



**EQUITY FIRST:**  
**Transforming**  
**Journalism and**  
**Journalism**  
**Philanthropy in**  
**a New Civic Age**  
**FINAL REPORT**



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

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Journalism as an industry is in a unique cultural moment.

**As many communities rely less on traditional media for their news, the landscape of the industry is shifting.**

Digital media has provided an opportunity to “democratize the news,” but it has also put pressure on journalism to constantly churn out relevant content even while the journalism industry constricts, making it difficult to prioritize communities and their needs, especially in the context of a global pandemic.

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**...by the year 2045, people of color will make up the majority of the U.S. population.**

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As ad revenues have significantly declined, many local news organizations are significantly overwhelmed, and historically marginalized communities are desperate to not only receive the critical information needed for survival, but also make key stakeholders understand the significant challenges faced by hard-to-reach constituents.

**Given the changing demographic of American communities (by the year 2045, [people of color will make up the majority of the U.S. population](#)),** there is an opportunity for journalism organizations to reach audiences who have been historically ignored by the mainstream narrative. Now more than ever, the public has embraced credible journalism as an essential and vital service, and many news organizations have a unique chance to win the loyalty of new audiences who have not engaged with their content before.

As Pew’s [State of the Media](#) reports that newsrooms continue to struggle financially, many newsrooms are [pivoting towards nonprofit models for philanthropic support](#). Despite the fact that philanthropic dollars seem to be growing for journalism, monetary support for DEI has been lackluster. According to the [Democracy Fund and Dot Connector Studio](#), of the \$1.1 billion in philanthropic support that went to journalism between 2013 and 2017, only around 8% went to DEI-focused efforts.

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

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## Funders have an opportunity to move both the field of philanthropy and the industry of journalism forward.

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its evolving communities. We're seeing promising examples of this through explicit language in requests for proposals for grants that include prioritizing serving marginalized communities from [Google News Initiative](#) and COVID-19 rapid response funds sponsored by the [Facebook Journalism Project](#) and the [Chicago COVID-19 Journalism Fund](#) led by the Robert R. McCormick Foundation in Chicago.

Internalizing DEI within grantmaking and journalism institutions requires a shared commitment. Some stakeholders perceive the concept as radical and will not take action until they see evidence that their peers and colleagues are prioritizing DEI.

A number of journalism funders are making progress on their own DEI journeys. The establishment of dedicated program officers and entire programs specifically focused on DEI indicates that the concept is gaining prominence within some philanthropic institutions. The next step is to normalize DEI as a priority across the field, so that it is seen as central to the work of journalism grantmaking.

## THIS PROJECT

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

Quotations that appear in this document are taken from these conversations and from the learning session.

# GLOSSARY OF KEY CONCEPTS IN PHILANTHROPY AND EQUITY

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## Diversity

The presence of people with different experiences, identities, and perspectives. Diversity answers the question, **"Who is in the room?"**

Journalism:

- *Who is covering the stories?*
- *Who are the sources?*
- *Who is being interviewed?*

Philanthropy:

- *Who is hired as a program officer, grants manager, etc.?*

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## Inclusion

The creation of an environment of involvement, respect, and connection, where a richness of ideas, backgrounds, and perspectives is harnessed to create value. Inclusion answers the question, **"Who gets to be heard?"**

Journalism:

- *Who decides what stories to cover?*
- *Who decides who gets to cover stories?*

Philanthropy:

- *How much authority do program officers have?*
- *Does that authority come with a funding cap?*

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## Power

The ability to influence others, including decision-makers; access to resources; and the ability to define reality for yourself and others.

Journalism:

- *Who decides what narrative to use?*
- *Who decides who the audience is?*
- *Who defines "real journalism"?*

Philanthropy:

- *Who decides how much money to give?*
- *Who determines the application process?*
- *Who sets the funding requirements?*

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## Equity

The elimination of barriers to access, advancement, and opportunity based on social or cultural factors.

