

Funding Free Expression: Perceptions and Reality in a Changing Landscape

A Report to the Center for International Media Assistance

By Anne Nelson

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**National Endowment
for Democracy**
Supporting freedom around the world



The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA), a project of the National Endowment for Democracy, aims to strengthen the support, raise the visibility, and improve the effectiveness of media assistance programs by providing information, building networks, conducting research, and highlighting the indispensable role independent media play in the creation and development of sustainable democracies around the world. An important aspect of CIMA's work is to research ways to attract additional U.S. private sector interest in and support for international media development. The center was one of the of the main nongovernmental organizers of World Press Freedom Day 2011 in Washington, DC.

CIMA convenes working groups, discussions, and panels on a variety of topics in the field of media development and assistance. The center also issues reports and recommendations based on working group discussions and other investigations. These reports aim to provide policymakers, as well as donors and practitioners, with ideas for bolstering the effectiveness of media assistance.

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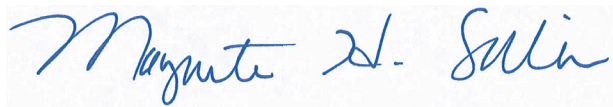
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Preface

The Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) at the National Endowment for Democracy commissioned this study of donor support for freedom of expression in collaboration with the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX).

CIMA is grateful to Anne Nelson, a veteran journalist and journalism educator, for her research and insights on this topic.

We hope that this report will become an important reference for international freedom of expression efforts.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Marguerite H. Sullivan". The signature is written in a cursive style and is set against a light blue rectangular background.

Marguerite H. Sullivan
Senior Director
Center for International Media Assistance

Executive Summary

In early 2011, the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA) and the International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) launched a research project to explore shifts in funding patterns for international freedom of expression activity. Twenty-one major donors responded to a survey, which was supplemented by eight in-depth interviews with donors and additional research on trends in Europe and the United States.

This report builds on previous IFEX research carried out in 2009 and published as *Funding for Freedom of Expression Organizations: Report of a Survey of IFEX Members*. The 2009 paper presented data from a survey of more than 60 diverse freedom of expression groups, all members of the IFEX network.

The 2009 research revealed that IFEX members were finding it increasingly difficult to acquire basic resources in the form of core funding for general operations, as opposed to funding for specific projects. Their perceptions indicated that the field of donors who specifically supported free expression work was shrinking. The IFEX members reported that their greatest challenges consisted of responding to shifting donor priorities and searching for a suitable programmatic fit between their work and donors' agendas.

In 2011, the donor community got a chance to respond to these perceptions. This research records the reactions among a sample of 21 major funders, representing a broad range of private foundations and government and multilateral aid agencies in North America and Europe. It signals a key contradiction: The overall amount of support for free expression funding actually appears to have increased in recent years. However, three factors have escalated the competition for these funds:

- The number of organizations working on freedom of expression has greatly expanded.
- A significant proportion of the funding is being directed to newer, non-traditional freedom of expression activities and institutions (especially relating to Internet freedom).
- Massive internal reorganization has temporarily disrupted the administrative processes of several key donors.

While many of the new initiatives hold great promise, there is a risk that sudden shifts could be detrimental to the stability of the established free expression community—whose expertise may become increasingly valuable to the new organizations as they mature.

Seven key findings emerged from this research:

1. Overall donor funding for free expression work has increased—not decreased—over the past three to five years. Of the 20 donors who responded to the question about levels of funding during this period, only 15 percent reported that their support for freedom of

expression had declined, while 45 percent stated that freedom of expression funding had increased at their institutions, and 40 percent reported that it had held constant.

2. Under current conditions, it is impossible to conclusively measure the amount of free expression funding. Donors themselves have a hard time extracting specific annual dollar amounts for free expression funding because it is housed in so many different programmatic areas and operating under so many different definitions. This situation is expected to improve as more donors digitize and tag their grant databases.
3. Changes in the political landscape of individual countries have a major impact on whether, how, how much, and what kind of freedom of expression activity is funded. These variables can include not just the broad ideology of the ruling party, but also such elements as trade policy and national security concerns.
4. Many donors are experiencing economic pressures as a result of the 2008 global financial downturn. In various cases, this pressure has led them to cut back programs, reduce funding, revise partnerships with grantees, and redefine geographic focus.
5. The community of free expression funders is evolving: new ones are emerging, while some long-time supporters are leaving the field altogether or shifting their priorities.
6. Internal and structural reorganizations are taking place across the board, in both government and private funding organizations. These changes bewilder NGOs and program officers alike. Over the transition period, it can become especially difficult for potential grantees and program officers to connect and communicate. Many of these changes involve staff reductions, so there are fewer officers to process grants, and they are additionally stretched when aid budgets grow.
7. The field of freedom of expression has been broadening with the addition of emerging Internet freedom organizations. The field has been complicated by mission overlap between established freedom of expression groups and emerging groups focused on technology and human rights.

Forty-five percent of those surveyed stated that freedom of expression funding had increased at their institutions, and 40 percent reported that it had held constant.

CIMA and IFEX hope that this report will offer some fresh perspectives and information on the shifting landscape to continue the conversation between free expression groups and donors in the pursuit of their common ideals.

Introduction

Freedom of expression has always been a pillar of democracy, but formal advocacy for freedom of expression is a relatively recent phenomenon. During the 20th century, the governments and citizens of Western democracies observed that both Communist and right-wing dictatorships relied on the manipulation of information and the repression of free speech to maintain their control. A host of organizations sprang up to encourage freedom of expression around the world.

Only a few decades ago, the free expression community still consisted of a handful of struggling NGOs and journalism trade organizations, which sought to hold governments accountable for violence against journalists and broader violations of press freedom. At the same time, they helped to define new parameters in international law to support freedom of expression and access to information. Now, spurred by political change and new communications technologies, the community has grown to an extensive international network. It has built an impressive research capability as well as unprecedented avenues for advocacy on behalf of embattled media practitioners and human rights defenders. Much of this work was supported by four major sectors of donors:

- European and U.S. government aid agencies
- international organizations
- private foundations
- media-based philanthropies¹

Only a few decades ago, the free expression community still consisted of a handful of struggling NGOs and journalism trade organizations, which sought to hold governments accountable for violence against journalists.

