

## Chapter 1

### Why Fund Media By Karen M. Hirsch

There is little doubt that media—film, television, radio and the Internet—are central communication tools of our time. An average American adult views nearly sixty films a year, listens to the radio sixty hours per month, spends roughly ten hours a week on the Web, and watches television more than four hours a day. Combined that comes to about four full months a year. Yet, despite the degree to which media shapes our daily lives, culture, politics and society, most foundations do not fund it.

Why? After all, the business of disseminating ideas is essential to the philanthropic community, and every foundation has communication goals. Why wouldn't *every* foundation want to invest in the most powerful communication resources available? Joan Shigekawa, associate director of the Creativity and Culture Program of the Rockefeller Foundation, puts the question this way: "Throughout the twentieth century, media has been one of the dominant creative expressions in American culture. Rather than 'why fund media' ...[the question] would be, 'why *not* fund media?'"

Foundations offer plenty of reasons. Some are based on widespread misconceptions. Others are real challenges. The goal of this report is to dispel myths, examine obstacles, offer a few solutions, and share some successes. Our hope is that foundations that routinely declare in their guidelines "we don't fund media" might reconsider their position after reading this report.

The word "media" applies to a vast array of forms. We are here examining independent media, i.e., media created by producers and artists who work outside corporate or commercial structures. These producers are not employees of television or radio stations, Hollywood studios, or AOL. They are not creating works on commission or assignment. By its very nature, "independent media" generates stories that would otherwise go untold and gives voice to perspectives otherwise absent. It pushes the boundaries of art, and it can also be wielded as a tool for social change.

In the pages that follow, we present seven case studies. These stories are told from dual perspectives—that of the mediamaker and that of the foundations that supported their projects. It was our intention to get *inside* the media-funding process. We hope these stories will help grantmakers see the incredible potential of media funding, provide grantseekers with insight into how foundations choose projects, and enable both parties to better understand one another.

The case studies reflect a wide variety of funding interests. Some of the program officers interviewed in these pages manage funds allocated for media, but most do not. Program goals among these nontraditional media funders run the gamut from environmental protection to nonprofit capacity building, from job training to community development,

from urban renewal to the arts. “We’re beginning to see a much wider nonprofit organizational commitment to media as a modality of organizing and community engagement,” says John Santos of the Ford Foundation, which awards grants for media not only through its Media, Arts, & Culture Program but also through its two additional programs—Peace & Social Justice and Asset Building & Community Development.

Before we turn to our case studies to demonstrate the many reasons *to* fund media, let us look at the most common reasons foundations give for *not* funding media. These are roadblocks that have become entrenched over decades, but they can be overcome, if you know how.

### **Road Block #1: Sticker Shock**

The most common reason for not funding media is sticker shock. When funders think of a documentary, they generally think of what they’re most familiar with—something produced for television. A typical PBS documentary can cost several hundred thousand dollars per hour for production alone. Outreach and promotion can easily add hundreds of thousands of dollars to the project cost. It can be difficult for a foundation to consider these numbers when the same dollars could cover the operating budget for a medium-sized nonprofit for an entire year.

What are the remedies for sticker shock? How do the foundations that fund documentary productions, even small foundations, address this concern?

**Broaden the Definition of Media.** “Media” does not have to equal “million-dollar documentary for PBS.” One of our primary goals in this report is to offer an expanded definition of media. Other highly effective media formats often have project budgets under \$50,000, such as activist videos (see Chapter 3), radio documentaries (see Chapter 4), and youth-produced media projects (see Chapter 8).

**Compare Like and Like.** Grantmakers should resist the inclination to compare a documentary budget to the operating budget of a nonprofit. When evaluating media budgets, it is important to compare like and like. Specifically, look at budgets for projects equivalent in scope, comparing public television documentaries to other public television documentaries, activist videos to other activist videos. (See page X “How to Read a Budget.”)

**Consider Small Grants.** Just because a production budget might be \$150,000 or more does not mean a foundation cannot make a small and significant grant. In Chapter 6, documentary filmmaker Arthur Dong (*Licensed to Kill*) and several program officers who support his films discuss the importance of small grants, even for amounts under \$10,000. In Chapter 5, we explore how seed grants under \$5,000 have launched influential documentaries like Allie Light and Irving Saraf’s *Dialogues with Madwomen*, which won the Freedom of Expression Award at the Sundance Film Festival and was broadcast on PBS’s *P.O.V.* and Ellen Bruno’s *Sacrifice*, another Sundance and *P.O.V.* screener, which brought international attention to the issue of child prostitution.

## Road Block #2: Media Gatekeepers

A second and very real concern is about media gatekeepers and distribution. Foundations fear that media projects they fund might not be able to get out into the world. The fact that independent media originates outside the domain of broadcasters and other presenters—which is at times its strength—can present a challenge at this stage. What if the project is completed and never airs? How do media funders address concerns about distribution?

**Work Around the Gatekeepers.** Many mediamakers intend for their projects to be “picked up” or acquired by national broadcasters. But this does not always happen. As a result, independent mediamakers have developed ways to ensure distribution of their productions without the help of national broadcasters or “gatekeepers.” For example, even the films supported by the Independent Television Service (ITVS), which funds independent productions for broadcast on public television, are not guaranteed national airdates from PBS unless accepted by PBS’s Green Light Committee. That’s why ITVS has a division to promote its films station by station, often securing hundreds of airdates in this manner. Industrious independent filmmakers have been known to do the same.