Journalism:

- *Which communities are getting the news?*
- *Is the news about them? Is the news being created with them?*
- *Are they better informed?*

Philanthropy:

- *Are underserved communities getting support, or are the white-led institutions that claim to serve these communities getting support?*

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## Cultural hegemony

The idea that one group of people (historically, in the United States, white men) and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions are taken for granted as dominant and superior to people of color and their ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and actions. **This culture often shows up in workplaces through the following values that are deeply entrenched at the level of “common sense”:**

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### Paternalism

the tendency of those with power to think that they are capable of making decisions for (or in the interest of) those without power. When decision-making is clear to those with power and unclear to those without it, those with power often don't think it important or necessary to understand the viewpoint or experience of those for whom they are making decisions.

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### Worship of the Written Word

the tendency of an organization to value written communication without valuing or taking into account other ways in which information could be shared. Those with strong documentation and writing skills become more highly valued, even in organizations where ability to relate to others is key to the mission. In such cases, the belief emerges that there is one right way to do things, and once people are introduced to the right way, they will see the light and adopt it.

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### Hoarding of Power

the perception of power as limited, such that those with power feel threatened when anyone suggests changes to organizational processes, seeing suggestions for change as a reflection on their leadership.

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### The Myth of Objectivity

the belief that there is such a thing as “being objective” while ignoring the cultural and societal values that undergird conceptions of objectivity.<sup>1</sup>

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### Urgency

a bias towards acting immediately (such as in hiring decisions), which makes it difficult to take the time necessary to be inclusive, encourage democratic and/or thoughtful decision-making, think long-term, or consider consequences. This frequently results in sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results.

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1. Kenneth Jones and Tema Okun. *Dismantling Racism: A Workbook for Social Change Groups*. ChangeWork, 2001.

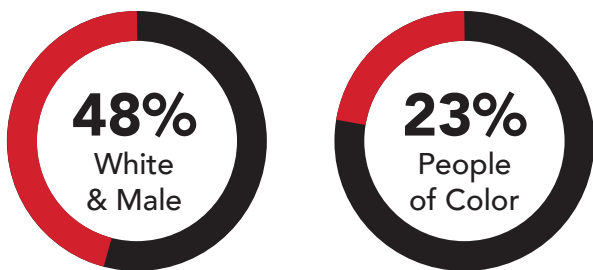
# CHALLENGES WITH UTILIZING A DEI LENS IN JOURNALISM PHILANTHROPY

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

**“Every demographic should be accurately represented by the news, served by the news, [and] given chances at being part of staff, ownership, & leadership.”**

Journalism values and principles are grounded in accuracy: lifting the truth, taking power into consideration, and amplifying unheard voices and stories. Yet data from sources such as the annual [ASNE diversity survey](#) and research institutes such as [Pew](#) suggest that newsrooms continue to struggle with diversifying staff. Employees who are white and male comprise 48 percent of newsroom staff, even though they are only 34 percent of all U.S. workers.<sup>2</sup> Conversely, people of color comprise 23 percent of newsrooms despite representing 35 percent of all U.S. workers. **Newsrooms that do not accurately reflect their changing communities risk offering coverage that lacks context and nuance — losing credibility with the very audiences they are trying to reach and serve.** For example, according to research produced by [NORC at the University of Chicago](#), we know that audiences of color (namely African American and Latinx audiences in the 18-34 age range) report a high level of dissatisfaction with the portrayal of these communities in mainstream media.

### Percentage of Newsroom Staff



2. Michelle Polyak and Katie Donnelly. *Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Journalism: What Funders Can Do*. Democracy Fund. October 2019.



As a result, communities of color often reject mainstream news sources as meaningful sources of information to help make critical civic decisions. This dissatisfaction is validated by countless studies that document the harm the [news media has perpetrated against communities of color](#) by covering them inaccurately. Meanwhile, [disinformation campaigns have disproportionately targeted communities of color](#), exploiting the trust gap between newsrooms and communities.

