

Inside Philanthropy



The State of
American Philanthropy

Giving for Film

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ABOUT INSIDE PHILANTHROPY

Inside Philanthropy is a digital media site that covers the world of charitable giving. We report daily on foundations, major donors, and trends in philanthropy. Through our GrantFinder resource, we also profile and track thousands of funders working across key issue areas and geographic regions. Inside Philanthropy is supported by reader subscriptions and advertising. We do not receive funding from any other source. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com

ABOUT THE STATE OF AMERICAN PHILANTHROPY

The State of American Philanthropy is a series of background papers on important topics and trends in U.S. philanthropy. The papers draw on past research and reporting by IP writers, as well as new interviews, grantmaking data, and other sources. Learn more at insidephilanthropy.com/state-of-american-philanthropy.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Once relegated to a foundation's arts portfolio, giving for nonprofit film production, distribution and presentation – documentary work, in particular – is now more regularly embraced by funders with a range of interests and missions well beyond the arts. In a society practically breathing media, it's clear that film can be a powerful force for change.

Streaming services have also noted the public's interest in documentaries, which, on the surface, can be seen as expanding opportunities for filmmakers. But risk-averse corporations, market forces and allegiance to algorithms has, according to many in the field, kept subject matter narrow and safe and the pool of filmmakers from diverse communities shallow.

Still, change is afoot. Large foundations have sought to expand their reach by building up and supporting a rich ecosystem of intermediary film organizations more connected to filmmakers and specific communities. Those organizations, sensitive to the difficulties and complexities of developing a film project, have created numerous programs and opened up new streams of funding to help address filmmakers' financing gaps. And a new wave of activist collectives are emerging to take on inequities in the filmmaker space. Here, we explore how philanthropic funders are working in this area today. Key points include:

Who's Giving

- Much of the philanthropic sector's support for film comes from "legacy foundations" – some of the country's largest, most recognizable private foundations – many of which have longstanding commitments to funding nonfiction, documentary film.
- Ford Foundation's Just Films, MacArthur Foundation, Mellon Foundation, Nathan Cummings Foundation, Wyncote Foundation and Foundation for an Open Society are important funders for filmmakers to know.
- Today, a significant portion of foundation funding aimed at documentary production and distribution flows through the growing field of support organizations that regrant monies to film projects with the use of carefully selected juries; these intermediaries also offer forms of critical professional and creative development.
- Individual major donors also play a key role, especially with gifts to top university film schools.

Who's Getting

- A significant percentage of film funding is directed to intermediary/regranting organizations, film festivals and film societies and other nonprofits whose mission is to celebrate and foster an appreciation for the cinematic arts through screenings and educational programs.
- Film festivals are also a popular niche for corporate funding, which typically comes in the form of sponsorships.

- Growing attention to equity in the film funding space is exemplified by the fact that Firelight Media, which focuses on filmmakers of color, and Women Make Movies show up on Candid's top 10 list of film-related grant recipients.

The Big Issues and Funding Trends

- The sheer unsustainability of independent documentary filmmaking as a career is of growing concern to many, both funders and filmmakers alike.
- There is a growing trend toward efforts to address funding gaps in the process, like creating funding opportunities for early research and development.
- Increased interest in independent documentaries by streaming services is seen as both a blessing and a curse: While there may be more opportunities for filmmakers, market forces narrows the issues and subject matter covered, as well as the pool of filmmakers on whom they're willing to take risks.
- In response, some newer organizations are creating investment pools as a way to share that risk among wealthy individual donors.

Equity in the Sector

- Addressing the way systemic inequities play out in the film funding process is a front-and-center issue for many working in this sphere of philanthropy.
- Equity comprises the big issues relating to the subject matter of films most likely to receive funding, but also speaks to considerations about a filmmakers' connection to a story or community, representation, and the ways in which the philanthropic sector and the general film funding infrastructure itself are working to address their own biases and systemic inequities.
- Directing film funding to community-based or sector-specific intermediary organizations rather than to filmmakers themselves is an increasingly common way that funders work to reach artists from historically marginalized communities.
- Those intermediary/regranting organizations have created a number of new programs aimed specifically at supporting filmmakers from historically marginalized communities.

Fundraising Now

- Among the small group of organizations we interviewed for this paper, the fundraising trend seems to point toward continued modest, steady growth.
- While revenue has held steady for many organizations, the makeup of the donor base is evolving to some degree, with some reporting an increase in individual and family foundation funding and decreasing government grants.
- Organizations are presenting more online screenings, events and other activities with the hope that revenue will follow. It was a lifeline for some during the pandemic, and many are looking for new ways to bolster revenue online, pursuing many models.

The ecosystem of organizations and collaboratives working to nurture BIPOC, queer and female filmmakers is expanding and increasingly diverse. The impact of this on the field cannot be stressed enough. While a growing number of foundations are supporting these groups, they remain woefully underfunded. It is encouraging to see so much emphasis being placed on addressing inequities in all aspects of film funding, but that attention needs to continue growing, and there are great opportunities to encourage even more diverse voices to enter the space.

It's come to be accepted that independent filmmaking, and documentary filmmaking in particular, is primarily a labor of love and passion. But that is a concept that holds back those who must labor for financial survival and tacitly accepts limitations on the voices and perspectives that come through in a medium that can be a powerful tool for education and social change. Much needs to be done to ensure that the systems in place for funding and supporting documentary filmmakers enable individuals of lesser means to participate and lead.

Introduction

A '90s-era report from the Council on Foundations stated, “It is crucial for foundations interested in furthering an artistic culture to fund media.” In the past, philanthropic funding for film – typically nonfiction, documentary film – almost always resided in a foundation’s arts portfolio. But a number of forces over the last several decades have shaped the current documentary landscape into something much more potent and attractive to foundations, major donors and corporate interests alike.

Over the years, documentary filmmakers have embraced bolder storytelling techniques and narrative structures more appealing to audiences raised on contemporary narrative filmmaking. The democratization of technology put the ability to create documentary film into the hands of not just many more filmmakers, but people who previously lacked access to tell their own stories – think of that powerful camera we all carry in our pockets, the easy availability of sophisticated editing tools.

Even more influential is the overwhelming prevalence of screens in our lives, making all forms of media-based storytelling increasingly effective for changing hearts and minds. With this understanding, more funders have embraced documentary filmmaking as a strategy for effecting change (advancing mission).

“There’s been just a tremendous set of transitions that have incorporated the changes in technology, the changes in distribution, the changes in who’s making films, it’s just been incredibly dynamic,” notes Ellen Schneider, founder of Active Voice Lab and an early trailblazer in developing impact campaigns.

“If you want to influence the public,” says Doron Weber, vice president and program director at the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, “you go where the public is. And the public is interested in mass media, and film and tv and theater.” (See also IP’s State of American Philanthropy briefs on giving for [journalism and public media](#) and [theater](#).)

Also taking note of these formative forces have been the streaming services. HBO, Netflix, Hulu, NatGeo, Showtime, Disney and others have all now become major purveyors of documentary film. Their algorithms deliver nonfiction selections alongside every other entertainment genre to increasingly interested audiences. This phenomenon in particular has led many to anoint this another ‘golden age’ for documentary filmmakers.

But as many who have been in the field – as funders, financiers and filmmakers – for any significant amount of time have observed, the competition for resources remains exceptionally challenging for all but a select few. And though there are many positives resulting from the influence of streaming services, some see a tension arising as the social change aspirations of documentary filmmakers intersect with market forces.

In addition to funding directed to documentary filmmakers, increasingly via intermediary organizations, significant grant support is also directed to film festivals and nonprofit organizations that promote the cinematic arts through public screening programs and education.

Shifts and changes within the funding landscape continue alongside this growing interest from corporate entities. Many of the biggest funders of documentary film in the last decade have begun giving more through partner organizations, rather

than directly to filmmakers, an attempt by some to move the decision-making power over whose stories are told into the hands of those considered more connected to filmmakers and the filmmaking process. They have also begun to address gaps in funding for the many phases involved in the filmmaking process. While most funding is directed toward the costs of production, more funding is now becoming available for the crucial early phases of what some might term research and development, as well as for funding the costs of impact campaigns and award campaigns after the film is complete.

“I do feel like, at a very general level, we still are in what some people consider a ‘golden age’ of support for documentary film,” said Vince Stehle, executive director of Media Impact Funders, a philanthropic support organization for funders. “It still feels very challenging for filmmakers because there are more of them, it’s very competitive. But there are also a lot more funders over the past 10,12, 13 years.”

The Lay of the Land

Who's Giving

An especially large portion of philanthropic support for nonprofits focused on film comes from “legacy foundations” – some of the country’s oldest, largest and most recognizable private foundations – many of which have longstanding commitments to funding nonfiction, documentary film, though the range of funders tipping into the risky business of filmmaking has increased in recent years.

