

The dilemma: Donor-supported journalism and credibility

Can scholars help find a model to balance the need for editorial independence and the need to prove impact in donor-supported journalism?

A challenged profession looking for alternative funding

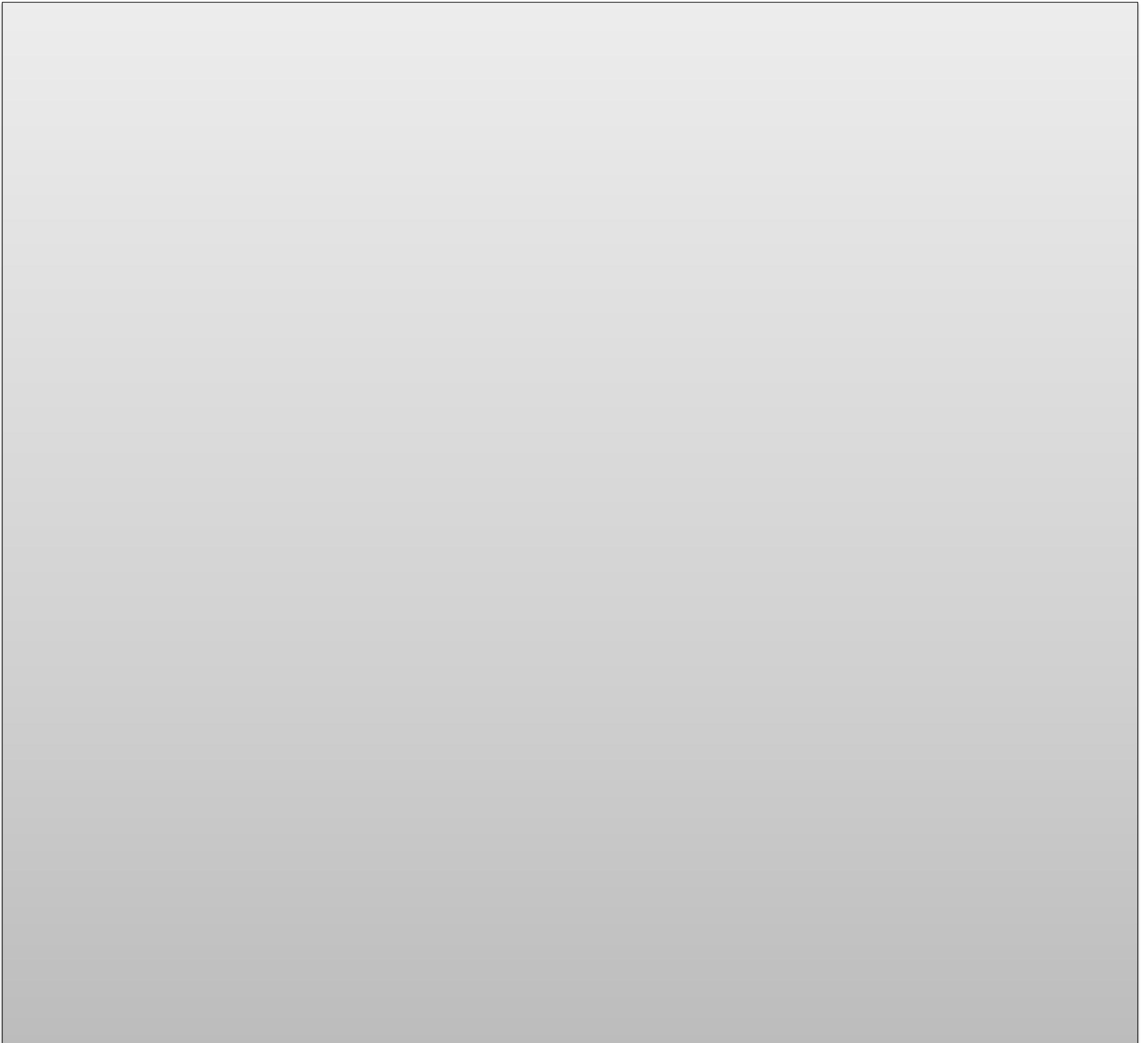
As legacy media are struggling to adapt to global and digital challenges, entrepreneurial journalists increasingly turn to alternative funding options to support in-depth journalism. The objectives are to do journalism and to adapt the profession of journalism to the very same challenges of globalisation and digitalisation. Non-profit journalism supported by foundations and philanthropy is widespread in the US (1) and on the rise in Europe (2). This leads to a new challenge:

The independence of journalism when working with donors

Foundation supported journalism solves the immediate need of journalists to carry out their work and develop professional practice even in times when media are economically and structurally challenged (3). But what about safeguarding editorial independence and credibility (4)? While credibility of the supported journalism is a shared interest of donor and journalist, the two players may have different views on editorial independence, agenda setting: Journalists have a legitimate interest to protect editorial independence, while donors have a legitimate interest to make sure their money is spent according to their statutes and to report how their money is spent (5).

A possible analogy

In the past decades, legacy media applied a model where business/funding and editorial were separated from each other while operating under the same roof: A balance was found and practiced where credibility was maintained. Can such a model be found for donor-supported journalism? “Journalism for sale” does not heighten credibility and not desirable for neither donors nor journalists, some ties attached to grants have been accepted such as geographical, methodological and even thematic foci. As long as such projects remain an insignificant share of journalism funding, experimenting is possible. If or when such projects gain wide attention – as we have seen already for example with the publication of the *Panama Papers*, it is crucial to have robust credibility models.



Direct and indirect agenda setting

The credibility of any funding has, of course, to be considered case by case. A geographic or thematic focus can make very good sense following classic news criteria or it can, indeed, constitute instrumentalisation of journalists for a geopolitical or commercial purpose and thus endanger credibility. Open agenda setting can be addressed openly. What is less open and thus more difficult to address is indirect or even involuntary agenda setting. This can occur through impact measurement unfamiliar with the logics of editorial independence and

journalism practice. Quantitative approaches in impact measurement, for example, can stimulate journalists to produce research, publications that lead to quantifiable publications, reactions – even though these topics may not be the most relevant ones in society.

Testing potential models, avoiding pitfalls

Direct and indirect agenda setting need to be addressed differently. Transparency about conditions of the funding could be one way forward (6), though transparency needs to be considered carefully in

repressive regimes. Setting up organisational structures guaranteeing arm’s length between donor and journalist are an opportunity already experimented with (7). The indirect agenda setting, however, is more subtle. Impact measurement effects are studied by scholars (8). A multidisciplinary approach bringing together (non-profit) journalism practitioners, scholars in the field of philanthropy and scholars in the field of media sciences could assist journalists and donors to develop best practices.

References

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- 7 - Such as Journalismfund.eu and its peer-review jury www.journalismfund.eu or Scoop and its volunteer model www.i-scoop.org

- 8 - See for example Jacobs, Alex, Barnett, Chris, Ponsford, Richard, *Three Approaches to Monitoring: Feedback Systems, Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation and Logical Frameworks*, Oxford, IDS Bulletin Volume 41 Number 6 November 2010