One measure of this community's rapid growth is the footprint of IFEX, the International Freedom of Expression Exchange. IFEX was founded in 1992 when a dozen international freedom of expression organizations gathered in Montreal to explore how to create greater efficiency in their joint research and advocacy activities. The result was an innovative approach to the then-novel phenomenon of online networking, to share and verify free expression violations research, coordinate campaigns, and build collaborative ties between the North and the South. Since then the IFEX network has grown to almost 100 members, with most of the additions from the developing world. Funding for freedom of expression expanded over most of that period as well, fueled by economic growth, increasing government support for human rights and economic development, and a boom in media businesses.

But during the 2000s, three major developments began to challenge this status:

- Economic—The 2008 economic downturn took a heavy toll on governments, slashing tax revenues and foreign aid budgets. At the same time, the technological revolution in media broke the business model for many Western print and

broadcast news organizations. This curbed their philanthropic activities, including those relating to freedom of expression.

- **Administrative**—The economic crisis coincided with (and accelerated) massive internal reorganizations in major donors in the sector. This had the dual impact of affecting grants and disrupting administrative processes.
- **Conceptual**—Both private foundations and government agencies are experiencing pressure to respond to new paradigms of freedom of expression. In the past, the traditional philanthropic models primarily addressed the needs of media institutions (comprising the “fourth estate”) through parallel advocacy organizations that monitored and campaigned against abuses perpetrated by government institutions. This institutional framework is being partially dismantled by the brave new world of digital media. The creation and dissemination of content have become more individualized, the agents of control have become more dispersed, and the donors are more concerned with identifying new formulas to address the ever-shifting environment.

These converging sources of disruption became apparent in 2009, when the Open Society Foundations supported a study of funding trends among the global IFEX membership.² Of the 62 responding organizations (out of 88 members), the vast majority reported that it had recently become strikingly more difficult to obtain funding for their work. Many reported that the process of applying for funding had become more time consuming and labor intensive, and tied to more onerous reporting procedures. Fewer than half the respondents expected to maintain their level of funding for the next five years; the majority ranged from uncertain or pessimistic. A number of respondents indicated that it was easier to get project funding than core funding for overhead and worried about maintaining basic office operations as they executed funded projects. “It’s just getting tougher and tougher, especially for core needs,” one noted. “Who will pay the salaries, rent and supplies?”

The overall message of the 2009 survey was that respondents believed that funding for freedom of expression work had been decreasing, and becoming increasingly difficult to access, as donor priorities shift to other areas.

In 2011 a second IFEX survey was launched in cooperation with CIMA, this time to take the pulse of the donor community. The 21 respondents, from a range of foundations and government aid agencies, presented a far different picture. Almost half of the donors (45 percent) stated that freedom of expression funding had increased at their institutions over the past three to five years, and another sizable percentage (40) reported that it had held constant. Only a small minority (15 percent) reported that it had fallen.³ Over a quarter of the respondents (26.3 percent) expect their funding to increase over the next three to five years. Furthermore, several new private donors appeared on the scene with major grants to IFEX members.

The two surveys indicate a significant gap in perception between the international freedom of expression groups and the donor community regarding the overall trends in funding. What is responsible for this paradox, and how could support be shrinking and growing at the same time? This question cannot be answered by a single explanation; rather, the situation is the result of a “perfect storm” of independent factors that have affected the funding environment from multiple perspectives. Many of these have been brought to light by both the donor survey responses and a series of follow-up interviews with representatives of the foundations and aid agencies.