Community foundations and corporate entities that hold donor-advised funds (DAFs) are increasingly in the mix, though for purposes of this report, the corporate DAF managers, like Schwab and Fidelity Investments, have been set aside from IP’s analysis because it is nearly impossible for grantseekers to approach those donors.

While some individual major donor names are associated with giving to film schools and universities with film programs, and the many filmmaker support organizations (referred to as intermediaries for the purpose of this report) have individual donor programs, it’s difficult to capture the extent of individual giving to film based on available Candid data. Still, the difficulties of getting an independently produced documentary completed are well documented and filmmakers regularly self-fund or turn to wealthy individuals for support.

Included among the list of biggest givers to film are the the Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation, funded by filmmaker George Lucas, and the Dalio Foundation, funded by billionaire hedge fund manager Ray Dalio. The size of the excluded corporate donor-advised fund managers also offer an indication of the interest by individual donors in the film space: If included, giving to film from

DAFs at Fidelity Investments and Schwab from 2014–2018 would add \$48 million to our data.

There is also a developing niche of equity investors, wealthy individuals who provide capital support individually or in groups to filmmakers with the potential for returns on their investments.

Corporate funding for film primarily comes in the form of sponsorships, with some of the largest sums going to film festivals where companies receive the greatest exposure. Though not the focus of this brief, a large amount of government funding for documentary film comes from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and flows through PBS and its local affiliates, NPR and its stations, as well as to the Independent Television Service. While five years of funding from CPB, at just over \$50M, makes it a significant source of support for public media, including documentaries, that amount still **pales in comparison** to what other developed countries provide for public media.

The 10 funders that give the most for filmmaking in the U.S., by order of amount of giving according to data from Candid, are as follows:

10 Film Funders to Know
Ford Foundation
John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation
Andrew W. Mellon Foundation
Hobson/Lucas Family Foundation
Alfred P. Sloan Foundation
Wyncote Foundation
Lilly Endowment
Foundation to Promote Open Society
Dalio Foundation
The San Francisco Foundation

The Ford Foundation, mostly through its longstanding JustFilms program, gave a total of over \$321 million in the years 2014–2018. It is clearly the biggest foundation funder of film in the country, giving almost seven times more than MacArthur Foundation, the second biggest contributor to film on the list. While filmmakers can apply for funding directly to the Ford Foundation for their projects, the general trend among these funders is to support a host of partner organizations which in turn offer a wealth of resources to filmmakers in the form of grants, mentorship and other support specific to the singular needs of documentary filmmakers. Ford encourages potential grantseekers to explore these partner organizations to determine whether their projects “might be better suited for support through other organizations.”

Funder Spotlight



The Jonathan Logan Family Foundation is a social-justice-oriented funder that supports investigative journalism, documentary film production and other organizations and projects aiming to “illuminate the world and create positive change.” It funded the Logan Elevate grant program at IDA to support emerging women filmmakers of color. Two recent grantees—the films “Crip Camp” and “Welcome to Chechnya”—were nominated for the Documentary Feature Academy Award in 2021.

The MacArthur Foundation began funding nonfiction film in 1985, and for three decades was at the forefront of funding independently produced documentaries that examine underreported but important social issues. That

kind of direct support was discontinued in 2015 in favor of giving through partner organizations with closer ties to filmmakers and diverse communities.

“It felt like the right time for us to give up that power” and create more opportunities for “different decision-making lenses to be applied” to the process, said Lauren Pabst, senior program officer for MacArthur’s Journalism & Media program. In the five years since that shift in strategy, she noted, “those funds have reached projects that we might never have funded directly.”

Around that time, MacArthur also seeded the Enterprise Documentary Fund at the International Documentary Association (IDA) to assure there was no net loss in funding for documentary films. IDA built in legal services to the program, a move Pabst described as “brilliant” and “so important for indie filmmakers who don’t have a big news organization behind them...It’s something we couldn’t have done without this partnership.”

MacArthur’s shift serves as an example of the film funding ecosystem writ large. Much of the foundation funding targeted for documentary support flows via this growing field of support organizations that in turn regrant monies to film projects with the use of carefully selected juries and also offer various forms of professional creative development. It’s a phenomenon we’ll explore in greater detail later in this brief, as it relates not just to how monies are disbursed, but also how funders are working to respond to calls for increased attention to equity in the documentary space.

Some of the funders in this space do have explicit program areas or stated areas of interest that include documentary film, and most often, film that addresses issues of social justice. The Ford

Foundation’s JustFilms program area and MacArthur’s “enduring commitment” to its Journalism and Media program are two examples. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is interesting because of its strategy of funding both documentary and narrative film, among many other forms of media, to increase the public’s understanding of science. A majority of these funders, however, do not specifically state an interest in funding film, nor do they accept unsolicited proposals.

Despite the fact that many see this period as a kind of “golden age” for documentary filmmakers, the funding pool from foundations has decreased, even as more funders have entered the field.

According to Candid data, cumulative funding for nonfiction film in 2018 was about \$69 million less than what it was in 2014. The number of funders giving, however, increased by 236.

Year	Dollar Value of Grants	Funders	Grants Awarded	Recipients
2014	\$296M	2,164	4,154	1,168
2015	\$234M	2,603	5,720	1,353
2016	\$228M	2,509	5,795	1,316
2017	\$244M	2,341	4,553	1,252
2018	\$227M	2,400	4,683	1,346

Source: Candid

Despite the numbers available from Candid, the majority of experts IP spoke to in the development of this brief perceived philanthropic support for filmmaking to be on the rise. It may be that Candid data, also foundation funding that eventually makes its way into film projects is being directed to

nonprofit organizations that don’t have film as their primary mission – ones that are movement-based or social justice advocacy organizations – and so are not being captured in the Candid data tracking grants to filmmaking organizations.

Who’s Getting

A significant number of the organizations receiving grants from philanthropic institutions for film are intermediary organizations that regrant funds directly to film projects. They also offer programs designed to help filmmakers develop their craft and move through the phases of the long and arduous process of making a film, and some also provide help with access to distributors, communications campaigns and other services aimed at widening the public conversation. According to Candid data, also included among the 50 organizations receiving the most funding are film societies and other nonprofits whose mission is to celebrate and foster an appreciation for the cinematic arts through screenings and educational programs.

The Jacob Burns Film Center in Pleasantville, New York, which over the course of five years received \$32.7 million in funding, exemplifies this type of grantee. The center describes itself as “nonprofit cultural arts center dedicated to presenting the best of independent, documentary and world cinema; teaching literacy for a visual culture; and making film a vibrant part of the community.” The center also hosts an annual Jewish Film Festival. Other, similar organizations include the Film Society at Lincoln Center, home of the New York Film Festival, Utah Film Center, and the Philadelphia Film Society.

Quite a few of the country’s film organizations that receive the greatest amounts of private funding produce film festivals. With their opportunities for

awards, audiences, attention from critics and, ultimately, distribution deals, festivals play a critical role in the filmmaker ecosystem. Festivals are also a popular niche for corporate funding, which typically comes in the form of sponsorships.

More than half of those on the list of organizations receiving the most funding in this category produce film festivals, including SFFilm and the American Film Institute (AFI) festivals. One of the highest-profile and most prestigious of the festivals is the Sundance Institute’s Sundance Film Festival, which takes place annually in Park City, Utah.

The nonprofit organizations receiving the most grant funding from foundations for film, according to data from Candid, are as follows:

10 Film Grantees to Watch
Sundance Institute
Jacob Burns Film Center
Academy Foundation
International Documentary Association
Film Society of Lincoln Center
Imagination Productions
American Film Institute
San Francisco Film Society (SFFilm)
Women Make Movies
Firelight Media

It may be indicative of a growing attention to equity in the film funding space that Women Make Movies and Firelight Media appear on this list of major recipients. Firelight Media, founded in 1998 by veteran documentarians Stanley Nelson and Marcia Smith, focuses on supporting nonfiction cinema by and about communities of color. They produce documentary films, support filmmakers of

color, and cultivate audiences for their work. One of the older, more established of a growing number of filmmaker support organizations with a focus on underserved communities, Firelight’s profile is definitely on the rise (see more in Equity).

Women Make Movies, which has been supporting independent documentary films made by and about women for 45 years, offers fiscal sponsorship, individualized consultations, workshops, networking and more. They describe themselves as “the world’s leading distributor of independent films by and about women.”

A substantial amount of nonprofit funding for film-focused efforts flows to university film schools. A single \$20 million gift from a billionaire can eclipse giving from a typical legacy foundation over the course of four years. Gifts can be earmarked for new facilities, scholarships, alumni networking, or curricula. Some of the major film schools that receive the bulk of this major donor support include USC Cinematic Arts, NYU, American Film Institute, UCLA and Columbia University.

