



FORD FOUNDATION

CREATIVITY & FREE EXPRESSION

# Journalism Program Evaluation

2016–2021

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**i**MPACT ARCHITECTS

# Introduction

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In late 2021, Impact Architects partnered with the Ford Foundation to conduct a portfolio level evaluation of the Creativity and Free Expression's (CFE) Journalism Program, one of three program areas alongside Arts and Culture and JustFilms. At the midpoint of the Program's 10-year strategy, the purpose of this evaluation is to articulate the CFE Journalism Program's strategy as it has been implemented thus far, identify progress made toward its near and medium term goals, and generate insights and considerations to inform the next five years of the Program's strategy.

From 2016 through 2021, Ford Foundation's CFE Journalism Program has invested \$57.5 million in support of 110 organizations, many of which are led by and serving women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ communities, and those in underserved rural communities — the priority communities for the CFE Journalism Program's strategy. (This analysis does not include grants made to journalism organizations by other Ford program areas.)

The CFE Journalism Program's current strategy is situated in a context wherein some communities have historically been ignored by the mainstream media, including the populations identified above. In addition, the news outlets that serve those communities have largely not had access to philanthropic support or resources. A foundational element of this context is evident in the [1968 Kerner Commission report](#), which identified an array of "separate and unequal" social services available to U.S. residents as a core reason for the urban uprisings of the late 1960s. Among the report's recommendations regarding journalism were the need to expand coverage of Black communities by developing beats focused on "racial affairs," integrate activities of Black communities into general news coverage, and recruit more Black reporters into journalism. While the report was specifically about Black communities, there are clear implications for other population groups.

The CFE Journalism Program's efforts have focused on changing the power dynamics within the journalism sector to create a more equal society.

Journalism — who does it and who it serves — is a site of power. A misuse of this power can create and deepen social divides, further marginalize and stigmatize communities, and undermine democracy, as evidenced by the Kerner Commission 50 years ago and the effects of mis- and disinformation in contemporary America. The responsible and equitable use of this

power is an essential component of a functional and resilient democracy.

In addition to persistent divisions of service, the industry has seen continuous upheaval over the past 20 years that has only accelerated during the past five. The contextual trends include:

- **The failure of the commercial advertising model** for journalism that originated with digital publishing, grew steadily worse over time, and was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic;
- **A national racial justice reckoning** that has implications for the journalism industry;
- **An increasing lack of trust** among U.S. residents in news and media, at least in part a result of the proliferation of information and disinformation in digital spaces; and
- **The effects of the COVID-19 pandemic** on the journalism industry, which accelerated the trend of declining advertising revenue and has caused greater instability in the industry.

This evaluation finds evidence that Ford’s support has resulted in a growing and strengthened equitable journalism sector that includes both more diversity in leadership in the journalism space and more content for and by people from the aforementioned priority communities. Furthermore, Ford’s strategy has resulted in additional resources for its own grantees and other journalism organizations that center equity, both through direct activities and the halo effect of the Ford Foundation’s widely respected name.

## Evaluation Approach

This evaluation focuses on the Ford CFE Journalism Program’s strategy from 2016–2021. While other Ford program areas occasionally fund journalism and media, this evaluation only includes grants held by the Program Officer leading the CFE Journalism Program, funded by the CFE budget, and mapped onto CFE Journalism outcomes. The success of this evaluation relied on the participation of Ford Foundation’s staff, grantees, and peers in the field who participated in this evaluation process.

To measure progress toward near and medium term outcomes, our data include:

1. **Grantees’ self-reported data**, as collected through Ford’s competitive letters of inquiry (LOI) and grant applications, as well as a grantee survey<sup>1</sup> and interviews<sup>2</sup> with a subset of priority grantees (as defined by the CFE team);
2. **Journalism sector-level data** gathered by professional industry organizations such as Media Impact Funders (MIF), Institute for Nonprofit News (INN), and Local Independent Online News Publishers (LION);
3. **Ford background and strategy** documents; and
4. **Interviews** with Ford peers in philanthropy.

<sup>1</sup> We sent the survey to 78 grantees, and 54 responded (69% response rate).

<sup>2</sup> We conducted interviews with 22 grantees. Seventeen grantees were compensated with a \$100 gift card in gratitude for their time. And five additional grantees that are featured in case studies were compensated with a \$150 gift card in recognition of additional requests we made for information, materials, and to address follow-up questions.

# Ford Foundation Journalism Program Strategy, 2016—2021

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The Ford Foundation Journalism Program made 186 grants to 110 organizations totaling \$57.5 million from 2016–2021.<sup>3</sup>

*The CFE Journalism Program’s strategy has included two distinct approaches:*

1. **Direct support** for journalism organizations and leaders, as well as organizations that support them at the sector level; and
2. **Field building activities** that have included convenings, commissioned research, collaborative funding, and direct engagement with the field of journalism philanthropy.