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**“Time and the way our newsrooms are resourced [are] our greatest obstacle[s]: the shrinking of the industry combined with the world of digital and all the requirements that are placed on journalists now. It leads to a lack of depth. But even when we were fully staffed, there was a lack of commitment to covering communities of color.”**

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**It’s time for philanthropy to invest in ways that uphold the values and principles of journalism for a new American landscape.**

Philanthropy is missing out on critical opportunities to incentivize journalism to reframe its relevance as a civic institution for changing communities.

Furthermore, if the principles of journalism include holding power accountable, and if journalistic foundations are powerful institutions with deep influence over how journalistic organizations sustain their work, it’s critical for journalism funders to hold their own decision-making accountable in ways that uphold the very ethics and values they support.

## **2. Change is difficult because journalism & philanthropy reinforce each other’s hegemonic cultures.**

Having the power to determine whose stories are told and how, while using the guise of objectivity to insulate journalism from community accountability, perpetuates unjust gatekeeping practices that abide by journalistic norms and criteria that have historically been established in white-led newsrooms. These practices favor cultural norms that may dismiss or exclude the lived experiences of communities of color. For example, performance in the journalism industry is still largely measured by indicators such as number of journalism awards earned, prestige, or ability to present via the written word to a niche audience of powerful stakeholders. Many of these indicators contain selection and evaluation criteria set within the context of white supremacist culture.

**Other significant inequities in journalism are language access and cultural competency (in other words, the ability to work from a deep understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of a community of color).** For example, one program director noted the low number of journalists who speak a language other than English, citing experience as one of those journalists:

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**“I went out on a lot of crime stories because I could communicate with people. This is unfair — if you can’t communicate with the people you’re reporting on, how can you actually report on them? And to those of us who speak other languages, it creates a burden.”**

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Given the current hostile climate for undocumented immigrants, linguistic and cultural competency are crucial: journalists need to understand how to identify trusted community leaders and responsibly source information from people afraid to disclose information that might endanger their families.

As in the field of journalism, power tends to be concentrated in white culture across the field of philanthropy. Which organizations and individuals should receive funding, how much funding, and how long funding should last are all decisions predominantly made by white leaders and boards. This concentration of power is mirrored in the field of journalism, where decisions about what news to cover and what counts as “journalism” are made by a small and largely homogenous group of people, a group also over-represented among both journalism funders and grantees. These realities jointly produce an environment in which white culture is continually shaping and reinforcing a narrow worldview that is increasingly out of touch with other communities and that impedes innovation for the journalism industry.

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**“Trusted advisors in my leadership structure tend to be people [my leaders] worked with when they were in the journalism field, which means they often don’t see barriers like I do.”**

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As with most institutions, newsrooms and journalism funders often find that diversity is the simplest DEI principle to address first. Because the metrics for diversity are relatively straightforward (e.g., counting staffers of color, new hires of color, etc.), it is easy to track progress. One can add more people of color, women, and young people to staff or even at the leadership/advisory levels without interrogating any underlying structures or assumptions.



**Journalism funding is primarily geared towards large organizations**, which are typically white- and male-led and have strong pre-existing networks.<sup>3</sup> Foundations are less likely to support numerous organizations within the field simultaneously, which necessarily pits organizations against each other for funding. Too, small organizations are typically connected to fewer funders overall. DEI-focused organizations are almost entirely dependent on philanthropy for funding, with grants making up over 70 percent of their revenue. (Note that this does not include the POC-owned for-profit institutions currently unsupported by foundations; these include a number of non-English-speaking outlets.)