The Big Issues & Beyond

Social justice and equity are the most frequently named issues among funders and their partner organizations supporting film, and they have deep and far-reaching impacts in the film funding space. We’ll explore these latter issues in the “Equity” section. Here, we’ll look at other issues of concern in the film funder ecosystem, including the difficulty for independent filmmakers, particularly documentarians, to sustain a career in the field; the impact of streaming services as they’ve become increasingly interested in documentaries; and unsurprisingly, the impact of COVID, particularly on filmmakers from marginalized communities.

The issue of sustainability plaguing the documentary and other nonprofit filmmaking community can easily be likened to the ongoing overhead issue that has long dogged the nonprofit sector at large: philanthropic funding is focused too myopically on program costs alone and not enough on the needs of the people who execute those programs. Many of the people interviewed for this report repeatedly echoed a similar refrain: funders should be investing in filmmakers themselves, not just their projects.

“The whole industry is very oriented toward projects and not people,” said Marcia Smith, president of Firelight Media. “The whole field is precarious, it’s precarious for everybody, unless you have a trust fund. The way it’s structured is precarious. So by definition, indie filmmakers don’t have regular income, don’t have healthcare, they don’t have a pension... all of these things stood out in bold relief in the pandemic, but they’ve always been true.”

Self-funding through personal finances and individual investments that need to be repaid account for about 30% of a typical filmmaker’s budget, equal to the 30% filmmakers report receiving through a combination of foundation and government grants, according to a 2018 study of documentary professionals from the Center for Media and Social Impact (CMSI) at American University.

“If you start to think about what it takes to develop a project on your own unfunded... it starts to reveal a lot of problems,” said Megan Gelstein, senior program director for Catapult Film Fund. “It starts to limit the number of voices that we can hear in the landscape...”

That precariousness was then exacerbated by COVID. Short-term impact during initial shutdowns has given way to a situation that one report by CMSI called “field-threatening.” A national survey of documentary filmmakers in April 2021 noted that two-thirds of all filmmakers reported significant losses from the pandemic, and nearly half of those reported those losses as profound.

Also impacting that landscape, in both positive and negative ways, are the streaming services. Once largely the purview of public television, documentaries are having a heyday with the likes of Netflix, Showtime, HBO, Hulu, and many others that are making numerous production and distribution deals with documentary filmmakers.

“I think that one of the things the streaming services have proven is that there is a major audience for documentary and nonfiction film,” notes Lauren Pabst of the MacArthur Foundation. “At the same time, I think that it can feel... like a closed system [with] just a select few receiving those opportunities.”

Smith of Firelight Media agrees: “There is a lot more money, but it’s pretty narrowly focused in relation to people and subject matter. It doesn’t mean that there’s a much wider lens on... our society, for example.”

With a few clicks of the remote, it’s not difficult to see what she means in terms of the impact market forces have had on what kinds of documentary topics receive commercial support: true crime, fashion, sports figures and music are in abundance; less so those more complex, challenging stories on more difficult topics. Algorithms increasingly dictate what documentaries are made, highlighting

what will appeal to more viewers rather than fostering any commitment to investigative journalism or content that serves a public good.

Science is the big issue for the Sloan Foundation. As the fifth largest film funder in the country, according to Candid data, it has a significant impact in the space. It supports film, both nonfiction and fiction, through its Public Understanding of Science, Technology & Economics grantmaking program. It is a longstanding effort to expand the public's understanding and embrace of science that has become increasingly critical in the face of rising science denialism, disinformation and a global pandemic.

“If I had to boil down what we do,” said Weber of the Sloan Foundation, “we’re trying to bridge the two cultures of science and humanities and we’re really trying to humanize scientists, mathematicians and engineers as human beings... it’s important to have more nuanced, complex depictions of science.”

Funder Strategies & Trends

An increasingly common strategy among foundations in the film funding space is a shifting away from funding individual film projects in favor of supporting partner organizations or intermediaries. Funders are also further expanding their support of filmmaking from primarily production grants to include the early research and development stages of a filmmaker's process, as well as addressing other gaps in funding, as well.

“It does seem to be the case that more funders are using intermediaries,” said Stehle of Media Impact Funders. “There are a lot of players who are both grantseekers and grantmakers... and I think it’s an area that’s really built up in our field. The doc space has the richest ecosystem of intermediaries.”

Grantee Spotlight



One of the older, more established of a growing number of POC-led filmmaker support organizations, Firelight Media's profile is on the rise. Founded in 1998 by veteran documentarians Stanley Nelson and Marcia Smith, Firelight stands out as a leader in the field in terms of the resources it has attracted and the breadth of its programs and services designed to nurture filmmakers of color. Firelight offers fellowships, mentorship and grant programs for emerging filmmakers of color, as well as for those more established in their careers.

As a result, independent filmmakers are more likely to receive funds regranted through one of the many intermediary organizations serving the sector than getting money directly from a major foundation. Many of these organizations are included among Candid's list of the top grant recipients in the country. They include the Sundance Institute, International Documentary Association, San Francisco Film Society (SFFilm), Women Make Movies, Firelight Media, Inc., Black Public Media, Bay Area Video Coalition, Kartemquin Films and Tribeca Film Institute. American Documentary, Inc. and Independent Television Service (ITVS) both receive significant government support through the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and focus on documentaries for public television. Others not on the list but included as partner organizations by the MacArthur Foundation are Working Films, the Center for Asian American Media, Latino Public Broadcasting, and the Southern Documentary Fund.

Strategically, funders support these organizations because of their deeper connections within the filmmaking community, their ability to provide varying kinds of support to filmmakers through the phases of the filmmaking process, and to move their funds to a more diverse pool of filmmakers, a strategy discussed in more depth in the Perspectives on Equity section of this report.

Filmmakers, or those seeking financing for film projects, are best off looking to these regranteeing organizations with their varying pools of funds supporting different phases of the filmmaking process as well as professional development for the artists themselves.

Grantee Spotlight
WMM
WOMEN MAKE MOVIES

Founded in 1972 by Ariel Dougherty and Sheila Paige with Dolores Bargowski, Women Make Movies has grown its collection to over 700 films that have screened in 86 countries. In the last five years, the organization has raised \$22 million and returned \$2.5 million in royalties. WMM is supported by a number of funders, including the National Endowment for the Arts, the Jerome Foundation and the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences.

There are multiple grant programs offered through the Sundance Institute, the largest and most prominent of these intermediary organizations, and one which also supports narrative, or feature films. Nonfiction filmmakers can look to the Sundance Documentary Film Program, established in 2002 with founding support from Open Society Foundations. Creative Distribution fellowships provide support and insights on creative funding, marketing and distribution, and are funded by the

James L. Knight Foundation and Cinereach, established specifically to fund film. The long-running Alfred P. Sloan Commissioning Grant and Fellowship supports the development of screenplays with scientific or technological themes.

The Sloan Foundation also supports scripted features that offer a fresh take on scientific, mathematical and technological themes through the Tribeca Film Institute's Sloan Filmmaker Fund and at Film Independent, among others.

At the International Documentary Association (IDA), the MacArthur Foundation seeded and continues as a major supporter of the IDA Enterprise Documentary Fund. The fund "supports in-depth explorations of original, contemporary stories that integrate journalistic practice into the filmmaking process."

Changes within the field of journalism can account for some of the growth in documentary production and increased funder interest. The contraction within the field in recent years has resulted in "a reduction in resources for local journalism and investigative work," said Pabst of the MacArthur Foundation, and has given rise to more independent journalistic work in the form of documentary film. In addition, she noted that with most all in journalism now using digital platforms, "what had not previously been a space for video is now opening up and (we're) seeing the real power that can have in terms of augmenting investigation or providing space for different viewpoints."

The process of creating a film can be long and arduous, as well as very expensive. The cost of production ranges anywhere from \$100,000 to \$2.5 million, according to Jenny Raskin, a documentary producer and director who currently heads up

Impact Partners, a film financing company that pools contributions of individual investors. The early research and development phase, she said, can run between \$30,000 and \$150,000, and is often some of the most difficult funding to get.

Beyond that, filmmakers typically need to invest in some version of a trailer to generate interest in order to attract potential funders. Funds are also needed for distribution, for entering festivals and campaigning for awards – two important ways to raise a film’s profile, and for impact campaigns, the advocacy and educational work that is sometimes conducted around a film to increase its effect on a particular social issue or public policy.

“It’s important for funders and donors to understand that there are these different entry points for their support,” said Stehle of Media Impact Funders. “The largest dollars are in production, then development, then research and impact.” Though there are funders and intermediary organizations that do support impact campaigns, Stehle said, more is needed.

Ellen Schneider, founder of Active Voice Lab, has spent decades in the documentary space and has been a pioneer around creating and leading impact campaigns. For funders who are more issue-specific, she noted, “we’re seeing the potential of creative media to move their issues forward... we’re seeing a trend toward the strategic funding of content... that lifts up not only the issues they care about, but the grantees they’re funding.”