## Journalism Strategy Assumptions and Theory of Change

Ford’s CFE Journalism Program views a robust, inclusive, and sustainable journalism sector as a key component of a more inclusive and resilient American democracy. The CFE Journalism Program’s theory of change assumes that change will happen from the bottom up: As existing organizations that are led by and directly serve women, people of color, LGBTQ+ people, and those living in rural communities are strengthened and new journalism organizations and leaders from these communities are developed, these innovative organizations will become stronger and more resilient. Ultimately, the CFE Journalism Program believes this robust and equitable journalism sector<sup>4</sup> that reaches and serves priority communities will result in increased trust among community members, broader publics, and newsrooms, thus combating mis- and disinformation in these spaces. And while the CFE Journalism Program’s strategy does not prioritize direct investment in legacy or mainstream media that traditionally has been made by and for white populations, its theory of change posits that a newly robust equitable journalism sector will ultimately influence mainstream<sup>5</sup> media with narratives and perspectives, thereby contributing to a shared understanding of reality among U.S. residents.

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<sup>3</sup>. This total amount includes all direct grantmaking from the CFE Journalism program, Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) grants, and Social Bond grants.

<sup>4</sup>. We use the term ‘equitable journalism sector’ to refer to the strengthening of pre-existing community and ethnic media together with newly emerging journalism organizations that are founded, led by, and explicitly serve Ford’s priority communities. In Ford’s understanding of the journalism sector overall, equitable journalism organizations exist alongside mainstream media. The CFE Journalism Program’s strategy’s focus is on supporting equitable journalism organizations, rather than incremental change within mainstream media.

<sup>5</sup>. Historically, mainstream media has used ‘objectivity’ as a principle for reporting that has, in practice, meant reporting through a white lens (largely by white reporters), which misrepresents society as a whole.

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT CONTEXT

There is a **market failure in journalism** that has resulted in the closure or gutting of local news outlets, requiring new models for financial sustainability.<sup>6</sup>

The journalism industry **has made insufficient progress in becoming inclusive** — in terms of staff, leadership, boards, and content — of women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ communities, or people living in and serving rural communities, and this has left organizations that prioritize these communities under-resourced.<sup>7</sup>

**Organizations serving women, people of color, people with disabilities, LGBTQ+ communities, and underserved rural communities** require philanthropic support, among other important vehicles, for the continued development of new models of journalism to serve these communities.<sup>8</sup>

## ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

**Women, people of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and people from underserved rural communities** are **best suited to develop new models of journalism** that will be trusted by people in their communities and people in the U.S. more broadly.

It is **more effective to contribute to large-scale change by investing primarily in organizations that are already doing strategically aligned work**, thereby strengthening and growing an equitable journalism sector, rather than investing in those that would need to incrementally change deeply seated institutional norms and practices.

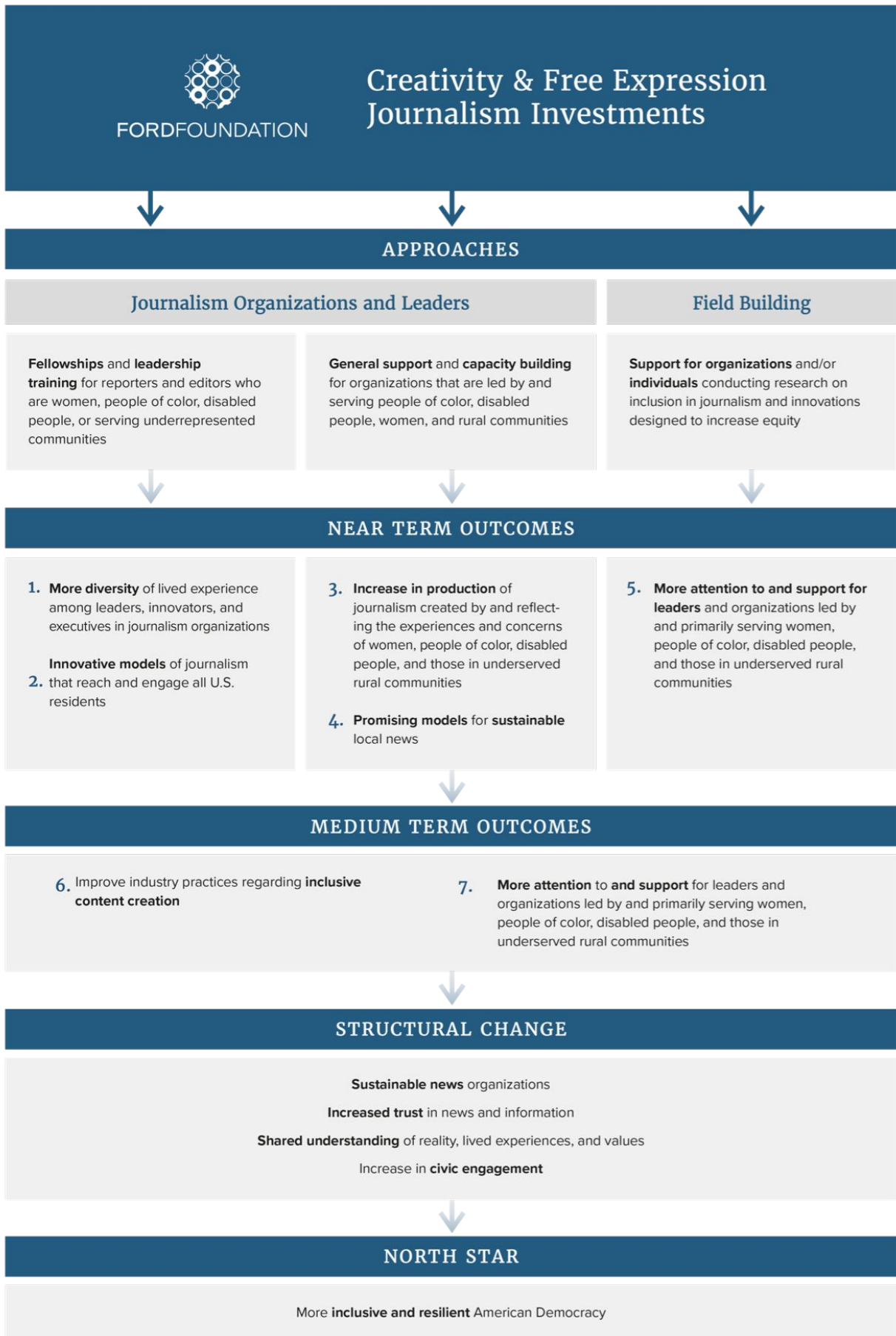
Investing in **early-stage and/or small organizations** with small budgets and clear visions is an essential element for **cultivating lasting change**.