Nonprofit and philanthropic boards are statistically much whiter, older, and wealthier than the general population, which means that the decisions about substantial funding support are made by demographics who have always had disproportionate power. Program officers and grant managers at journalism grantmaking institutions expressed frustration at their limited ability or discretion to move dollars toward critical needs or to stop funding white-led, well-resourced outlets. One program director shared that at their organization, a program director could only approve changes below \$75,000. A vice president could approve changes up to \$250,000, and anything over \$250,000 needed board approval. Our research suggests that program officers are attempting to prioritize DEI in organizations that are still in the experimental stages of utilizing an equity lens in grantmaking.

Layering on the additional work of explaining the hows and whys of an equity lens to executive management and boards not only impedes change; it can also cause burnout among program officers trying to mobilize this change.

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**“We have fewer levers to pull when it comes to inclusion, and that is so tied to culture. We have a hard time making change internally and asking for change externally.”**

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Since senior leadership teams in philanthropy tend not to be diverse (in particular with regard to socioeconomic backgrounds), executives tend to have a narrow, homogenous understanding of what DEI is and why it matters. Said one program officer, “We don’t all see the same barriers, or [we] have different ideas about the magnitude of the barriers.... Trusted advisors in my leadership structure tend to be people they worked with when they were in the journalism field, which means they often don’t see barriers like I do.” The historical (and current) overrepresentation of white men in senior leadership of news organizations continues to shape journalism philanthropy’s perspective, and that influence, in turn, crowds out deeply important other perspectives. Until philanthropic leadership diversifies its own ranks and its typical cohort of trusted advisors, philanthropy will continue to reinforce a white-centered culture, internally and externally.

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<sup>3</sup> Michelle Polyak And Katie Donnelly. *Advancing Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in Journalism: What Funders Can Do*. Democracy Fund. October 2019.  
See note 3.



Philanthropic culture has historically perpetuated power concentrated at the top with **decision-making under tight control**. This is illustrated by opaque decision-making and communication, including a lack of clarity regarding how foundations are held accountable by their grantmaking investments. For example, program officers will often try to function as advocates for grantees, and when barriers to grant approval arise, the reasoning behind them is not always clear to grantees. This illuminates a possible disconnect between the decision-makers who are further removed from the work and the program officers who are more directly connected to the field and to the grantees.

Another way in which white supremacy culture pervades philanthropy is through a “benevolent donor, white savior complex” sensibility that discourages self-determination and removes the agency of grantees. While funders may be well-intentioned in trying to advance diversity, equity, and inclusion goals in journalism, this can prove toxic when they are not able to receive criticism or disagreement from the grantees to help inform and improve their grantmaking. Grantees who attempt critical honesty as expert practitioners in the field risk being portrayed as ungrateful. The communities impacted then suffer the consequences—not only the possible loss of funds provided by the grantmaking institution, but conceivably the loss of support from other institutions.

Finally, both journalism and journalism philanthropy struggle to retain staffers of color, which leads to concern that the work put into advancing DEI goals in organizations will stall or become erased once staffers of color leave the organization, particularly if the work has not been structurally integrated into organizational processes.

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

The concepts of equity and inclusion are defined by who holds power within an institution and how that power is used and shared. A foundation may have a staff that is diverse in terms of racial and gender representation. However, diversity falls short of inclusion if such representation does not extend to the leadership. When the majority of decision-makers are white, distance forms between a foundation’s work, its recipient communities, and its impact.

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

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

# FIVE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUNDERS TO REVOLUTIONIZE JOURNALISM

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

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

One program director said that their institution “doesn’t fund need, we fund opportunity.” That distinction creates an implicit value judgment: “opportunity,” like innovation, is exciting and carries no negative connotations while “need” is not exciting and carries the implication of failings or wrongdoing on the part of the powerful. But “need” should be framed as an opportunity to inform and engage communities in new, relevant ways. Indeed, communities that have the most need for high-quality, culturally relevant news—rural communities, communities of color, non-English-speaking communities—often have the most opportunities for true innovation.