Funders – both the private foundations and their regranting partners – are recognizing those gaps. Catapult Film Fund is unique in its focus on supporting filmmakers during the early development phase. The fund was created in 2010

with a specific focus on funding the creation of those early trailers, also known as rough cuts, that filmmakers can show potential funders. Films they supported include “Crip Camp,” “American Factory” and “Always in Season.”

Catapult, which supports about 20 projects a year, has since expanded its grants programs, but has stayed solidly focused on development funding, said Megan Gelstein, Catapult’s senior program director. In 2020, Gelstein said the Catapult team “surveyed the landscape” for gaps in funding and landed on research.

Inside Philanthropy August 2020 Survey

“There is growing attention in the documentary community on accountability to the communities and people featured in documentary films and to how resources are allocated by funders with or without this accountability in mind. More organizations outside of folks focused traditionally on the impact of social issue documentary are focusing on art and film as tools for social change.”

—Fundraiser, United States

“We took a step back and thought... these filmmakers are out there developing these projects entirely out of their own pockets, and that seems problematic on a myriad of different levels.” The research grants include six months of professional mentorship and are meant to prepare filmmakers for the next step in securing development funds.

Funding films as a recoupable investment is nothing new, but risking investment in more socially conscious documentaries is an emerging strategy as the market grows for these films. In response, some newer organizations that create investment pools as a way to share that risk are on the rise. Tapping that interest are such

organizations as Impact Partners in Los Angeles and Chicago Media Project (CMP), which create funding collectives in support of socially conscious film projects. Both offer programs for recoupable investing, while CMP also acts as a vehicle for individual philanthropy. Sundance also has its Catalyst program, which serves as more of an investor training program.

Impact Partners focuses on building a community of investors who benefit from the knowledge, expertise and connections that the organization's leaders bring to the table. "IP staff are in deep conversation with filmmakers at all times, have an open submission platform, attend markets and industry events, are always looking for projects, going to festivals," said Raskin of Impact Partners.

Impact Partners keeps their pool of investors capped at about 40 individuals who choose to support about 10 to 15 projects a year. Raskin says they look for projects that are addressing important social issues, but that also work as cinema. Investors do not expect a 100% return on their investments, she said, but are more focused on supporting challenging documentary films.

"We're blessed to have this very educated group of investors – we can all speak the same language," she explained. "We develop a shorthand based on experiences we've had on other films."

Perspectives on Equity

As noted in several previous sections of this report, addressing the way systemic inequities play out in the film funding process is a front-and-center issue for many working in this sphere of philanthropy. Equity issues also comprise the subject matter of films most likely to receive funding. But these concerns also speak to considerations about a

filmmaker's connection to a story or community, representation, and the ways in which the philanthropic sector and the general film funding infrastructure itself are working to address their own systemic inequities. Concerns about equity are upending the status quo, making space for new grassroots efforts and generally reshaping the landscape.

According to the Center for Media & Social Impact's 2018 Documentary Film Diversity Report, documentary filmmakers are still largely white and male. Of the documentary films that were nominated for Academy Awards in 2018, according to the report, "a whopping 80% were focused on social justice issues, but only 12% were produced or directed by people of color, and only 36% by women. The stories that are being told could use greater diversity, too."

Directing film funding to community-based or sector-specific intermediary organizations rather than to filmmakers themselves is, as previously discussed, an increasingly common way that funders work to reach artists from traditionally marginalized communities.

That acknowledgment of disparities was a major driver behind MacArthur's decision to decentralize its documentary funding by partnering with a larger group of filmmaker support organizations that regrant their funds and nurture diverse filmmakers at various phases of the development process and career stages.

All of the MacArthur Foundation's giving is guided by its overarching mission to build "a more just, verdant and peaceful world," including support for film through its Journalism & Media program area, one of its "enduring commitments."

“There’s really nothing like film to convey different perspectives and experiences,” said Pabst. “We talk a lot about how documentaries can show the human impact of public policies and otherwise abstract social issues... when you have the chance to see it play out in the lives of individuals, in families, in communities, it can bring a new level of understanding.”

Ellen Schneider, the founding director of Active Voice Lab, says, “Funders have realized that it’s one thing for us mostly white funders who know nothing about this field, or this craft, to say ‘oh, that’s a great story, here’s \$45 K,’ versus [you are an] organization who understands your community, here’s a grant.”

Program Spotlight

PRENUPS for PARTNERS

When it comes to communications between institutional funders and filmmakers, the guidelines are often clear. However, when individual donors become involved, communication can become murky. Ellen Schneider, founder of Active Voice Labs, created Prenups for Partners, which uses “principled guidelines extracted from real life” to help funders and their creative partners avoid common miscommunications. Prenups for Partners is supported by the MacArthur Foundation and the Whitman Institute.

It’s “more of a reparative decision that recognizes that there are disparities in who gets the money” and in what perspectives are being supported, she added.

At the International Documentary Association (IDA), Poh Si Teng, who served as director of IDA

Funds and Enterprise Program until early 2022, said that while IDA’s priorities have always been about supporting urgent and important stories from diverse filmmakers, after the murder of George Floyd, “it can no longer be business as usual. Now, we’re more intentional.”

Recent years have seen the addition of several grant programs designed to elevate new voices at IDA. The MacArthur-funded Enterprise Documentary Fund supports “inclusive filmmaking with funding that might otherwise be inaccessible to emerging filmmakers.” The XRM Media Incubator supports short, vérité documentary films from around the globe, with an emphasis on emerging filmmakers and new perspectives. The Logan Elevate Grants, an initiative of IDA’s Enterprise Documentary Fund and supported by a grant from the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, provides awards of \$25,000 to emerging women filmmakers of color whose feature-length projects integrate journalistic practice into the filmmaking process. And each year, the Pare Lorentz grant program focuses on different issues that were hallmarks of films by the Depression-era documentary filmmaker. In 2021, the theme was white supremacy, and according to Teng, attracted more entries and more diverse filmmakers than in any previous year.

Also beginning in 2020, IDA began asking all program applicants to address the filmmaker’s connection to the story being told. “It’s really about authorship,” explained Teng. She said applicants must explicitly address whether they are “insiders or outsiders” to a community, identify particular challenges in gaps of knowledge if they are outsiders, and address how they will address those gaps. Gelstein at Catapult Films said they, too, are now explicitly asking applicant filmmakers to address their relationship to their subject. Others

have also acknowledged the importance of addressing this issue of who tells what stories.

Exploring new ways to support a field that makes room for filmmakers with different perspectives, or with the lived experience of their subjects, is an ongoing effort by a number of large funders. The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation is another example of a large funder working to be more explicit and intentional about its commitment to supporting diversity in the filmmaking space. “No matter what you’re doing,” says Sloan’s Doron Weber, “you have to tell us how you’ll be attentive to diversity in all aspects of the project... not just in front of the camera, but who’s behind the camera.”

These efforts have also come as a response to the significant growth in recent years of community-specific filmmaker support organizations and collectives, many emerging from BIPOC communities and led by people of color. These include Brown Girls Mafia, Asian American Doc Network, the Undoc filmmakers collective, Black Public Media, Southern Documentary Fund, Bay Area Video Coalition, Center for Asian American Media, Latino Public Broadcasting, National Black Programming Consortium and Firelight Films. Women Make Movies and Chicken & Egg Pictures focus on women filmmakers. VisionMaker Media, which is funded by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting, supports films by and about Native Americans that are intended for public media.

Firelight Media is one of the oldest among the BIPOC-led regrantee organizations with a focus on nurturing filmmakers of color. Founded by the celebrated documentarian Stanley Nelson (“The Murder of Emmett Till,” “Freedom Riders”) and his partner Marcia Smith in 1998, Firelight has continued to grow and expand and is among the top

10 grant recipients for film funding, according to Candid data. In 2021, Firelight received a \$5 million grant from the Corporation for Public Broadcasting and PBS to support its Documentary Lab and two other programs aimed at increasing the diversity of public media content in partnership with local stations and PBS national series. Over a three-year period, the funding will more than double the number of filmmakers served by the programs, with an emphasis on underrepresented populations such as Native Americans and Pacific Islanders, and underserved regions including the South, Midwest and U.S. territories.

Collaboration Spotlight



A collective effort to lift up and nurture the critical ecosystem of POC-led documentary support organizations, Color Congress launched in January 2022 with an invitation to these organizations to apply for two-year funding from a \$1.35 million fund; later in the year, they’ll be invited to join the congress and direct over \$1 million in grants aimed at addressing field challenges. Supporters of the fund include the Ford Foundation’s JustFilms, the MacArthur Foundation, and the Perspective Fund.

Smith, who serves as Firelight’s president, said funding for Firelight’s programs has “accelerated with the pandemic and the George Floyd moment.”

“It’s gotten easier for us as an organization to attract funding,” she said. “I think because we’ve been around a lot of years, so we’ve gained visibility... and I think, frankly, people caught up to us.” She and Nelson started Firelight, she said, in recognition of how difficult the life of a documentary filmmaker is, and particularly those of filmmakers of color.

