

Inside Philanthropy

[ISSUES](#) [PLACES](#) [BLOGS](#) [JOBS](#) [GRANTFINDER](#) [HELP](#)

“All the Tools in Our Toolbox.” What’s Next in Philanthropy’s Fight Against Misinformation?

Mike Scutari



JEFFERSON CITY, MO. POST-ELECTION, TRUMP SUPPORTERS ACROSS THE COUNTRY PROTESTED, ECHOING DISINFORMATION ABOUT VOTER FRAUD. RYANZO W. PEREZ/SHUTTERSTOCK

Follow the Money!

Want to get inside funders' heads? Sign up for our email updates.

Featured Jobs

Find Jobs

Development Director

As Chief Justice John Roberts swore in President Joe Biden on the steps of the U.S. Capitol, journalism funders and nonprofit leaders focused on combating misinformation may have caught themselves thinking that maybe, just maybe, the nation had turned some sort of symbolic corner.

If they did, the feeling was short-lived.

“Many people may be tempted to breathe a sigh of relief and move on, feeling that we’ve survived this episode and no longer need to worry about the negative impact of disinformation,” said Vince Stehle, executive director of Media Impact Funders, a membership organization that advances the work of funders whose work serves the public interest. “But they would be mistaken.”

To his point, on the same day armed insurrectionists stormed the Capitol—[fueled by the “Big Lie”](#) that Trump had actually won the election—*The Guardian’s* Lois Becket sounded the alarm about the proliferation of [COVID-19 vaccine falsehoods](#) on Facebook and Instagram. The problem of misinformation in today’s media landscape clearly runs much deeper than Trump and his supporters.

Stehle was one of the many journalism leaders and foundation representatives I spoke with in the aftermath of the January 6 attack on the Capitol in an effort to take stock of what funders have been doing, and what they should be doing, to confront this problem. [Yesterday’s piece](#) explored their thoughts on the sector’s pre-2021 efforts to curb misinformation, as

Other, - **Precious Project Inc.**

Development & Communications

Manager (International)

New York, NY - **Lewa Wildlife**

Conservancy

Philanthropy Manager

Palo Alto, CA - **Rosewood Family**

Advisors, LLP

Associate Director of Philanthropy

Palo Alto, CA - **Rosewood Family**

Advisors, LLP

Director of Philanthropy

San Diego, CA - **inewssource**

Post a Job

More jobs

Powered by **ymcareers™**
by community brands

well as its shortcomings. This second installment will focus on what comes next.

Surveying the philanthropic sector, Rick Edmonds, media business analyst for the Poynter Institute, told me he didn’t see an “obvious opening for foundations or concerned benefactors—except to chip away with studies and yet-to-be-invested experiments.”

Other respondents generally corroborated Edmonds’ perspective. The following post-January 6 funder action items look a lot like the ones that preceded it, albeit with an even greater sense of urgency. Sector leaders did, however, call for more aggressive and creative approaches that have been perhaps undervalued by funders to date, especially around philanthropy’s role as a [Big Tech watchdog](#).

“We’re up against the most powerful corporations in the world,” said Vera Franz, the deputy director at the Open Society Foundations’ (OSF) Information Program. “Let’s use all the tools in our toolbox.”

Here’s what leaders in this space recommend.

Support local news

“Disinformation is the weed growing in the empty lot left by the decline of local news, and building back local news across our country is essential to replace disinformation with fact-based journalism,” American Journalism Project CEO [Sarabeth Berman](#) told me.

“Not only would the rebuilding of local news be a powerful counter-force of fact-based information relevant to our lives, but Americans trust their local

news outlets, and therefore, they play a powerful role in dispelling misinformation.”

Practically every respondent offered some of the following variants on this theme. Local news “tends to be more consumer-oriented and less polarizing, or less ‘blue vs. red,’” said Poynter Institute President Neil Brown.

It acts as “the bulwark against misinformation and disinformation,” said Lenfest Institute for Journalism Executive Director and CEO Jim Friedlich. It exposes “phony, false-flag local sites” that are proliferating the vacuums that are [local news deserts](#), said Poynter’s Edmonds.

Local news also minimizes the tendency for individuals to “view each other as political stereotypes instead of neighbors with common interests,” said Report for America co-founder Steve Waldman. And according to Andrew Sherry, Knight’s VP of communications, it “can provide a shared basis of fact, which is essential for democratic debate.”

Double down on independent journalism

Stehle cited [2019 Media Impact Funders](#) research showing that foundation giving to support journalism quadrupled from 2009 to 2017, rising from \$69 million in grants from just under 300 foundations to more than \$255 million in grants from over 1,200 funders in 2017.

“But there is much more room for local and regional foundations to do more to support quality information,” he said, directing me to his

organization’s virtual 2020 [Journalism Funders Gathering](#), which explored emerging strategies to counteract misinformation. “In the aftermath of this tense chapter in our lives, we hope that more foundations will recognize their potential to contribute to an informed electorate.”