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**“Communities of color always know the future because we live in the future. Stuff hits us first... so when companies are figuring out what’s going on with machine learning and AI, we’ve already experienced the harmful effects of that.”**

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If funders have grant dollars earmarked for innovation (and with a higher threshold for risk), they should consider intentionally investing in new POC-led projects and organizations. Discretionary budgets can be used as a creative tool to incrementally move dollars in pursuit of equity. Inviting new voices and leadership previously ignored by philanthropy will inherently support innovation and new ideas for a struggling industry that desperately needs reform.

Another strategy that can be used by funders not yet ready to invest in POC-led institutions is that of **funding a philanthropic intermediary**. If a traditional foundation does not yet have the capacity or expertise to responsibly fund journalism organizations utilizing a DEI lens, sometimes an intermediary



can be a solution to take on the perceived risk of investing in unfamiliar ways. For example, the Ford Foundation mobilized other funders showing an interest in supporting people-of-color-led news organizations beyond their existing portfolios to create the [Racial Equity in Journalism Fund](#), housed at Borealis Philanthropy.

This allowed for funders to invest in DEI and journalism in partnership with an intermediary already grounded in racial equity, with the intention that the fund might show traction and success enough for other funders to learn from and join the effort.

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

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

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

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

News organizations struggling to diversify their organizations will often pitch grant support for fellowships and internships targeting journalists of color. These initiatives are often short-term and low-paying, without any sort of full-time employment guarantee. Instead of only investing in these stop-gap programs that do not structurally increase access to viable employment opportunities for journalists of color, funders should provide general operating support prioritizing newsrooms that have a proven track record of attracting and retaining journalists of color. This includes identifying newsrooms led by managing editors of color and meaningfully activating affinity groups, such as the National Association of Black Journalists and the Native American Journalists Association, who have already been cultivating next-generation newsroom leaders.



### 3. Apply Data with an Intentional Equity Lens

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

#### **BELOW ARE A FEW SUGGESTED NEXT STEPS ON WHAT TO DO WITH THE DATA.**

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##### **Audit Existing Portfolios to See Where Inequity Persists: Evaluate the Alignment of Impact to Targeted Communities**

When performing a landscape analysis to identify areas of greatest need, it's important to disaggregate the data along lines of race, income, gender, and other characteristics that reveal persistent inequities invisible in aggregate data. It's also useful to document learnings from this research to explain how the research informs and, if applicable, pivots the foundation's theory of change and how the foundation will prioritize its grantmaking.


For example, the Field Foundation of Illinois [produced a report](#) explaining the community listening events it held to inform its media grantmaking strategy. On its website, Field clearly outlines how identifying areas of greatest inequity and listening to community stakeholders informed its new media grantmaking strategy, demonstrating how using an intentional DEI lens can shape investment strategies.

In this process, a foundation should also audit existing portfolios, examining existing grantees, evaluating whether the organization is reflecting its target communities, and determining what percentage of funds go to white-led organizations that do not reflect target communities. This data should be shared across the foundation to gain an accurate picture of investments. Because so much of grantmaking can be relational and grants can be tethered by long-lasting professional relationships between funders and grantees, it can be challenging not to fall into a defensive stance protecting existing portfolios. The audit, then, brings a data-based lens to illuminate grantmaking bias when it undermines equitable solutions. Such an audit can also highlight those who are deeply committed to the work, no matter how uncomfortable, that brings about brave, transformative change.

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##### **Evolve Entry and Accountability Requirements Using a DEI Lens**

The true goal of grantmaking is to empower organizations and communities, particularly those who are under-resourced or in some way marginalized. Unfortunately, too many grantmaking structures and policies actually disempower applicants and grantees.



This happens either through the application process, which can be burdensome, confusing, or unevenly applied (Smaller, less-networked, and typically POC-led organizations have to follow a strict protocol, while larger and more networked organizations can often bypass certain steps.) or through reporting requirements that force the funder and grantee into a transactional relationship, rather than one built on trust, connection, and support.

