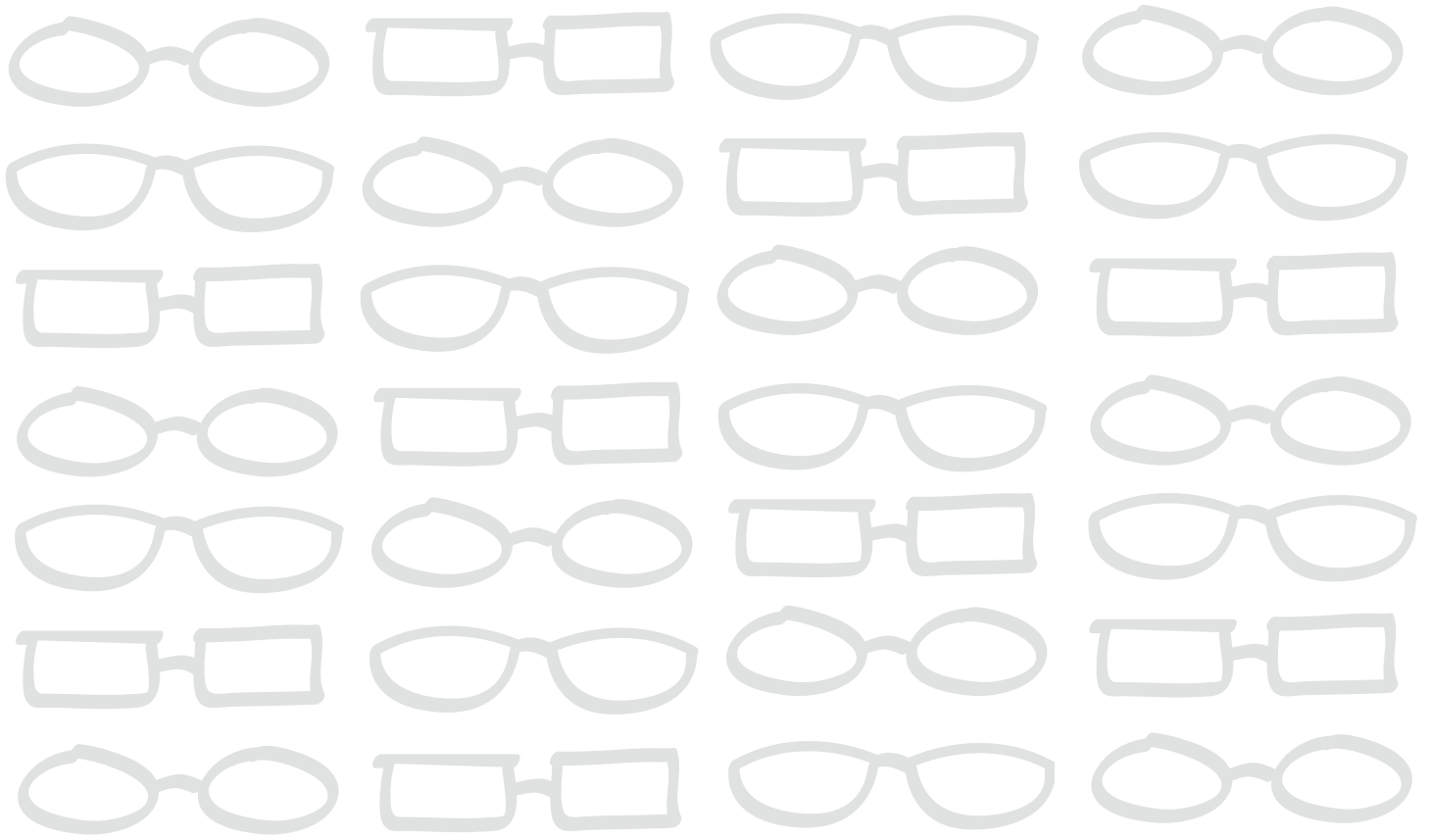
29% of funders report having funded broader projects to help better evaluate media investments. Most frequently these include analyses of user demographics, best practices for impact analysis within a particular field of production, and analyses of shifts in media usage.

More clarity is needed.

The two biggest challenges facing the media impact field are lack of consensus about what constitutes “impact” (33%) and lack of clarity about methods/ measures within the media field (30%).

Next Step: shared tools.

Funders agree that the most important next step is to “build or agree upon shared impact tools” (29%). Interestingly, although grantees shoulder much of the evaluation burden, no funder indicated “developing evaluation training for media grantees” as a priority.



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