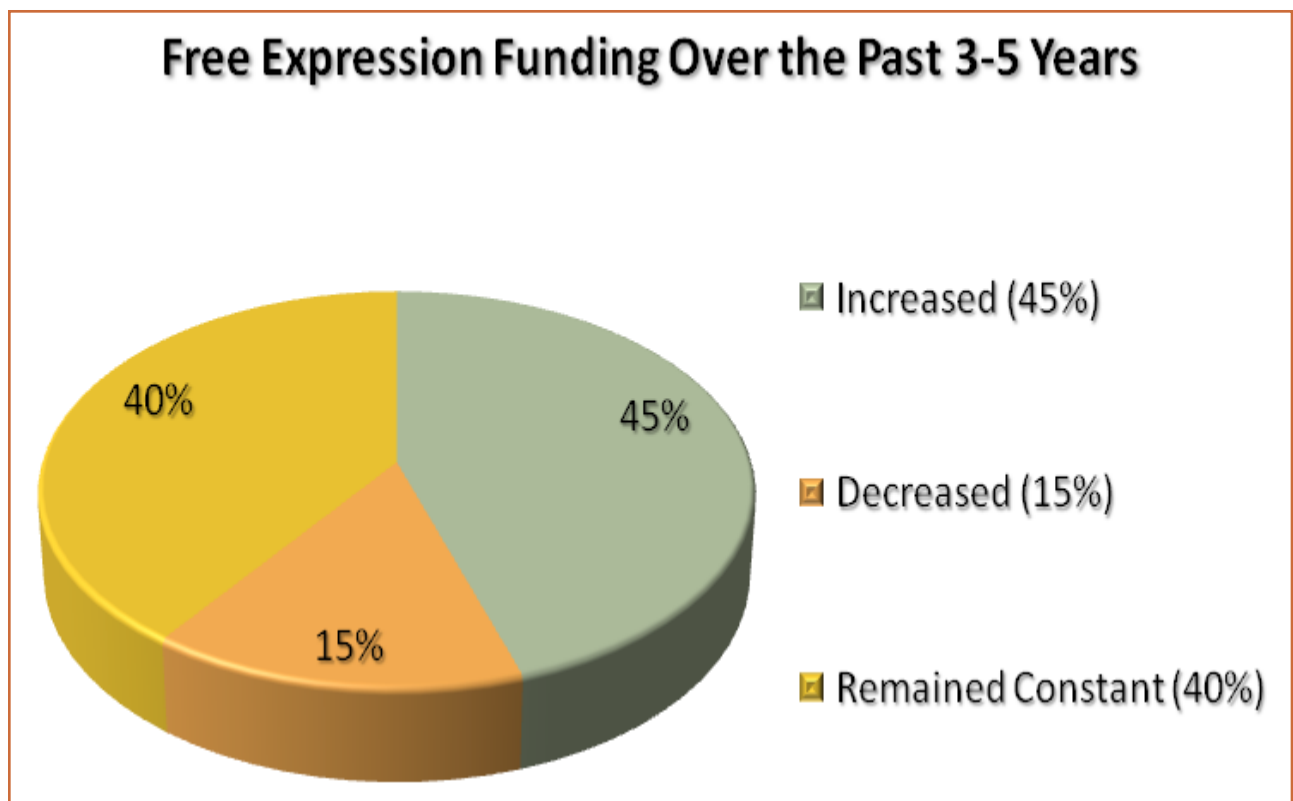
Key Findings

1. Increases in Funding

One headline is that while overall support for freedom of expression may have in fact increased in recent years, it may have done so in ways that diverge from the needs of many traditional free expression organizations. This report attempts to reconcile the contradictions.

The universe of major donors in the field of freedom of expression is not large. When each IFEX member organization was asked to identify its top three funding sources for 2009, ten institutions made the list (in order of citations):

1. Open Society Foundations
2. National Endowment for Democracy
3. Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
4. UNESCO
5. European Union
6. Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
7. Ford Foundation
8. Free Voice
9. United Kingdom's Department for International Development
10. John S. and James L. Knight Foundation



2. Measuring Freedom of Expression Funding

The list of donors above tells only part of the story. Many government agencies with a strong presence in the field did not appear among the 2011 survey's participants for various reasons. Furthermore, even the government agencies listed cannot offer a comprehensive view of their country's activities. Most of the governments offer freedom of expression funding from multiple pockets. In the United States, for example, USAID, the State Department, and the congressionally funded National Endowment for Democracy are all among the major funders in the sector, and the State Department's and USAID's funds originate from both Washington and local embassies and missions.

Similar complexity exists among European governments. Louise Bermsjö, program manager for democracy and human rights at the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Sida), reported: "Here at headquarters we have global funding; while most regional and bilateral work for freedom of expression is done at the embassy level." The Netherlands has a constellation of organizations constituted as NGOs that operate with government funding, such as the Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation (Hivos) and Oxfam Novib.

On a practical level, this means that various agencies of the same government don't always have a clear notion of what other divisions are funding, and it can be even more difficult for potential grantees to track.

Furthermore, most donors assign projects to categories or portfolios within their institutions. Freedom of expression activities have been assigned to many different portfolios across institutions, and frequently they are parceled out among different portfolios at the same institution. (This is the case at private foundations as well as government agencies.)

The 2011 donor survey showed that the majority of the respondents placed freedom of expression grants in one or more of four principal categories: human rights, governance and democracy, media development, and freedom of expression. Any number of portfolios may contain grants that benefit freedom of expression activity. For example, several of the donors indicated that they work with "other" categories such as ICT portfolios. These may be primarily directed towards education and communications infrastructure.

This internal dispersal can create frustration. The Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES), supported by the German Social Democratic Party, has been a major supporter of freedom of expression activities, operating from 90 country offices around the world. Rolf Paasch, director of the Southern Africa Media Project, said that "FES does not have a global, integrated media program, but a rather haphazard approach to its media activities ... There is a high degree of continuity in our freedom of expression work, but a lack of coordination or central steering or control."

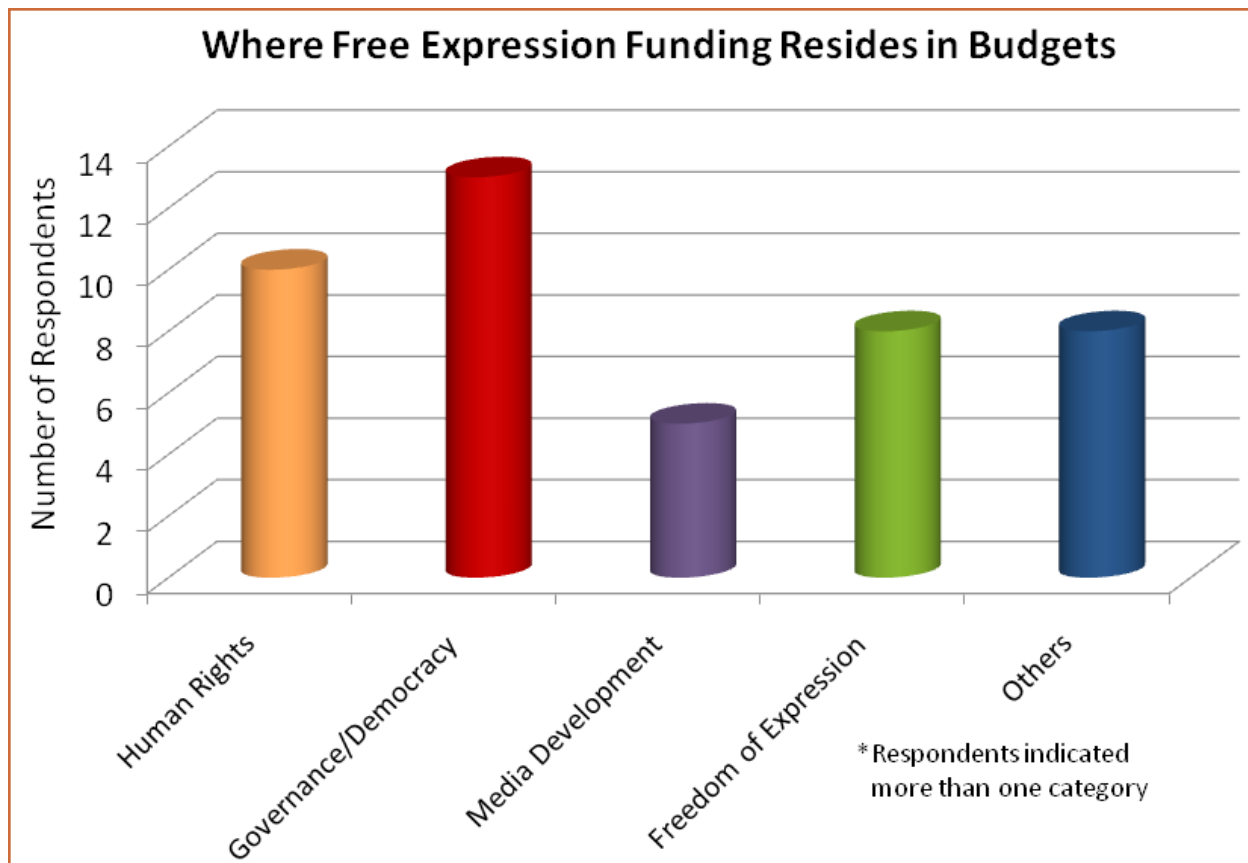
As a result of such ungainly administrative structures, grants officers often have only a vague notion of the entire institution's freedom of expression funding levels. Furthermore, they often refer to free expression funding in the same breath as media development funding, indicating that

