



Funding Free Expression: Perceptions and Reality in a Changing Landscape



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.

Findings

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 level 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.

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.

Funding Free Expression: Perceptions and Reality in a Changing Landscape is a publication of the Center for International Media Assistance (CIMA). The Center is an initiative of the National Endowment for Democracy that works 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.

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. For more information on CIMA, please visit <http://cima.ned.org>.

The International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX) is a dynamic global network that monitors, promotes and defends freedom of expression worldwide. Created in 1992 in Montréal, Canada, IFEX now numbers over 90 independent member organisations in over 60 countries (www.ifex.org). IFEX enhances its members' work by creating distinct opportunities for capacity building, joint advocacy and increased visibility.