Respondents universally agreed. Franz told me that Open Society Foundations operates “on the assumption that only aggressively countering disinformation is not enough. That is why we fund networks of independent, investigative journalists and locally based journalism organizations that produce credible, verifiable information and build trust with local audiences.”

OSF grantees creating what Franz calls “fact-based accurate information” include [ProPublica](#), the Center for Investigating Reporting, the Centro de Periodismo Investigativo in Puerto Rico, the *Chicago Reporter*, Voice of San Diego, the Global Investigative Journalism Network, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, the Investigative Journalism Hub in Southern Africa, and Bellingcat.

Franz encourages grantmakers to “provide core funding that covers salaries and operational costs. This allows news outlets to play, to be agile and nimble, able to respond to the needs of the moment.” (Editor’s Note: IP’s Michael Kavate has reported that OSF is undergoing a “major transformation,” which includes the merger of its information and digital rights program with its project on journalism. [Get the details here.](#))

Other respondents called for greater support for independent journalism. When asked how funders can best combat misinformation moving forward, the Lenfest Institute’s Friedlich said, “Job one is to continue to fund real, independent, fact-based journalism,” while Save Journalism Project’s Nicholas Charles said, “Fund the media that tells the truth!”

Fund training and tools

Paul Cheung, director of journalism and technology innovation at the Knight Foundation, said its leadership is committed to equipping journalists with the necessary training and tools so they “can adapt to this increased threat and manage this scourge to our democracy.”

For example, Knight has “invested in technologies that can provide instant notifications of fact-checks during live events such as speeches and debates, as well as developing a tool that will help journalists more easily monitor broadcast and cable television election coverage by automatically transcribing spoken words and other elements into text.” The funder has even begun to explore tools that can [help journalists detect “deepfake”](#) or altered photos or videos.

“However,” Cheung said, “that alone won’t mitigate online misinformation. Who can fund media literacy for different segments of our populations so that they can distinguish facts from fiction? Who can equip community leaders with resources so that they can prevent their community from a misinformation attack?”

Support communities of color

Joshua Stearns, director of the Democracy Fund’s Public Square program, told me that funders “should listen to and support Black, Indigenous, and people of color, who have spent decades working to build a more just and inclusive media.”

Stearns cited Media Justice, Color of Change and Free Press as organizations that “have been tackling these complex issues from multiple fronts—holding media and tech platforms accountable, helping develop grassroots media, and building community resilience to misinformation.”

Funders “need to understand that misinformation operates within an ecosystem of struggling local media, and part of what needs to happen is to strengthen local journalism so that it is not so easy for bad information and false news to fill the gaps,” he said. “Programs like the [Racial Equity in Journalism Fund](#) at Borealis Philanthropy and the NewsMatch program are fueling important growth in that sector.”

Explore “new storytelling approaches”

“I think it’s worth acknowledging the pathways funders can take outside of traditional journalism,” said Media Impact Funders Communications Director Nina Sachdev. “There’s a need to support and research new storytelling approaches, and to understand that those approaches might differ, depending on who you’re trying to reach, so it’s also important to understand the social science research behind what motivates people to take certain actions, or not.”

Sachdev cited a philanthropically supported documentary series called “[Let Science Speak](#),” which

“is engaging audiences (especially Fox News audiences) that are bombarded by anti-science rhetoric and falsehoods.”

Fighting disinformation is “a multi-pronged approach that should include efforts to elevate diverse voices, within journalism but also in other sectors (tech, science, etc.),” she said. “Trusted messengers are a critical component to successfully delivering accurate information to persuade skeptics—we’re seeing this now with the vaccine rollout.”

Hold Big Tech accountable

Social media giants “wield more power than most governments over public life, but [with limited oversight](#) and virtually no consequences if they do not play by the rules,” said OSF’s Franz.

They have also made only half-hearted attempts at addressing the root causes of the proliferation of online misinformation. “The platforms are still reacting with Band-Aid policies instead of surgical procedures needed to fix this problem, like detoxing their algorithms,” [Fadi Quran](#), campaign director for the human rights group Avaaz told Vox in the aftermath of the Capitol attack.

If anyone’s going to force Big Tech to adopt fundamental reforms or provide watchdog groups with access to their algorithms, it will be [representatives in Congress](#). But respondents told me that philanthropy has a critical role to play in holding the industry’s feet to the fire.

“We are working with civil society groups to create accountability for the platform companies,” Franz said. This work includes “challenging the surveillance-based business model of these platforms, which exacerbates hate speech and disinformation, and contesting the platforms’ market dominance, which gives them arbitrary power no private corporations should have over democratic discourse.”

For example, OSF supports what Franz called “community-based groups to stop the spread of hateful misinformation by forcing the social media platforms to stop playing host to these lies.”

Franz pointed to the Stop Hate for Profit campaign, which engaged over 1,000 advertisers last summer to pause advertising on Facebook in protest of its refusal to [take down a post by Donald Trump](#) saying that “when the looting starts, the shooting starts.” Franz called it an “unprecedented engagement of corporate and other advertisers as a tool.” On January 12, Facebook announced the hire of Roy Austin to be its first VP of civil rights, a key coalition demand.