the two categories are often conflated. (For example, the expanding area of enabling environments and legal frameworks can easily fall within both categories.)⁴ The 2011 donor survey featured some notably round numbers (“\$11 million”) and a number of admitted guesses (“approximately \$1-2 million, a very rough estimate”).

In interviews, a number of foundation officers noted that prior attempts to tally their figures required someone to spend a week piecing together data from the files, and many donors are in the process of updating their information systems. Eric Newton, senior adviser to the president of the Knight Foundation, said his organization is in the process of upgrading its computerized records. He expects Knight to launch an open, searchable grants database within a few months that will help to identify grants across categories.

Martin Abregu, director of rights and governance for the Ford Foundation, noted that it is not currently possible to tally the foundation’s freedom of expression grants electronically. “Some of us are working to tag all the grants to answer this question. We are not able to give you a number—maybe in a year. I’d have to go grant by grant. Foundations are really behind in terms of data management.” There are parallel efforts at government agencies.

The donor survey offers an interesting snapshot of trends in funding amounts, but it should not be taken as a definitive sum, since many major donors do not appear in the survey. If one adds up the survey estimates going by their upper ranges, one arrives at the total of nearly \$227.6 million in freedom of expression funding among the 21 donors. (See list on page 12.)



3. The Impact of the Political Landscape

Compared to overall foreign aid budgets, the amount destined for all forms of media support is strikingly small. Newton points to Andrew Green’s 2009 CIMA report on U.S. government support for media development as evidence:⁵ “It shows that of all U.S. aid, less than .003 percent—or \$140.7 million—was spent on media development aid,” Newton commented. “So it is not a state secret that 99.9 percent of aid in the world is NOT media aid. That means media development [which is frequently conflated with freedom of expression funding] would need to be 1,000 times more important than it is now to be as important as other kinds of aid.”

This lopsided ratio was painfully apparent to the democracy protesters in Egypt, where the U.S. government devoted an average of \$24 million a year to support democracy and civil society (including freedom of expression activities), which amounted to only 1.8 percent of the annual \$1.3 billion for military assistance over the last decade of the Mubarak regime.⁶ Nonetheless, it should be stressed that the U.S. government remains the largest single supporter of freedom of expression activity in the world, and one of the few whose funding commitment is still growing.

Any consideration of international freedom of expression funding must be placed within the context of overall foreign aid budgets, which have undergone major upheavals since 2008. In Britain, the government eliminated all foreign aid to 16 countries, many in Africa, as part of an effort to “rebalance” its £8.4 billion international development budget.⁷ Although most Western nations still officially adhere to a goal of allocating 0.7 percent of their gross national incomes to global development cooperation, few governments have met this goal.⁸ In late December

List of Survey Respondents

- Adessium Foundation (The Netherlands)
- Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (United States)
- Canadian International Development Agency
- Danish International Development Agency
- Foreign Affairs and International Trade (Canada)
- Humanist Institute for Development Cooperation, Hivos (The Netherlands)
- International Development Research Centre, (Canada)
- John D. & Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation (United States)
- John S. and James L. Knight Foundation (United States)
- McCormick Tribune Foundation (United States)
- National Endowment for Democracy (United States)
- Norwegian Agency for Development Cooperation
- Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Open Society Foundations (OSF)
- Sigrid Rausing Trust (U.K.)
- Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency
- Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation
- U.S. Department of State, USAID, and Middle East Partnership Initiative (joint response)
- UNESCO
- United Nations Development Programme
- World Bank

2010, several European donors, including Austria, Ireland, Spain, and Italy, announced aid “reforms” to take effect in 2011, which had led to some countries eliminating nations from their list of aid recipients and cutting overall aid budgets.⁹ In the 2011 donor survey, one European donor reported that it was “phasing out” freedom of expression programming per se, and integrating it into its good governance, accountability, and country ownership discourse.

European aid agencies, cited “Paris-Accra” as a guideline for future policies, shorthand for the roadmaps presented in the 2005 Paris Declaration and subsequent Accra Agenda for Action to promote aid effectiveness. The underlying principles of Paris-Accra promote increased autonomy for developing countries in setting their own agendas, implementing their own solutions, and using local resources in their use of foreign aid monies. The statements also placed renewed emphasis on monitoring and evaluation practices.

Based on the interviews for this study, it is clear that aid agencies across Europe have been told to consider these principles in their day-to-day work, including support for freedom of expression. But the “roadmap” does not constitute a set of operating instructions, and Paris-Accra could easily present a set of contradictions to past practices. In that sense, it represents yet another disruption in donor activity. In many developing countries, freedom of expression is often questioned, and even denounced, as a “Western value,” and many governments are reluctant to direct support towards the defense of critical media. Paris-Accra is obviously a serious point of departure, but it will take years to develop the actual strategies for implementation.

Foundation officers note that freedom of expression funding is often linked to other foreign policy interests. The British and U.S. governments expend large amounts on various media programs, but a disproportionate percentage is assigned to Iraq and Afghanistan.