Many would-be grantseekers of color in journalism are not eligible to apply for grants because many media entrepreneurs of color are for-profit organizations. This phenomenon is due to structural necessity, as barriers often prevent people of color from having the necessary start-up capital and access to pursue nonprofit status. For example, the paperwork and capital required to apply for nonprofit status (upwards of \$2,000 and more for legal fees) can deter people of color, as can unfamiliar mainstream systems to apply for grants. Additionally, many grantseeking webinars and informational sessions are only offered in English, deterring potential immigrant or non-English-speaking grantseekers.

Furthermore, in traditional philanthropy, we frame “safe bets” as well-known brands or organizations vetted or vouched for by other legacy institutions, newsroom leaders, or peer funders. We also tend to expect sector-wide shared language around goals, outcomes, objectives, and evaluation of impact, when in reality media entrepreneurs may frame impact and progress indicators very differently than do journalism philanthropies.

Entry requirements could be grounded in prior research that would map the

news organizations and sources already trusted by community residents to make healthy civic decisions. This could include investing in small business opportunities and media entrepreneurs of color who care about community and economic development in a context where collective, healthy civic decisions are being made. This could be accomplished in partnerships with place-based funders like community foundations that have missions and mandates to move communities forward.

Funders often assume that “good ideas and grantseekers will find us.” This is counterintuitive to how many journalism funders prioritize proactive high-quality information-seeking, believing that it yields better civic engagement than passively subscribing to the idea that “if the news is important enough it’ll find us.” Utilizing an equity lens in a highly inequitable system, then, requires funders to seek people who are doing strong social impact journalism work but are not seeking grants because they have not already been inculcated into mainstream philanthropy norms. Funding viability criteria should include models that have deep, proven connections with their communities and that have heretofore sustained themselves without mainstream philanthropic support.

Foundations have the power to incentivize grantees to center DEI in their own institutions. Grantee requirements could include a board whose members are representative of impacted communities, a commitment to publishing in a non-English language, or an accessibility scan of website and published materials. Existing grantees may be given a grace period, but the message should be clear: you must match our values if we are to continue working together. A foundation should document how stringently it enforces these requirements versus other requirements that may be burdensome for smaller, less-resourced grantees.



Since research shows that many existing journalism grantees are white-led, **accountability metrics for white-led organizations should perhaps differ from those led by people of color.** For example, the Philanthropic Initiative for Racial Equity has [many useful recommended accountability guidelines for white-led organizations](#) that include determining how these organizations have connected POC partners directly to funding sources (including sub-grants and introductions), the quality of relationships with POC-led organizations and communities of color, and the percentage of general operating funds that have been directed towards equitable, structural change in leadership and programming decisions.

This specifically addresses the question many funders ask: “What kinds of resources can we offer to white-led organizations to become more equitable?” In essence, we shouldn’t offer more resources to well-resourced organizations regarding how to utilize a social justice lens in their mission-driven work. Instead, we should directly fund POC-led consulting firms and experts to build capacity and expertise while holding white-led organizations accountable by measuring their intentional pursuit of the difficult learning required to execute an equitable strategy. These are all straightforward, answerable data points to collect.

Additionally, it’s important to evolve the way funders collect data for evaluation from organizations for nuanced impact tracking. For example, Borealis Philanthropy, which houses the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund, is moving away from written reports to phone or audio interviews so that program officers can offer follow-up questions.

This way, their reports can provide co-learning rather than functioning solely as an accountability requirement for grantees that goes unnoticed or ignored by the funder.

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## Redefine Impact

New metrics, like those used by Chicago-based civic journalism lab [City Bureau](#), can reframe the measurement of impact. Rather than designing indicators around advertising goals and the attention economy (such as eyeballs on content), City Bureau now more accurately measures how well it serves its social mission: “to create more equitable, responsive and impactful media.” This includes a nuanced system of identifying outcomes under categories such as civic knowledge, generative relationships, information economy skills, and information system resilience.