Firelight “is such a leader in the cultivation of filmmakers of color,” noted Lauren Pabst, the senior program officer for MacArthur’s Journalism & Media program, a long-time funding partner of Firelight Media. Also noteworthy, she said, is their support of mid-career filmmakers with their Willam Greaves Fund and nurturing of regional filmmakers with their Groundwork Lab.

The Ford Foundation, through its JustFilms program, supports “social justice storytelling and the 21st-century arts infrastructure that supports it.” Key granting criteria include: projects that present singular analyses of vital social justice issues; films that explore new documentary languages to address the concerns of our times; and filmmakers committed to engaging with the ethics and power dynamics inherent to media representation.

A new 10-year, \$10 million initiative – a partnership with the Ford, Compton and Skoll foundations – will focus on the Global South. IRIS

(International Resource for Impact and Storytelling) will fund organizations, research and the creation of moving image content itself – including filmmaking, but also virtual reality, social media videos, and more – to create a collaborative network of storytellers and civic leaders.

Justice and equity are prominent themes guiding the grantmaking programs through which the Mellon Foundation funds film. Immigrant rights, social and economic injustice, and the roots of nationalism are a few of the issues explored by films supported by the Foundation to Promote Open Society (aka the Open Society Foundation), the foundation established by George Soros which focuses its grantmaking on freedom, democracy, and human rights.

Whether the heightened attention from funders to address disparities in the documentary film field will, ultimately, result in systemic change remains to be seen. Those who have been in the field for decades remain hopeful, but skeptical.

“The industry is fickle. We’ve seen earlier phases of a lot of diversity programs, pipeline programs,” said Smith. “Those have come back to some extent, but we’ll see if anything changes with regards to access or the power imbalance.”

A tiny number of film funders are now focusing on people with disabilities, as both subjects and creators. As noted in a recent IP article on one such funder, according to recent studies, while 20% of the U.S. population has a disability, less than 2% of on-screen characters and 0.7% of writers are disabled. The Inevitable Foundation addresses the barriers to entry that disabled mid-level screenwriters face in the industry. The foundation’s

Advocate Spotlight



The Ruderman Family Foundation’s guidelines to audition actors with disabilities were adopted by Sony Pictures Entertainment, Paramount Pictures and NBC Universal in 2021. The foundation’s promotion of increased inclusion of people with disabilities in the industry was a five-year effort. Ruderman also initiated a pledge to create more opportunities for people with disabilities in entertainment, which was signed by a number of studio heads and actors including Glenn Close, George Clooney and director Peter Farrelly.

offerings include a talent sourcing service, a fellowship program, mentorship opportunities and advocacy. The foundation launched on January 1, 2021, and has received support from the Ford Foundation, the AT&T Foundation, the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, the [Disability Inclusion Fund](#), Netflix, Amazon and AMC Warner Media.

Another organization working in this area is Ruderman Family Foundation, which produced [Guidelines to Audition Actors with Disabilities](#). Those guidelines have been [adopted by](#) Paramount Pictures. In press coverage, Paramount Chairman and CEO Jim Gianopulos said, “Inclusion of individuals with disabilities is central to an authentic commitment to diversity in our industry and in our community. We are proud to adopt these guidelines as a crucial step in the ongoing work of prioritizing and furthering diversity and inclusion, both in the making and in the telling of the stories we share with audiences everywhere.”

“It takes more than one movie to move the dial,” says Peabody Award-winning documentary filmmaker Judith Helfand. “Change takes a long time. So change makers need multiple films that explore an issue from multiple perspectives. They don’t need just one movie. As we used to say, there’s no cinematic bullet.” It’s important not to gauge the impact of any single film in isolation. Specific projects tend to be part of a larger body of media work and activism. Helfand’s film, along with several hundred others, was made possible in part by the Fledgling Fund, a go-to source for independent filmmakers. Now, after 15 years and \$14 million, [Fledgling will no longer play that role](#). Fledgling’s founder, Diana Barrett, recently announced that the family foundation is spending down and focusing on safety net programs, significantly increasing its community-based funding to invest in organizations that are working on homelessness, health disparities and youth services.



“The whole industry is very oriented toward projects and not people. The whole field is precarious, it’s precarious for everybody, unless you have a trust fund. The way it’s structured is precarious. So by definition, indie filmmakers don’t have regular income, don’t have healthcare, they don’t have a pension... all of these things stood out in bold relief in the pandemic, but they’ve always been true.”

—Marcia Smith, president, Firelight Media

A Closer Look at Funder Types

Private Foundations

Private foundations have played a critical role in shaping and advancing the documentary space in the U.S. They recognized the power media played in important social movements and supported independent filmmakers and the infrastructure that grew up around supporting these creators. And many are responding to the emergence of a more diverse ecosystem that is working to raise up new voices and perspectives.

Similar to the MacArthur Foundation's shift to supporting a wider network of filmmaker support organizations, the Ford Foundation and others have followed suit. Of the \$20.29 million the Ford Foundation funded through its JustFilms program in 2021, \$15.29 million went to fund documentary organizations that are "working to support emerging creatives and diversify the documentary film industry at large." Among those groups were Black Star Projects, Third Horizon, and Sundance Institute, and newer grantees such as Color Congress, Cousin Collective, and Morpheyes Studio at Rochester Institute of Technology's National Technical Institute for the Deaf. JustFilms also granted over \$5 million to support projects, 73% of which went to filmmakers identifying as Black, Indigenous, or people of color.

As filmmaking technology advanced and became more accessible, the pipeline of filmmakers expanded and diversified, explained Schneider of Active Voice Lab. Early on, there were private foundations that "took notice," she said, and began funding documentary film not just through arts and culture grants, but through other

programmatic areas, like immigration. In addition to Ford, MacArthur and the Rockefeller foundations, she noted, the Nathan Cummings Foundation and Mott Foundation were other private foundations interested in supporting films addressing issues consistent with their missions.

"Private foundations were our first funders," said Smith of Firelight Media. "They got us started. They kept us alive. They've been our lifeblood from the beginning." She singled out Ford Foundation, MacArthur Foundation, Open Society, The Perspective Fund, the Nathan Cummings Foundation, as well as the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation, the Wyncote Foundation, Andrus Family Fund and Jerome Foundation as ongoing supporters of Firelight Media.

The Jerome Foundation focuses its giving on filmmakers in New York City and Minnesota. They provide two-year grants to early career artists as well as to organizations that develop, mentor, commission and/or premiere these artists.

The Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation does not have a dedicated arts program area, but has supported films that address the issues they care about, namely science, environmental conservation, patient care improvements and the San Francisco Bay. Films they've funded in recent years look at the discovery of CRISPR, patient safety, and a documentary about preparing for aging. Likewise, the John Templeton Foundation, which funds "research and catalyzes conversations that inspire people with awe and wonder," has supported a variety of film projects over the years, including a documentary about a meeting between Archbishop Desmond Tutu and the Dalai Lama and a documentary series about free speech and expression.

Other private foundations whose names appear in Candid data among the top givers for film include W.K. Kellogg, Hewlett, Knight, William Davidson, Bloomberg Philanthropies, Kenneth Rainin and Annenberg foundations.

Corporate Funders

Most of the philanthropic support from corporate interests in the documentary film space comes in the form of sponsorships, particularly – and most visibly – of film festivals.

Car companies, financial institutions, big tech, studios and media companies are all in the business of sponsoring film festivals. In 2021, one of the best known, the Sundance Film Festival, was sponsored by Acura, Adobe and AMC+, as well as Netflix, Amazon Studios and XRM Media, to name just a few of the 30-plus sponsors listed on their event website.

In 2021, the San Francisco Film Festival, noted as the longest continually running film festival in the country and operated by SFFilm, received sponsorship from Dolby, First Republic Bank, Apple, Netflix and Amazon Studios. The Spirit Awards, presented by Film Independent, has been sponsored by Genesis Motors North America.

Still, there is some corporate funding outside the festival and awards circuits. XRM Media has supported the Catapult Film Fund and created a grants program with the International Documentary Association (IDA). Hulu partnered with Kartemquin Films, a Chicago-based organization focused on nurturing emerging, diverse, midwest-based filmmakers, to create its Accelerator Program for Filmmakers of Color, an opportunity for alumni of the organization's acclaimed Filmmaker Development Programs.

Many corporations often give in charitable areas that have some direct or tangential connection to their business objectives, so it is not surprising that the huge film studios such as Universal Pictures, Paramount Pictures, Warner Brothers, Walt Disney Pictures (which are all now subsidiaries within large media conglomerates) are associated with corporate giving programs that provide funding for documentary and other nonprofit film-focused organizations. While the parent companies usually support a wide range of feel-good philanthropy focused on family, youth, education and the environment, a little digging uncovers considerable support for nonprofit film organizations.