Foundation officers note that freedom of expression funding is often linked to other foreign policy interests. The British and U.S. governments expend large amounts on various media programs, but a disproportionate percentage is assigned to Iraq and Afghanistan. (At times, government initiatives to promote independent media can work at cross purposes with military media priorities.)¹⁰

Sometimes these approaches can create a gulf between the perceptions of freedom of expression groups on the ground and their foreign donors. For example, in an October 2010 survey, IFEX members ranked impunity for those who kill journalists as the top issue of concern in the field. In the 2011 donors’ survey, only half of the respondents identified impunity as a priority issue, while 94 percent described “freedom of information/access to information” as a high priority—demonstrating the commonly reported experience of misalignment between donor priorities and the priorities of the free expression community, raised in the 2009 funding survey.

In other instances, support for freedom of expression suffers from the “flavor of the month” phenomenon, in which large amounts of funding surge into a region and abruptly surge out. Vast quantities of freedom of expression funding went into the former Soviet Union and Eastern bloc countries at the end of the Cold War. Now little is available, despite renewed media freedom problems in the region. Africa was a popular destination in the recent past and remains a priority for Swedish government funding, but other donors note a migration of funds away from Africa and towards the Middle East, the new favorite. Paasch of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation noted, “My impression is that media development in Africa [including freedom of expression projects] has been generally financed by the Scandinavian and Dutch organizations like Sida, NORAD (Norway), NiZA (Netherlands), etc., which all either have revamped their programs or are thinking of doing it. NiZA closed down their media program in 2008, a development which has more to do with internal Dutch politics than with the needs in Africa.”

In other instances, support for freedom of expression suffers from the “flavor of the month” phenomenon, in which large amounts of funding surge into a region and abruptly surge out.

Arab countries have undoubtedly been the focus of the most recent funding interest. As events unfolded in Egypt in the winter of 2010-11, media activists there began to field a wave of calls from Western donors wanting updates, offering support, and requesting project proposals—which in some cases put additional short-term pressure on groups when they were already working in extremely stressful circumstances. While some specific project-focused initiatives may have been warranted at this juncture, it could be argued that groups would get better value from other types of political or institutional support over the long term.

Groups in the region have noted that the support received from IFEX has been critical especially because of its link to donors. By the same token, 84 percent of the respondents to the 2011 donors survey said they found it easier to fund members of coalitions and initiatives involving multiple organizations.

4. The Impact of the 2008 Global Financial Downturn

Government aid agencies operate on a massive scale, but private foundations have also played a critical role in the freedom of expression sphere, and they are often more agile in their responses to new developments.¹¹ Although many of the most active foundations in the field are based in the United States, they have recently been joined by some important additions from Europe, including the Sigrid Rausing Trust in the U.K. and the Adessium Foundation in the Netherlands. It should be noted that some of the new additions have different ways of working, and do not accept unsolicited proposals.

The Ford Foundation was one of the earliest and most visionary supporters of freedom of expression initiatives. Ford was one of the first donors to the U.S.-based Committee to Protect Journalists and the sole funder for the founding meeting of the IFEX international network,

among many other projects. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, built on the Knight newspaper fortune, has made an impact by stressing innovative and adaptive anti-censorship measures in the rapidly changing media environment. Chicago's McCormick Tribune Foundation has made a major contribution to combating abuses of press freedom in Latin America, and the Open Society Foundations offer the most comprehensive international freedom of expression support.

A number of foundations suffered sharp reversals in the economic downturn. According to some reports, the Ford Foundation lost nearly a third of its assets.¹² The economic crisis also slammed the brakes on unusually rapid growth in the field. A 2010 report by the Foundation Center, which analyzes data and disseminates information about philanthropy worldwide, revealed that U.S. foundations had dramatically expanded their international grants between 2006 and 2008, with international grant dollars growing twice as fast as overall funding (49 percent compared to 21 percent). However, in 2008 and 2009, international grants from U.S. foundations dropped more than 12 percent.¹³

5. The Evolution of the Funding Community

The Foundation Center report also suggested other pertinent funding trends such as the role of new actors in the funding community. Many new donors have been funding on the fringes of freedom of expression. In recent years, for example, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has begun to fund media projects (and many of them have been indirectly beneficial for freedom of expression), but so far they have been oriented towards public health and economic development rather than directed specifically towards freedom of expression activity.

The acknowledged leaders in funding freedom of expression among private foundations are the Knight Foundation and the Open Society Foundations, founded by financier George Soros (formerly known as the Open Society Institute). The Knight Foundation grants approximately \$7 million in international freedom of expression-related funds each year, some in partnership with other foundations.

OSF's London-based Media Program estimates that out of the \$40-50 million that the entire network of OSF foundations, regional programs, and special projects spend on media development, roughly \$10 million is dedicated to freedom of expression. However, this funding comes with several footnotes. Some of these funds are expected to cover internal programs within the organization. The Media Program itself allocates approximately a quarter of its own \$10 million annual budget to media freedom—primarily for three principal areas: traditional freedom of expression support, media law reform, and support for safety of journalists. These funds are usually matched in contributions from OSF's regional programs and national foundations, and increasingly OSF's Information Program, for Internet-related freedom of expression.

Stewart Chisholm, the OSF Media Program's senior program manager, said that his office receives funding requests from a number of international, regional as well as in-country freedom

of expression organizations that are experiencing shortfalls from other donors. “We’re still one of the larger donors,” Chisholm said. We are working more closely with other donors to deal with the funding gap, and we’ve reached out to new donors.” Chisholm pointed out that in the case of IFEX the number of organizations has grown enormously, now up to nearly 100 members, while some of the traditional donors have been dropping out.

Over the past decade, the U.S. foundation community has grown to include new philanthropies growing out of the West Coast tech industry. The largest and best-known of these is the Gates Foundation, but others include the Skoll Foundation, the Omidyar Network (whose founders were architects of eBay), and Google. The Hewlett and the Packard Foundations are older members of the group. These philanthropies have been increasing their involvement in freedom of expression activity. Google and the Omidyar Network were among the sponsors of the 2011 World Press Freedom Day program in Washington, where Omidyar Investment Partner Stephen King used the occasion to announce four new grants, including \$1.7 million over the next two years to the Africa Media Initiative and \$800,000 to the Committee to Protect Journalists.