Again, for white-led organizations, defining and measuring impact might look different. For example, impact might include determining the actual benefit to communities of color by building the white-led organization’s capacity to utilize a DEI lens. Well-resourced, white-led organizations should be able to articulate the intended impact of elevating important issues that affect communities of color. Likewise, they should be able to outline how they will track progress toward these goals.

In PRE’s Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens, a Native American organizer stated the importance of relationship as an impact indicator for systemic change: “Philanthropy needs to assess their investment based on how the relationships develop: are [the relationships] growing stronger, in a good way, with mutuality, reciprocity, respect — a values-driven, spiritually-driven strategy.” These goals are aligned with good journalism and trusting relationships built between communities and journalists.

Co-designing with grantees on impact-evaluation frameworks is a critical challenge in journalism; the industry tends not to welcome evaluation as a useful information-gathering strategy. Rigorous program evaluations with relevant indicators will necessitate considering organizations in the context of communities served, which in turn means the grantmaking institutions should have a rich understanding of grantees' target communities and stakeholders.

## 4. Equalize the Funder-Grantee Relationship

As we noted earlier, the relationship between funders and grantees is often inherently inequitable. Because foundations have the most power in this dynamic, the onus must be on them to share that power with grantees. Foundations should ask themselves: How easy is it to navigate the grant application process? How responsive are our program officers? Are they willing to meet somewhere that would be more convenient or comfortable for the grantees? How clear and transparent is our communication about grantee expectations?

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

- When communicating with a grantee about expectations, be transparent and honest. Some standards and financial language come from a

corporate, patriarchal view, and a less-resourced grantee who is new to working with foundations will appreciate candor and context.

- Grantees not only value dollars, but access to networks, including wraparound services to help them successfully execute on deliverables.
- In journalism philanthropy in particular, foundations should caution themselves against being too paternalistic around grantees' fund deployment and allocation.
  - » We must stop being extractive toward the prospective grantees and people of color we use to gain access to innovation. We should pay people for their time and expertise through contracts or grants rather than simply assuming that an invitation to an exclusive meeting without any real decision-making power is enough compensation. Such meetings are not inherently a privilege to attend, and they can consume valuable time, energy and resources for less-resourced people.
- Avoid giving oxygen to whisper networks. Peer funders often share notes on grantees and heed other funders over practitioners, which fosters distrust between practitioners and funders and indeed can be an indication of white supremacy culture. Whisper networks also get in the way of authenticity, honesty, and productivity between stakeholders. Communicate to grantees directly and with integrity.

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

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

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

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**Participatory grantmaking structures decision-making around the constituents most impacted by the allocation of resources. This can manifest in various ways:**

- Collecting feedback from the constituent groups most affected by the issues when drafting a theory of change, and sharing logic models when completed for additional feedback.

- Forming an advisory committee of leaders who are independent of journalism philanthropy to help source new ideas and prospects and weigh in on grantmaking decisions.
- Co-designing a feedback loop utilizing reliable, credible sources grounded in community needs and continuing to iterate grantmaking processes and protocols.

Those in funder roles should additionally assess how they create conditions for honesty from grantees and solicit feedback from community constituents who are not seeking funding or support (thereby receiving responses from situations where the power differentiation is not as pronounced and eliminating barriers that can prevent critical feedback). The analysis should also consider how this feedback informs and improves future grantmaking decisions.

Organizations should own their power not to accept grants that conflict with their own integrity and DEI values. Foundations can be incentivized to change their practices through external pressure, especially if confronted by the perception that their investments are irrelevant in the larger picture of advancing journalism. Speaking truth to power and aligning those values with journalism and philanthropy are moral imperatives that collectively can inspire foundations to support DEI values.