The Internet is beginning to offer opportunities to distribute media content from point to point rather than going through a central channel. In Chapter 4, we discuss [www.radioexchange.org](http://www.radioexchange.org), a collaboration between The Station Resource Group (an organization of leading public radio stations) and Atlantic Public Media that will distribute radio documentaries directly to radio stations, circumventing National Public Radio.

**Invest in Community-Based Distribution.** While broadcast is an important and worthy goal, some of the most important work a film or video can do is not on the airwaves but on the ground. In Chapters 3, 6 and 7 we examine collaborations between filmmakers and nonprofit organizations in which film and video greatly expanded the scope and impact of nonprofit campaigns. When integrally connected to the efforts of nonprofit organizations and coalitions, a film or video can be *the* resource that sways the feelings of a community or gains the attention of Congress. In these chapters, we see how targeted screenings to audiences dealing with the issue at hand are as important in the life of a social-issue film as securing an airdate.

## Road Block #3: Risk in Funding Individuals

Then there is the apocryphal tale of “The Filmmaker Who Ran Away With the Money.” There is an abiding reservation about funding individuals, and numerous foundations simply do not do it. How do foundations that invest in media overcome apprehensions about funding individual artists?

**Support Intermediaries.** Many foundations choose to support intermediary nonprofits that serve independent mediamakers. This can be a way of supporting individual projects or a way to invest in the field. Most independent media projects have a fiscal sponsor, i.e. a tax-exempt nonprofit that is the umbrella organization for the project. Through these partnerships, foundations can make their grants to organizations and not individuals.

Foundations also make contributions to organizations serving the independent media field. These organizations range from large, high visibility organizations like Robert Redford's Sundance Institute to smaller organizations that serve mediamakers working in a particular community or medium. In Chapter 5, we highlight the vital role of nonprofit organizations like Film Arts Foundation and National Alliance of Media Arts and Culture (NAMAC).

**Take the Plunge.** Making grants to individuals is not as complicated as it might seem. In Chapter 2, we hear from foundations that do award grants to individual artists, and we discuss the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) requirements for doing so.

#### **Road Block #4: What is the Value?**

Perhaps the greatest obstacle to media funding is that foundations do not see the value. In the pages that follow, program officers articulate the unique benefits of funding media from the foundation's perspective.

**Stories to Remember.** More than any other resource, media brings home the reality behind social issues in a visceral way. It is far more likely that audiences will remember a compelling television documentary or radio segment than the details of a print report. As Joy Moore of the Annie E. Casey Foundation says in the sidebar on page X, "There are always going to be reports and traditional ways to get the story out. Media gets it to a broader audience and can employ techniques that a report can't. It can provide a face to the statistics." As our case studies show, great storytelling through media gives foundations unique opportunities to capture the attention of general audiences, legislators and other media outlets.

**Nonprofit Capacity Building.** Foundations are discovering the power of media as a tool for nonprofit capacity building—that is, to help nonprofit organizations expand their reach and impact. In Chapter 3, we profile Green Fire Productions, a nonprofit that exclusively produces strategic videos for environmental and social justice organizations. Of a Green Fire video, Kathy Crist, a national field organizer working to protect the Snake and Columbia rivers, says, "More than any other resource, [the video] helped us nationalize the issue with the public, Congress, and the media." In Chapters 6 and 7, program officers discuss investments in documentaries that have been used as sustained grassroots organizing and educational tools. Hilary Goodrich, program director with the Fund for a Just Society, an organization that usually funds small grassroots organizing efforts, attests, "You can't just say that because it's a film, it doesn't have the potential to be incredibly valuable as part of an ongoing organizing strategy," says Goodrich. "The

films that we fund are few and far between, but we've been really gratified by the results."

**Supporting the Future of the Arts.** Most foundations committed to the arts have traditionally excluded media as a funding area, but that seems to be changing. Merrill Lynch provided major support for the retrospective of video artist Nam June Paik that took over the Guggenheim Museum in New York City in 2000. In Chapter 2, Anita Contini of Merrill Lynch, says "[Media] is an important art form to support...as important as supporting any of the visual or performing arts." Jean Gagnon, president of the Daniel Langlois Foundation, believes it is incumbent on all foundations to support cutting-edge work. "Given the fact that new technologies are becoming increasingly dominant in society as a whole," he says, "it is crucial for private foundations or those involved in philanthropy to be able to grasp that phenomenon."

**Reaching Today's Youth.** One area of tremendous growth in recent years has been youth-produced media (see Chapter 8). Robert Sherman, who funds youth media through the Surdna Foundation's Effective Citizenry program, says, "The absence of the voices of young people is a glaring hole in democratic dialogue." Erlin Ibreak, director of the Youth Initiatives Program of the Open Society Institute, says, "[Young people] are producing images we've never seen before and stories we haven't heard until now. And they are deconstructing the mass media and its effect on them, really taking hold of something that has a powerful—and often negative—impact on their lives. It's been really exciting to learn about this field and get involved in it."

Working together, producers, nonprofit organizations, presenters and funders are unleashing the power of media. They are realizing its potential as a tool for community mobilization and grassroots organizing, as an empowering expression for today's youth, and as an art form. It is our belief that for every foundation there are media productions that can further its organizational goals. Our hope is that this report will help grantmakers and grantseekers find those matches.

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