Another donor for the event was Bloomberg. The lines between philanthropist Michael Bloomberg, the Bloomberg Family Foundation, and donations from Bloomberg Business News are not always clear. In 2008, Michael Bloomberg was the biggest living individual donor in the country, giving away \$235 million. Various outlets for Bloomberg’s philanthropy have supported the Committee to Protect Journalists and other freedom of expression efforts, but they do not function with the same bureaucratic structures as traditional U.S. foundations.

Although the media-based philanthropies have suffered some of the greatest disruption, the recent tremors have been felt across the board.

Google, via both Google.org and Google Inc., is one of the new arrivals on the scene.¹⁴ The company has experimented with several approaches to philanthropy in recent years (with an initial focus on global public health). Its participation in World Press Freedom Day 2011 signals a new involvement in freedom of expression activity.¹⁵ Google also recently extended support to Index on Censorship and Reporters Without Borders, as well as contributing \$5 million to the Knight Foundation and \$3 million to the International Press Institute in Vienna to promote digital innovation in the African news industry.

The new tech philanthropies occupy a far more favorable economic position than traditional U.S. news media-based philanthropies. The same forces that benefited digital platforms have contributed to additional losses for traditional publishers and broadcasters, as the technological revolution has led advertising to migrate online and drop in price. This has been a serious development for freedom of expression funding, since many U.S. news organizations have maintained a fierce and active commitment to First Amendment principles over the years. The damage spread across newspaper, magazine, and broadcast news organizations, which slashed staff and operations as well as charitable contributions. The McCormick Foundation, which

has been a major funder for press freedom organizations in Latin America, was recently obliged to scale back its operations. The New York Times Company Foundation and the Boston Globe Foundation, both of which supported international freedom of expression work, suspended grant-making altogether in 2009.¹⁶

Although the media-based philanthropies have suffered some of the greatest disruption, the recent tremors have been felt across the board. Many of the foundation officers who were interviewed noted that there had been major changes in their leadership at the top, resulting in organization-wide shifts in priorities and procedures. The Rockefeller, Ford, and MacArthur Foundations have all appointed new presidents since 2005, and major rotations at other foundations are believed to be imminent. “We’ve been undergoing a major reorganization over the past two to three years, dating from when the new president arrived,” said Ford’s Martin Abregu, who works on freedom of expression grants.

All of this indicates that, while U.S. foundation funding for international freedom of expression efforts may not have dropped by much over the past few years, both the foundations and their portfolios have been shifting in character, often in ways that do not favor traditional freedom of expression organizations.

When the economic downturn struck in 2008, a number of foundations took action to defend their institutional priorities by curtailing first-time grant applications and reviewing their grants from a “survival of the fittest” perspective. In the freedom of expression community, some of the leading U.S.-based international organizations were able to build multi-million dollar endowments over the past decade, which shielded them from the vicissitudes of the annual grant cycle.

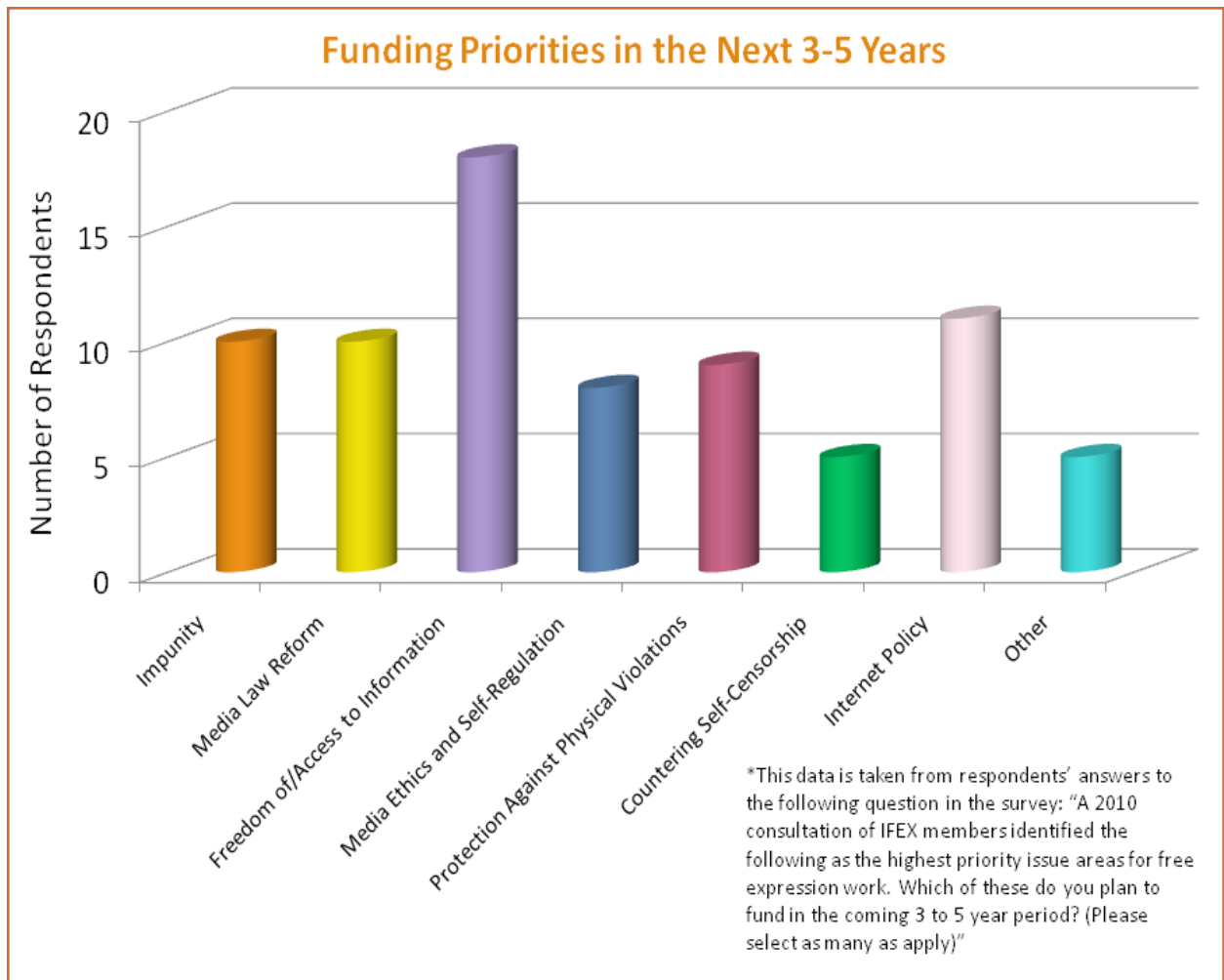
Some theorists refer to the “media ecosystem” to describe the complex interplay among media. That term could be adapted to a “donor ecosystem” as well, to apply to the complex web of relationships and styles among donors. At Knight, for example, the endowment campaigns were exceptions, extended to trusted, long-standing partners. Knight’s principal focus has been to promote innovation. According to Newton, the role of its philanthropy is “not to provide ongoing funding, it’s to provide R & D for start-ups.” Newton said, “Over the last ten years, the media freedom portfolio at Knight has grown by taking on a project, stopping, and taking on another project.” In this venture capital model of philanthropy, grantees receive start-up money but are expected to become self-supporting within a few years.