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“Arts organizations face a severe threat in the current environment. With such a heavy focus on basic human needs, I don't think funders realize how critical the arts are to local economies, children's education, racial equity work, and the mental health of the country.”

—Fundraiser, Canton, Connecticut

The Time Warner Foundation's film grants support fellowships, workshops, residencies, festivals and other types of film-related productions and events. Diversity and support for the development of filmmakers from underrepresented groups appear to be grantmaking priorities. Over the past decade, this set of Warner properties has been sold and merged with many corporate entities, but as of 2022, the overarching media company is Warner Bros. Discovery, which owns HBO, Turner Classic Movies and countless other properties. The company's [partnership page](#) has a long list of mission-driven organizations it supports, including Transgender Film Center, American Black Film Festival, FascinAsian Film Festival, ImagiNative and HotDocs.

The foundation has funded full-tuition fellowships for underrepresented students at the American Film Institute (AFI) in Los Angeles and made a grant to support an online master class for young filmmakers at the Ghetto Film School in New York City. The foundation has also given to the Sundance Film Festival's Diversity Initiative, the Tribeca Film Institute, Film Independent and the Black Filmmaker Foundation.

Universal Pictures is a part of NBCUniversal, part of the Comcast media empire. Comcast's charitable support for nonprofit filmmaking is a bit harder to track down, but one example is its support for Echoing Green for the documentary special "Unwavering: The Power of Black Innovation," in partnership with Comcast NBCUniversal. Comcast gave \$1 million in the form of ten \$100,000 grants to emerging Black filmmakers through Comcast NBCUniversal to celebrate the one-year anniversary of "Black Experience" on its Xfinity network. Comcast also has a history of supporting university film schools.

Grantee Spotlight



Ghetto Film School was established in 2000 and has locations in New York City, London and Los Angeles. It offers an introductory education program for high school students and early career support for alumni and young film professionals. Each year the nonprofit serves around 8,000 people between the ages of 14 and 34 free of charge. Ghetto Film School supporters include corporate donors such as Dell, Dolby, and Google Creative Lab and institutional donors including the Herb Alpert, SAG-AFTRA, and Stavros Niarchos foundations.

Paramount Pictures is a subsidiary of Paramount Global (formerly ViacomCBS), which owns Showtime, CBS, MTV, BET, Comedy Central, Nickelodeon and countless other media properties. In one example of its support of documentary filmmaking, Paramount Pictures supported the release of Participant Media's "Waiting for Superman," a documentary examining the American public education system by following several students as they strive to be accepted into competitive charter schools such as KIPP, Harlem Success Academy and Summit Preparatory Charter High School.

The Walt Disney Company owns such properties as ABC, Marvel, LucasFilm, Pixar, ESPN and Hulu (controlling stake). This company's direct support of nonprofit film organizations or documentary filmmaking more generally is not clear from its giving history and available media stories. It does have a substantial corporate giving program, but no obvious support for nonprofit, mission-driven media.

The [Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences](#) is not technically a business corporation (it is a c6 trade association) but functions in many ways like a for-profit business, and makes grants for filmmaking with the FilmCraft and FilmWatch programs, which were created to "identify and empower future filmmakers from nontraditional backgrounds, cultivate new and diverse talent, promote motion pictures as an art form, and provide a platform for underrepresented artists." According to the academy, these programs "are on hold and will not be awarded for the 2022 cycle due to budget adjustments resulting from the COVID pandemic."

Community Foundations

Community foundations in general may not be primary sources of funding for nonfiction film, but there are a handful that provide significant funding, and signs indicate that this is a potential area of growth for those seeking film funding.

The Silicon Valley Community Foundation and the San Francisco Foundation rank among the top 10 funders of film in the country, according to Candid data. Also included are the New York Community Trust and the Philadelphia Foundation. It should be noted, however, that it can be almost impossible to disaggregate from community foundations' grant totals what funds originate from program funds where staff can be contacted and what are from donor-advised funds where the donor making the decision can't be approached.

Media Impact Funders believes community foundations have the potential to increase their media funding (which includes funding film). They have produced two separate reports recently exploring community foundation funding of media, finding that "scope of giving today is an encouraging sign that community foundations are recognizing the importance of supporting media as part of a larger strategy to build and sustain healthy communities."

"As an organization, we want to engage more of the community foundation world, both staff and their donors," said Vince Stehle, MIF's executive director. As media grants increase from community foundations, Stehle said the assumption is that much funding is directed through donor-advised funds, but that data is harder to come by. This makes it difficult to grasp the level of giving in this area by donor-advised funds compared to

discretionary funding by program staff. The goal is, he said, to better inform staff, board and donors to community foundations about film and media as a relevant area for philanthropic investment.

According to "Community Foundations and Media," one of the MIF reports, other community foundations providing significant funding for film and video include the Seattle Foundation, Marin Community Foundation, Cleveland Foundation, Chicago Community Trust, Greater Houston Community Foundation, and the Pittsburgh Foundation.

A look at The San Francisco Foundation's giving for film shows the organization has a broad interest, funding intermediary organizations and film festivals, but also providing significant support to individual film projects as well as impact campaigns. All funded projects did appear to be managed via a 501(c)(3) organization.

Program Spotlight

JustFilms

FORDFOUNDATION

JustFilms is part of the Ford Foundation's Creativity and Free Expression program and supports documentary film, video and emerging media projects focusing on timely social justice issues and reducing inequality. JustFilms awards grants to organizations, networks and individuals. Its film collection includes such films as *Neutral Ground*, by CJ Hunt; *Primera* by Vee Bravo; and *Users* by Natalia Almada. 3 Star LLC, Allied Media Projects and All is Well Pictures are among the program's recent grantees.

Since 2002, The New York Community Trust, another community foundation with a record of giving to film, has given more than \$1.7 million to the International Documentary Association and the Redford Center to create documentaries that “help Americans understand and take action on crucial issues.”

Some donors provide significant levels of support to film organizations through donor-advised funds managed by community foundations. While donors will give to organizations they are familiar with, they may also ask DAF managers within the managing organization to recommend organizations that may be a good fit. IP encourages leaders at film organizations to introduce their organizations to DAF fund managers at community foundations, which are more accessible than large financial services firms like Vanguard or Schwab.

Major Donors

Major individual donors tend to give to large institutions, and major donors supporting documentary film are no different. But wealthy individuals are also finding other avenues for supporting socially conscious nonfiction film, including equity investing and through the creation of their own independent production companies.

The biggest philanthropic gifts from wealthy individuals in recent years have gone to the country’s biggest film school at the University of Southern California. Major Hollywood players like George Lucas, Steven Spielberg, Robert Zemeckis and Jeffrey Katzenberg all have named buildings on the campus. George Lucas and Melanie Hobson gave a total of \$20 million to USC’s School of Cinematic Arts via gifts in 2015 and 2017 alone, which follows a gift of \$175 million to the school in 2006.

Kenneth Whitney, an investment banker, and his wife Elizabeth Reiko Kubota Whitney, an alumna and award-winning producer, made a \$10 million pledge in 2019 to the School of Theater, Film & Television at the University of California, Los Angeles, and have supported individual film projects as producers. The Academy of Motion Pictures Arts & Sciences has also attracted major gifts from Hollywood’s elite, including \$10 million from Steven Spielberg and \$25 million from David Geffen in 2013.

Another major donor is Jerry Perenchio's family foundation, which made a \$5 million commitment to fund the Perenchio Family Endowed Scholarship to “support diverse voices” at the American Film Institute’s AFI Conservatory. Perenchio got his start as a young agent at MCA before founding his own agency, Chartwell Partners, which was later purchased by International Creative Management. With Norman Lear, Perenchio formed T.A.T. Communications, which grew into a successful production and distribution company. In 1992, he purchased Univision Communications, and when a group of investors acquired the company in 2007, Perenchio netted \$1.1 billion. Perenchio was worth \$2.8 billion when he died in 2017. His foundation is just now [ramping up its giving](#).

Hedge fund billionaire and Mets owner Steven Cohen, along with wife Alexandra Cohen, are among top film funders through their family foundation, according to Candid data. Between 2014 and 2018, they donated some \$4.5 million in film-related grants, including gifts to Sundance and the Film Society at Lincoln Center. Michael Bloomberg also makes significant contributions in support of film via his Bloomberg Philanthropies. During that same five-year period, Candid data estimates his giving in film at \$4.5 million.

Actors Will Smith and Jada Pinkett Smith are active philanthropists through their Will & Jada Smith Family Foundation. Under their foundation's Arts & Education grants program, they have supported impact campaigns for documentary projects and partnered with the American Film Institute to create the Young Women in Film intensive, an eight-week filmmaking workshop that teaches high school girls pitching, screenwriting, producing, directing, cinematography, production design, and editing, in order to cultivate the next generation of female storytellers.