As a part of our research, we learned that larger foundations struggle with how to engage with people-of-color-led organizations. Some POC-led organizations feel an inordinate amount of pressure not to fail, or have felt burned in some way in the past by interacting with funders, or have been confused by the obligation to navigate needs and wants of funders that do not necessarily align with

the interests of impacted communities. Additionally, POC-led organizations often struggle with more obvious communication issues, such as lack of resources for infrastructural capacity.

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**“When the body of work that we care about is under attack, we should be marshalling all the appropriate fervor that mobilizes us to resource the work in order to convince other funders to step in.”**

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Program staff can leverage networks of funders who are also working hard to reform journalism grantmaking that utilizes a thoughtful DEI lens. Given that funders tend to listen to their peers, imploring other funders to share in growing best practices for equitable journalism grantmaking meaningfully inspires progress. For example, the Democracy Fund has revamped its Engagement Journalism Lab content to write explicitly on equity in journalism funding, which opens the doors for other program staff at foundations to advocate for change within their own institutions. Another example is the way a large, influential journalism funder like the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation has written about diversity and structural change in newsrooms, accompanied by big bets in supporting organizations led by people of color -- creating huge signals for the industry at large. That kind of public leadership can create more impact and influence than even grant dollars themselves.

## IN SUMMARY

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

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

This guide was inspired by a community of program officers who will not wait any longer for meaningful change and want to empower the next generation of journalism leaders of color to deploy their assets to construct new ways of engaging with a changing public. While these changes may not be seen during their lifetimes, we dedicate this guide to the members of the cohort who risked their own social and professional capital to pave the way for others who might follow. We express deep gratitude for the support and bravery of the members of the cohort who shared with us their data and thoughts.

# RESOURCE GUIDE

- American Press Institute: African-American and Hispanic Perceptions on News Coverage  
<https://www.americanpressinstitute.org/publications/reports/survey-research/african-american-and-hispanic-perceptions-coverage/>
- Center for Effective Philanthropy: Nonprofit Diversity Efforts: Current Practices and the Role of Foundations (2018)  
<https://cep.org/portfolio/nonprofit-diversity-efforts-current-practices-and-the-role-of-foundations/>
- Color of Change: A Dangerous Distortion of Our Families (2017)  
[https://colorofchange.org/press\\_release/new-research-news-media-black-families/](https://colorofchange.org/press_release/new-research-news-media-black-families/)
- Columbia Journalism Review: Editors By the Numbers; Race/Ethnicity in Newsrooms  
[https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/editors-by-the-numbers.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/editors-by-the-numbers.php)  
[https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/race-ethnicity-newsrooms-data.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/race-ethnicity-newsrooms-data.php)
- Dotconnector Studio and Democracy Fund Report on DEI and Journalism Funding  
<https://www.democracyfund.org/publications/advancing-diversity-equity-and-inclusion-in-journalism-what-funders-can-do>
- Equity in the Center's Awake to Woke to Work Framework (2019)  
<https://www.equityinthecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/Equity-in-Center-Awake-Woke-Work-2019-final-1.pdf>
- Grantmaking with a Racial Justice Lens: A Practical Guide (Rinku Sen, Lori Villarosa, 2020)  
<http://racialequity.org/grantmaking-with-a-racial-justice-lens/>
- Media Impact Funders: Journalism Grantmaking (2019)  
<https://mediainpactfunders.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Journalism-report-for-web-hyperlinks-1.pdf>
- Operationalizing Equity: Putting the Annie E. Casey Foundation's Racial and Ethnic Equity and Inclusion Framework Into Action (2017)  
<https://www.aecf.org/resources/operationalizing-equity/>
- Race Equity and Inclusion Action Guide: 7 Steps to Advance and Embed Race Equity and Inclusion Within your Organization (2015)  
<https://www.aecf.org/resources/race-equity-and-inclusion-action-guide/>



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

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**Special thanks to Manami Kano, Yna Moore, Jacob Nelson, Josh Stearns and Anita Varma for their review and contributions to this document.**