Donors who reside in another zone of the ecosystem take a different approach. The OSF Media Program is known for its long-term support, and for helping freedom of expression grantees adapt to shifting currents. “We’re concerned about their reliance on only a few donors and the difficulty in getting core funding as opposed to projects,” OSF’s Chisholm said. “We’re lucky in that we still have a global mandate to address these issues. Over the last ten years our own funding has not increased significantly, but our mandate has. The same amount of money has to go to more groups in more places.”

6. Internal and Structural Reorganization and the Disruption It Causes

The economic crisis created plenty of uncertainty about future funding in its own right. But it has been compounded by the recent massive administrative restructuring of some of the biggest sustaining donors in the field: notably Sida, the cluster of Dutch government-funded donors, and the Ford Foundation. This restructuring will no doubt be helpful to grantees in long run, but there is also little doubt that it has caused some short-term disruption for grantees.

Sida’s Bermsjö said, “In 2008 we did a full reorganization, and just before Christmas [2010] we did another. It’s not easy for people working at Sida to navigate, and it’s not easy for partners to find the right entry point. The new organization is not yet fully in place. Our staff has been reduced by 120 people [out of approximately 700], and it will take some time before people know who is responsible for what. Our home page has undergone continuous changes, and we’ve also been moving offices within the building.” But, Bermsjö added, “After the summer, everything should be more in place.” The reorganization also temporarily affected the Sida travel budgets, which limited program officers’ abilities to go to conferences and meet prospective new partners. Travel budgets have now reappeared, and Bermsjö and her colleagues look forward to becoming more visible in the community.



In Sida's case, apparent signs of shrinkage in freedom of expression funding turn out to be deceptive. "We got the new strategy for global thematic contributions in February, and freedom of expression funding is stable or growing," Bermsjö reported.

The situation in the Netherlands is less encouraging. At the close of 2010, the Dutch government budget dramatically reduced funding to agencies such as Oxfam Novib, which has recently made access to information a priority in its programming, leading to abrupt ends to long-term development partnerships. In addition, the government favored proposals from funding consortiums,¹⁷ for example merging several government-funded media support institutions: Press Now, Free Voice, and RNTC's Foreign Projects department, which jointly work in some 40 countries. The new organization, Free Press Unlimited, was launched in April 2011.¹⁸

The recent reorganization at the Ford Foundation has been one of the most complex, since it involves restructuring the institution's entire grant-making logic. In the past, much of Ford's freedom of expression funding was assigned to the "Media, Arts & Culture" portfolio. That area is now called "Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom," but as of April 2011, no one was occupying the position. Ford's Abregu reported that the foundation has been undergoing restructuring for the past three years. "It took a while and there are still things that are developing, such as the units on freedom of expression in Knowledge, Creativity and Freedom."

However, the restructuring has also reassigned basic elements of the grant-making process to regional offices. Now, Abregu says, "the foundation organizes its work around 12 units and 35 initiatives. The initiatives are how work is focused around the world. Some are only U.S. initiatives, but human rights is global." Abregu added, "The offices have more autonomy now. Each office is going to pick five or six initiatives among the 35 options, but once you pick one of these initiatives you have to stay with that focus."

Abregu said he expects the Ford Foundation to maintain a strong commitment to freedom of expression, but its emphasis will shift. "Freedom of expression was an issue that was very clearly defined 10 or 15 years ago, and it was a priority for many of us at the foundation. But now that definition is not explaining the work many of us are doing, based on the same values." He notes that country offices place freedom of expression work in many different local contexts. "In Brazil, for example, work is on media regulation. The new media law, ownership concentration, those kinds of issues are at the core of that office."

Abregu also noted that different country offices assign freedom of expression work to different categories. "The office in Nigeria works on freedom of expression, but it's associated with economic and social rights. Indonesia is moving towards an access to information paradigm. The Mexico office is focused on migration, and deals with attacks on journalists and migration. There's no special focus there on human rights and governance and freedom of expression. We're looking at attacks on journalists as attacks on social leaders. So freedom of expression work takes place in the context of office priorities."

Abregu said that Ford, like OSF, has been asked to help grantees that have lost other sources of funding. “The cutbacks from European donors is reshaping the field in a very strong way, and they won’t go back to support what they were funding.”

7. The Emerging Internet Freedom Movement

In addition to the budgetary and administrative disruptions in freedom of expression funding, the field has also experienced a shift in priorities. Over the past decade, the digital revolution has altered every aspect of communications. However, it is unclear how the new technologies will play out in influencing the creation of quality content and the impact on goals such as democratization, good governance, and transparency.

Furthermore, the technologies are spreading to different regions at different rates, in different forms. In the United States and Britain, online media has crippled newspaper revenues, but in much of Latin America, convergence has boosted them. Mobile platforms have become more influential in news delivery, at a faster pace, in Africa than other regions. Media scholars dispute whether the new technologies offer a net gain in freedom of expression through access to the creation and diffusion of information, given that they can also help limit freedom of expression by putting new instruments in the hands of censors and oppressive governments.