According to their website, their goal is to "pair every artistic project that a member of the Smith family is involved in with a corresponding change effort, such as a grant, a partnership or impactful content." Jada Smith, individually, is credited as a producer on at least two documentaries – the 2014 documentary "Free Angela and All Political Prisoners" and the TV documentary "Children for Sale," which explored human trafficking in Atlanta.

Some high-net-worth individuals have gone a step further than directing donations to film projects and organizations that support them. Billionaire Jeff Skoll, former eBay president, has his own prominent grantmaking foundation, but in 2004, created Participant Media, a film production company formed as a B-Corp focusing on socially relevant films, both narrative and nonfiction.

Abigail Disney, the granddaughter of Disney cofounder Roy Disney, has been producing socially conscious films and documentaries for years. She created Level Forward, an entertainment company focused on social change, and Fork Films, which develops and produces documentaries. Most recently, she, along with a partner and two siblings, produced "The American Dream and Other Fairy Tales," a harsh critique of pay inequity in corporate America with a particular focus on her family's company. Ms. Disney also directed the documentary.

Cinereach, cofounded in 2006 by Philip Engelhorn, the son of a German pharmaceuticals billionaire, is structured as a nonprofit grantmaking organization providing grants, awards and an annual fellowship, as well as in-house film production. The organization, which made \$2.8 million in grants between 2014 and 2018, according to Candid data, also has partnerships with other film development organizations such as the Sundance Institute and other film funding organizations.

And newer on the scene is Concordia Studio, funded by millionaire philanthropist Laurene Powell Jobs in partnership with the documentarian Davis Guggenheim, the Oscar-winning producer of "An Inconvenient Truth." The new company launched in 2020 with a quarter of the 16 slots in the 2020 U.S. documentary competition at Sundance, and in

Funder Spotlight



In 2006 Cinereach made its first grant and by 2011 it engaged in its first official full production film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, which was nominated for four Oscars. In 2016, Cinereach expanded its grantmaking with its Organizational Support and Audience Development programs. It continues its expansion and now focuses on different types of media beyond film. Cinereach has an extensive film database and its grantees include the Sundance Institute, SFFilm and Stockade Works.

2021, produced the celebrated documentary “Summer of Soul.” Concordia offers a fellowship program for directors, editors and producers that is designed to “foster diverse documentary filmmakers in the U.S. who demonstrate talent, voice, and commitment to story-driven nonfiction content.”

Further indication that the pool of potential major donors and recipients for film schools is quite broad is the gift of \$3 million from American film producer and philanthropist Regina K. Scully’s Artemis Rising Foundation, an organization that primarily produces documentary and narrative feature films focused on social justice issues. Her foundation is the founding sponsor of the Athena Film Festival at Barnard College, which showcases the stories of “strong, bold women leaders from all walks of life and [supports] the women and nonbinary writers bringing these stories to life.”

Intermediaries & Associations

The rich ecosystem of intermediaries building the field and supporting both nonprofits creating social-justice-themed media and independent documentary filmmakers may be unique in the world of nonprofit organizations. As has been documented throughout this report, particularly in the Funder Strategies and Perspectives on Equity sections, there is a burgeoning number of organizations to which foundations and donors increasingly turn as a way to support the field.

More than simply regranters, these organizations are helping to nurture a new generation of filmmakers with an eye toward diversifying and strengthening the field. Once dominated by such organizations as the Sundance Institute, the International Documentary Association and SFFilm, groups focusing on filmmakers from

marginalized communities – like Women Make Movies, Black Public Media, Firelight Media and the Center for Asian American Media – grew up alongside them and now attract similar levels of funding. Their growing prominence has also paved the way for new collectives and other organizations focused on women, LGBTQ and BIPOC filmmakers.

In turn, funders support these organizations because of their closer connections to filmmaker communities and their expertise around the complexities of the filmmaking process, including where gaps in funding might lie. In addition, these organizations have enabled funders to widen their reach into previously excluded communities. The recent launch of a collaborative initiative called Color Congress (see Spotlight), designed specifically to support the newer, less-resourced of these groups, is a sign of this burgeoning ecosystem’s importance to the field.

The primary organizations supporting funders of nonfiction, socially conscious films are Media Impact Funders and, to some extent, Grantmakers in the Arts. MIF is more specific in connection to journalism and documentary film in their stated mission to advance the field of media arts and public interest media funding.

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“The philanthropic sector must absolutely center every effort to combat white supremacy, anti-blackness, and anti-racism. More funding efforts must be made to support people of color, Trans people, and LGBTQ+ people everywhere, but most specifically in the US South.”

– Nonprofit Development & Strategic Planning Consultant, Oakland, CA

Fundraising Now

Throughout the pandemic, organizations devoted to filmmaking continued funding the creation of new work, while shifting how that work was shared with audiences and donors alike, relying more on virtual screenings and festivals. IP recently spoke with five organizations that fundraise for and support independent filmmaking; their overall mindset was that despite needing to be flexible and to pivot away from in-person events, backers who believed in the mission would stick with it and step up – and they did.

This mirrors the experiences of fundraisers in [other fields](#) we've spoken with over the past couple of years, [particularly in the arts](#), where development professionals have had to push themselves out of their comfort zones to cover their budgets, but ultimately kept the mission going thanks to devoted supporters. In fact, some even saw increases in revenue, an invigorated sense of purpose, and improvements to their operations that will continue.

Those we spoke with – Doc Society, Film Independent, Mid-America Arts Alliance and Women's Voices Now – are all behind-the-scenes players; most likely, their names are not familiar, except perhaps for American Documentary, which produces the popular "POV" series airing on PBS stations nationwide. And they all aspire to do more in terms of supporting the art of film and its makers; they're invested in the impact of the medium on global and social justice issues, the people most impacted by those issues, and all the voices who have been underrepresented in the genre in the past. In that sense, national and global events since 2020 have made their missions more relevant.

Direct funding or grantmaking for film creation is just one facet of the support they provide, comprising between 10% to 50% of their expenditures. Other major priorities include acting as conveners, facilitating networking and collaboration, and increasing access for filmmakers. Putting on festivals to showcase films and their makers, acting as a neutral adjudicator for awards and festivals, securing professional equipment and technical support, and offering ongoing educational programs that generate involvement with students and their communities comprise an equal, if not more important, segment of their support.

Steady fundraising growth. American Documentary's revenue was stable during the pandemic at about \$6 million. PBS (a powerhouse fundraiser itself) accounts for 40% of its funding, and private foundations and government grants account for 45%. Individual giving accounts for the other 15% and ranges from small, recurring monthly contributions to five-figure major gifts. While American Documentary had a small cutback during calendar year 2020–21, in 2022, it gained it all back and then some, with year-over-year growth coming from individuals as a result of a deliberate, and successful, development strategy, Executive Director Erika Dilday said.

The group is now having discussions about how they can make a bigger impact. One beneficiary, "POV," has a better-known name than American Documentary does, and while audiences relate to the show, Dilday is wondering how they can use Am Doc's reach, knowledge and context to do more in a changing field. "We are the RuPaul – we are edgy and cool. How can we use that? It is bigger than providing programming. We want to use our power in the industry to bring in more new filmmakers and further democratize access."

The 12-year-old Women’s Voices Now is working at a smaller scale, but has grown steadily for the last four years, reaching \$300,000 this year in service of its mission to amplify voices to advance women’s rights. The group provides access to 200+ films from 65 countries in 44 languages on its website.

Other groups saw their revenues increase in recent years, as well, including Doc Society and Film Independent, albeit from different sources. Since 2005, Doc Society has given direct grants totaling \$19 million and leveraged many millions more. Their fundraising strategies involve sustaining relationships and finding new ones by “being a great convener,” said its founding director, Beadie Finzi. The organization comprises separate legal entities in the U.K., Australia, the Netherlands and the U.S., and has a staff of 29 across three continents. “From parties to panels and conferences, we foster beautiful conversations and convert people and organizations from being curious to being engaged.”

Doc Society has been working to expand its pool of funders ever since the financial crash of 2008, following the advice of Professor John Bates of the London Business School, who serves on its U.K. board. The organization now has more than 50 organizational supporters, according to its website. Doc Society had a successful fiscal year 2021–22, with about \$9 million in revenue that allowed it to increase its regranting pool by 25% over the prior year, up to \$4.8 million.

The story of growth at Mid-America Arts Alliance (M-AAA) is even more dramatic. For starters, the organization is a partner in the U.S. Regional Arts Resilience Fund, receiving \$10 million for COVID relief from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, boosted by a gift of \$150,000 from the Windgate

Foundation. Then came a transformational, unrestricted gift from MacKenzie Scott in June 2021. Its usual annual budget is \$5 million, with \$350,000 going to grant awards for artists of all types, including filmmakers. In fiscal year 2021, grants grew 355% to \$5.78 million.