While these developments constitute progress, “the onus remains on civil society to police disinformation and to flag and request removal of hateful and inciting content,” Franz said. “This cannot remain the case when platforms hold all the cards and have vast wealth and expertise to draw on. We need systemic reforms that will address the current information asymmetry and massive power imbalance.”

Advocate for legislative reforms

Speaking of systemic reforms, writing in the aftermath of the Capitol attack, IP’s Philip Rojc argued that one of the reasons that few funders have prioritized assertive democracy work that combats structural racism and economic inequality was “philanthropy’s customary caution around [anything that smacks of politics](#), even though civic engagement and movement funding are more than fair game for foundations.”

The same can be said for funders operating in the journalism space. However, if funders wish to dip their toes in more activist waters, they can throw their weight behind some of the many reforms being circulated in Washington, D.C.

“Antitrust regulation of platforms now also seems possible, if not likely,” said OSF’s Franz. “These efforts draw on scholarship, policy development and advocacy we’ve supported, by grantees including Open Markets Institute and the American Economic Liberties Project.” OSF also seed-funded a movement in Europe that successfully advocated for its data protection law, Franz said.

Other proposals to combat misinformation include a [bipartisan commission](#) to address the problem and provide recommendations, an [Honest Ads Act](#) that applies broadcast election ad transparency rules to the internet, an industry-wide digital code of conduct overseen and enforced by the FTC, and more public funding for independent public service media.

Bankroll a “PBS of the internet”

At the beginning of this piece, I mentioned that Poynter’s Rick Edmonds predicted that the new year

will find funders taking a closer look at “yet-to-be-invested experiments” to better combat misinformation.

Writing in [the Washington Post](#), Karen Kornbluh, who directs the Digital Innovation and Democracy Initiative at the German Marshall Fund, and Rutgers University Professor Ellen P. Goodman proposed a particularly ambitious experiment—the creation of a “‘PBS of the internet’ to strengthen our civic infrastructure and ensure a strong online supply of trustworthy, nonpartisan scientific and election information.”

The recommendation looks a lot like journalist [Matt Taibbi’s](#) recent call for a “new media channel, the press version of a third party, where those financial pressures to maintain audiences are absent.” He envisions a system that is unaffiliated with any party, employs a Fairness Doctrine-inspired approach to exploring alternative points of view, and operates on a distribution model that isn’t reliant on Big Tech.

While such a vision of a new media system that stresses what Taibbi calls “credibility over ratings” doesn’t explicitly mention philanthropy, such support could be part of the mix.

In the meantime, funders will allow themselves to feel some sense of relief knowing that Biden is in the White House. Then the feeling will pass and they’ll go back to work.

“With the bitterly fought campaign amid a thick haze of misinformation, we have just come through a near-death experience for our democratic republic,” Stehle

said. “Philanthropy has an important role in making sure we never face that again.”

Featured



“All the Tools in Our Toolbox.” What’s Next in Philanthropy’s Fight Against Misinformation

“The ‘Big Lie’ That Fanned the Flames.” Philanthropy’s Role in Fighting Misinformation

“Untapped Opportunity.” A New Playbook Helps Nonprofit Outlets Boost Earned Revenue

“Patient Capital” Has its Limits: Another Outlet Folds After its Main Funder Cuts Off Support

January 21, 2021

0 Likes

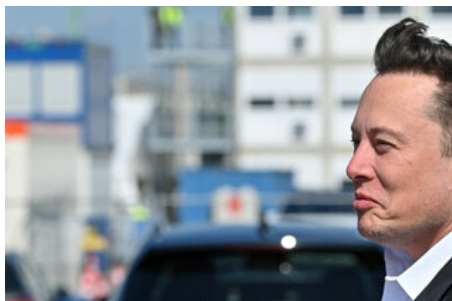
Share

Inside Philanthropy - Main

Behind a Funding Push for Boys

Subscribe for Unlimited Access

EDITOR'S PICKS



Now the World's Wealthiest Person, What Kind of Megadonor Might Elon Musk Become?



Foundations Are Making an Epic Push to Tackle Housing Affordability in the Bay Area



An Inside Look Into a Music Funder's Democratized Grantmaking Process



Five Funders That Played a Role in the Georgia Senate Runoffs



Philanthropy Awards, 2020



"A Wake-Up Call to All of Us." Inside a Chicago-Based Pharma Company's Racial Equity Giving



With Billionaire Backing, 30 Mayors Rally Around Guaranteed Income



"An Essential Resource." A Foundation Tackles the Digital Divide, Starting in its Own Backyard



With \$4.2 Billion in COVID-Relief Grants, MacKenzie Scott Cements Her Place as a Top Giver



Follow the Money. Who's Funding What & Why

SUBSCRIBE TO IP

[About](#)
[Contact](#)
[Help](#)
[Login](#)
[Privacy Policy](#)
[Terms of Use](#)


Follow the money! Get our daily email

Sign Up