Not surprisingly, donors are regarding the field with uncertainty, but they are pressing ahead. One of the leading institutions in the field is USAID, which has been steadily escalating its funding in both freedom of expression and general media programs. According to Mark Koenig, senior media advisor for USAID, “We hope to work more in the area of Internet freedom, through a joint State Department and USAID initiative. The overall budget numbers seem to be going up—the U.S. government funding was about \$50 million, and now is about \$80 million. The independent media and freedom of expression programs have been lumped together.” Koenig points out that overall media funding can originate in many different areas. “Development communications would come in from health, environment, education, economic development. There’s probably still too much stovepiping.”

Koenig said that it is no longer possible to make a sharp distinction between press freedom programs and other forms of media development. “I can’t answer that, it’s holistic.” Although USAID is working more with interactive media and gradations of citizen reporters, the basic objectives are unchanged and platform neutral. These are:

1. more professionalism
2. media pluralism
3. improving the legal enabling environment
4. improving economic conditions.

“Quite a few of the IFEX groups are adapting to the new technologies,” Koenig observes. “You also have the human rights community and individual bloggers in the Middle East.”

Koenig sees a gradual shift in regional focus. “We’re seeing more attention to the Middle East and Africa. Eastern Europe is on a slow decline. Democracy funding in Latin America is small.” Koenig recently returned from a mission to East Timor, where he encountered an Australian (AusAID) media support program—which may be a development to watch in Asia.¹⁹ Many donors join USAID in its concern about legal enabling environments, a system of laws and legal processes necessary for freedom of expression to thrive. There is considerable uncertainty around the question of how global Internet regulations will be defined and managed in the future, questions that get wrapped up in complex issues such as national security, differing cultural norms, and both government and corporate forms of control. According to Knight’s Newton, “The meta-theme is ‘The changes are happening so fast, we don’t know what’s happening.’”

Newton argued that these changes have confused donors and freedom of expression activists alike, and that traditional press freedom indicators need an overhaul. “We’re not measuring the right things any more. The old measurements are about institutions. They’re developed by institutions, they reflect institutions, and not the personal experience of individuals.” He pointed to the upheavals in Egypt as an example. “Where’s the map of the billions of cellphones? Where’s the map of hand-held devices that allow people unprecedented freedom? Where’s the map of satellite television? Facebook? Twitter? When press freedom indicators were developed a few decades ago, these didn’t exist. Half the people subject to jail are bloggers. Foundations are still fighting visible enemies.”

Knight funds various initiatives in Internet freedom research and activism, including the Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard Law School and the Aspen Institute’s Internet Policy Project, which Newton describes as “Internet freedom through a free trade doorway.” The Open Society Foundations also make a large number of grants related to legal enabling environments and Internet freedom.

The Berkman Center, founded in 1997, has been one of the major beneficiaries of the new trends in funding. The U.S. State Department gave the Berkman Center’s Internet and Democracy Project a \$1.5 million grant over two years to study the Middle East, and last year the Omidyar Network granted \$1.5 million to Herdict, a Berkman project to record real-time data about web accessibility and outages around the world.²⁰ Donors have begun to offer grants to related institutes that have sprung up elsewhere, such as the Oxford Internet Institute and Hong Kong University’s China Media Project.

Chisholm echoed Newton’s doubts about old models of freedom of expression activity. “You can’t expect to achieve everything by monitoring. We’ve always felt monitoring was the tool—add legislative reform and legal defense. Now we’re questioning the monitoring and advocacy model.

“The meta-theme is ‘The changes are happening so fast, we don’t know what’s happening.’”

*— Eric Newton,
John S. and James L.
Knight Foundation*

We'd like to see more groups integrate that into their strategies. Then again, you see regressions in countries where you were seeing progress." He is particularly concerned about negative media developments in Eastern Europe, citing examples of Russia and Hungary, where much of the freedom of expression funding has dried up.

Chisholm sees many of the old press freedom issues resurfacing in digital garb. "There are still huge needs to address: journalists under threat, defamation laws, legal defense. These issues are getting worse in many countries, and you need to look into the whole enabling environment. There's been attention to filtering and DDOS [distributed denial of service] attacks, and OSF has worked on those issues as well, but the other things are still going on, and the largest number of those put in jail for criminal defamation are from online outlets. Online media doesn't have the same support mechanisms." Chisholm noted that it is virtually unknown for an online outlet to have an in-house legal counsel, and few online writers have access to training and education in media law.

But another common theme among donors—and another echo of Paris-Accra thinking—is the need for more results-oriented work. The push for project monitoring and evaluation continues, and both government and foundation donors are pressed to show concrete results for their spending. This can be frustrating to freedom of expression organizations, given that one measure of their success is when nothing happens: the blogger isn't jailed, the newspaper isn't closed down, the website isn't blocked. It's possible to measure improvement of a bad situation, but it's more difficult to apply metrics to a good situation that is defended.

Nonetheless, freedom of expression organizations can expect to be challenged to demonstrate their value to a rapidly evolving media environment, and to make the constant analytical shifts required to understand the new media culture. The concept of "freedom of expression" has evolved throughout history in step with the evolution of media platforms. Government and foundation donors, freedom of expression organizations, and individual activists around the world all deserve credit for their work, whether it is courageous defense on the front lines or thoughtful analysis behind the scenes. The technology, the players, and the villains may shift over the years, but ever since Socrates was obliged to drink the hemlock, the need for their work has existed and will remain.

Conclusion

Looking at the 2009 and 2011 results together, it is clear that the landscape of free expression funding is evolving—with new players entering the scene and changing the playing field—for donors and beneficiaries alike. Some concerns raised by free expression groups in the 2009 study, such as the shifting priorities of donors and narrowing forms and sources of funding, have been confirmed in some cases. On the other hand, perceptions that funding has diminished overall can be checked by the perspectives of donors presented here. Common throughout is the challenge of locating free expression funding in the myriad pockets where it resides. This situation can only improve with the ongoing efforts to digitize grant information. While no one can easily predict future trends of free expression funding on the basis of these studies, they offer the promise that seeds have been sown to yield greater transparency, improved communications, and a shared basis for understanding between donors and grantees.

Endnotes

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