“Thanks to the COVID relief money, in the midst of this awfulness, we found ourselves in a space where we could help, and coincidentally, our bottom line went up,” said Christine Bial, director of the arts and humanities grants program. The strategy at M-AAA does not prioritize direct solicitation to individuals because they never want to compete with the artistic organizations they support, Bial said.

Pooled Funder Spotlight



Doc Society aims to “bring people together to unleash the transformational power of documentary film.” Based in London and New York, Doc Society has awarded nearly \$11.4 million in grants to filmmakers around the globe. Its major partners include the Ford Foundation and British Film Institute and the Skoll, Wyncote and Oak foundations are among its many supporters.

The recent big gifts have expanded the reach and influence of M-AAA, and they intend to leverage and maintain that growth. To that end, President Todd Stein has been meeting extensively with the other five regional arts organizations across the country to increase collaboration and impact.

Evolving donor bases. While revenue has held steady for Film Independent, the makeup of its donors is changing. During COVID, many corporations held back on giving and sponsorships, said Senior Development Director Kate Walker

D'Angelo. "But the entertainment industry stepped up in a meaningful way – the studios, the streamers and the content creators overall, as did our 2,000 FI fellow alums from around the world. You want to know that the community has your back, and they do." In addition, by December 2021, Film Independent's membership, which is made up of about 50% film lovers and 50% filmmakers, grew by 19% over the prior year. Walker D'Angelo attributes that to the virtual screenings Film Independent was offering to members.

Women's Voices Now (WVN) had been relying on family foundations and public grants for up to 70% of its budget. Beginning in 2018, fundraisers targeted county, state and national grants in support of expanding a program that teaches filmmaking to teen girls in underresourced neighborhoods. As a result, they grew their overall bottom line and shifted the group's donor constituency.

In 2021, when many foundations paused their giving and some government grants became more uncertain or delayed because of the pandemic, they added emphasis on individual giving. With the guidance of a consultant, the group's executive

director began a one-on-one personal cultivation and engagement program with donors, including direct asks, and upgraded their CRM to make communications easier. Development Director Soizic Pelladeau added that the WVN board, which recently expanded to seven, has been meeting their fundraising commitments throughout.

Going online. Taking events online presented fundraisers with new challenges, but in some cases, new benefits. For M-AAA, Zoom meetings with partner organizations across the region meant they could spend more time together, seeing each other once a month instead of every couple of years, in some cases.

Film Independent's signature event, the Spirit Awards, normally raises \$3 million, a big part of the organization's budget. It went virtual in 2021, with reductions in expenses and revenue. In March 2022, the awards returned to an in-person format, which was a challenge of its own, said Jennifer Murby, director of individual giving. "It was hard to predict how people were going to respond. There were capacity limits and testing requirements that created limitations and were a huge expense. It ended up going well, but the process was full of surprises and uncertainties."

When it comes to presenting the cinematic experience, Walker D'Angelo said going virtual for two years was a challenge; now, the group needs to recalibrate the balance between virtual, hybrid and in-person, and be sure the format they're presenting is appropriate and impactful for the current moment.

To counterbalance the decline of event revenue, Film Independent grew its matching gift campaign, which started as a modest year-end appeal in 2018.

Fundraiser Spotlight

FILM INDEPENDENT

In 2021, Film Independent raised nearly \$1.7 million through fiscal sponsorship, which supported 229 projects. It also awarded close to \$1.1 million in cash and production services grants to filmmakers. Established in 1981, Film Independent works to "champion creative independence in visual storytelling" while supporting artists "who embody diversity, innovation and uniqueness of vision."

In 2020, the board gave an \$80,000 matching gift. Film Independent repeated that success in 2021 with a \$75,000 challenge, vigorously promoting the opportunity through email, newsletters and social media ads to its 7,500 members, 70,000 subscribers, and 1 million online followers.

With the guidance of a consultant, Women's Voices Now also conducted a successful matching gift campaign in 2021, the group's first. They intended to pool donations to raise \$25,000 for the match, but instead, an angel stepped up with the gift. That campaign, promoted primarily through email, garnered \$60,000 from individual donors, five times as much as individuals had given before, Pelladeau said.

Doc Society's signature event is Good Pitch, where it brings filmmakers together with foundations and philanthropists, as well as, policymakers and NGOs, campaign strategists and media outlets. Since 2007, its held 54 events in 15 countries. Rather than halt the convenings, Doc Society adapted and brought the stakeholders together online. "We learned a lot in the process, and it afforded great inclusivity," Finzi said. "We're planning to resume the in-person event later in 2022, but we are not abandoning the virtual gathering. We've learned how to do it well, and there are profound economic and environmental benefits. We're leaning into the virtual for the long term."

Moving past the pandemic and looking to new strategies. Women's Voices Now is on track for 2022 and is doubling down on increasing individual giving, launching two programs. The first is aimed at converting annual givers into monthly givers, which they are rolling out in person in June at their first-ever donor appreciation event. Details of the second program are still being

finalized, but will be invitation-only with a minimum gift of \$2,500. Among the benefits under consideration is a seat at the Women's Voices Now table so the donor may add their own voice and insight on the organization's programs and services.

Film Independent is in the midst of creating a new five-year strategic plan. "The world is emerging from the dark, and we have changed," said Walker D'Angelo, adding that recovery will bring a whole new set of challenges. "While we succeeded in keeping programs and relationships stable, now is the time to move past stabilization and look to growth to support independent storytellers."

American Documentary's Dilday is looking forward to celebrating POV's 35th anniversary in person with donors in June. "We recognize these have been difficult years. Our aim in being together again is to excite them. When you convey that excitement to potential donors, they'll come along with you."

Sharing that point of view, M-AAA's Stein puts it this way: "While virtual platforms allow for flexibility, there is no replacement for meeting in person and making a human connection. A shared experience is key when speaking to the essential qualities of the arts."

Inside Philanthropy

August 2020 Survey

"The philanthropy sector must improve dramatically to meet this moment in history: increase the percentage of annual give outs! Fund grantees with multi-year general operating support. Fully commit to bringing more people of color into leadership in the field and get rid of tedious grant proposals and reports."

—Development & Strategic Planning Consultant, Oakland California

An Analysis of Opportunities & Challenges

Whether we are currently experiencing a true golden age of social-justice-themed media and documentary films seems to depend on one's point of view. On the surface, there may seem to be more opportunities for nonfiction filmmakers than ever before. But one need not scratch deep to reveal the continuing systemic inequities and the sheer unsustainability of documentary filmmaking as a career.

Despite the fact that streaming services have shown significant interest in documentary films in recent years, the impact on the filmmaking community generally tends to be more narrow, both in terms of subject matter and makers.

“There still is a relatively narrow slice of filmmakers who are sought after” by streamers, says Marcia Smith of Firelight Media, and the group is not very diverse. The industry, she noted, “is risk-averse” which results in issues about who they're willing to take a risk on financially.

The importance of the expanding and increasingly diverse ecosystem of organizations and collaboratives working to nurture BIPOC, queer, and female filmmakers cannot be stressed enough. While a growing number of foundations are supporting these groups, they remain woefully underfunded. It's also encouraging to see so much emphasis being placed on addressing inequities in all aspects of film funding, but that attention needs to continue and be encouraged as others enter the space.

With a burgeoning of new collectives of filmmakers that are organized quite differently than traditional film organizations, funders should look to find

ways to fund these more loosely organized groups made up of filmmakers who also engage in organizing and advocacy for their communities. Brown Girls Mafia, Asian American Doc Network and the Undocumented Filmmakers Collective are just a few examples of their growing universe.

Creating change in the way film is funded is one of the most critical issues facing the field. Many see the need for a system-wide shift away from a sole focus on funding projects to funding filmmakers themselves. Marcia Smith says she would like to see funders create insurance pools and develop other creative ways to make independent filmmaking a more sustainable career path.

Programs designed to help filmmakers at different stages of their careers are also a valuable approach employed by a number of filmmaker support organizations for addressing the difficulties these creators encounter as both emerging and established artists. Both Firelight Media and Impact Media have launched programs to nurture producers; support for other key roles in the filmmaking process could also be beneficial. But again, the problem comes down to the very nature of how documentary filmmakers are required to patch together funding from an array of sources — for each and every film they take on.

“Fundamentally, at the core of our industry is the question of sustainability,” said Gelstein of Catapult Film Fund. “We, as an ecosystem, need to figure out how to make sure filmmakers are not going into debt to get their films made. That is just wrong... We have somehow accepted this, and we really will benefit when we figure out how to change it, because it's not right.”

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¹ Based on available grant recipient data from Candid. Excludes government organizations.

Feedback?

The State of American Philanthropy is an ongoing project. Each SAP brief will be updated periodically to integrate new information, additional data and evolving perspectives. This brief was originally posted to Inside Philanthropy in October 2022. It has not yet been updated. If you have comments or information you'd like to share with us, please email us at managingeditor@insidephilanthropy.com.