Over the medium term, Ford posits that the combination of a newly developed equitable journalism sector together with more inclusive mainstream organizations and narratives will contribute to increased civic engagement among U.S. residents, thereby contributing to a more inclusive and resilient American democracy.

<sup>6</sup> About one-third of all newspapers that existed in 2005 are expected to cease to exist by 2025, with about one-fourth already gone as of summer 2022, and most communities that lose a newspaper don't have access to a digital, community serving replacement. "The state of local news, 2022 report," by Penny Abernathy. Local News Initiative. <https://localnewsinitiative.northwestern.edu/research/state-of-local-news/report/>

<sup>7</sup> As of 2018, racial and ethnic minorities comprised 17% of newsroom staff at print and digital outlets, and just 13% of leadership positions. "Decades of failure," by Gabriela Arana. Columbia Journalism Review. Fall 2018. [https://www.cjr.org/special\\_report/race-ethnicity-newsrooms-data.php](https://www.cjr.org/special_report/race-ethnicity-newsrooms-data.php)

<sup>8</sup> From 2013 to 2017, about \$1.1 billion of philanthropic funding went to journalism organizations in the U.S., but only 8.1% of the dollars went to organizations designed to serve "racial and ethnic groups, women and girls, and LGBTQ+ communities." "Advancing diversity, equity, and inclusion in journalism: What funders can do," by Michelle Polyak and Kate Donnelly. Democracy Fund, 2019. [https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2019\\_DF\\_AdvancingDEInJournalism.pdf](https://democracyfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/2019_DF_AdvancingDEInJournalism.pdf)



# Outcomes and Insights

There is significant evidence that Ford has made progress toward desired outcomes among its portfolio of journalism organizations and leaders. While it will take time to fully materialize, there is also some evidence that these direct outcomes have begun to have ripple effects across the broader field of journalism both through a fundamental recomposition of the sector overall and, at times, by influencing mainstream media with new reporting approaches, audience engagement tactics, and more inclusive and holistic narratives. The table below presents progress toward Ford’s desired outcomes among grantees and across the field as observed by this evaluation.

Approach: Journalism Organizations & Leaders	Evidence of Progress <sup>9</sup>	
Desired Near Term Outcomes	Among grantees	Across the field
<b>Outcome 1:</b> More diversity of lived experience among leaders, innovators, and executives in journalism organizations	 Strong	 Medium
<b>Outcome 2:</b> Innovative models of journalism that reach and engage all U.S. residents	 Strong	 Too Soon to Tell
<b>Outcome 3:</b> Increase in production of journalism created by and reflecting the experiences and concerns of women, people of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and those in underserved rural communities	 Strong	 Medium
<b>Outcome 4:</b> Promising models for sustainable local news	 Medium	 Too Soon to Tell
<b>Outcome 5:</b> More attention to and support for leaders and organizations led by and primarily serving women, people of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and those in underserved rural communities	 Strong	 Strong
Medium Term Outcomes	Evidence of Progress Across the Field	
<b>Outcome 6:</b> Improve industry practices regarding newsroom equity and inclusion	 Weak	
<b>Outcome 7:</b> Improve industry practices regarding inclusive content creation and narratives	Too Soon to Tell	

# Near Term Outcomes

## Outcome 1

### More diversity of lived experience among leaders, innovators, and executives in journalism organizations



**Finding:** Grantee organizations led by people from Ford's priority communities have grown the equitable journalism sector.

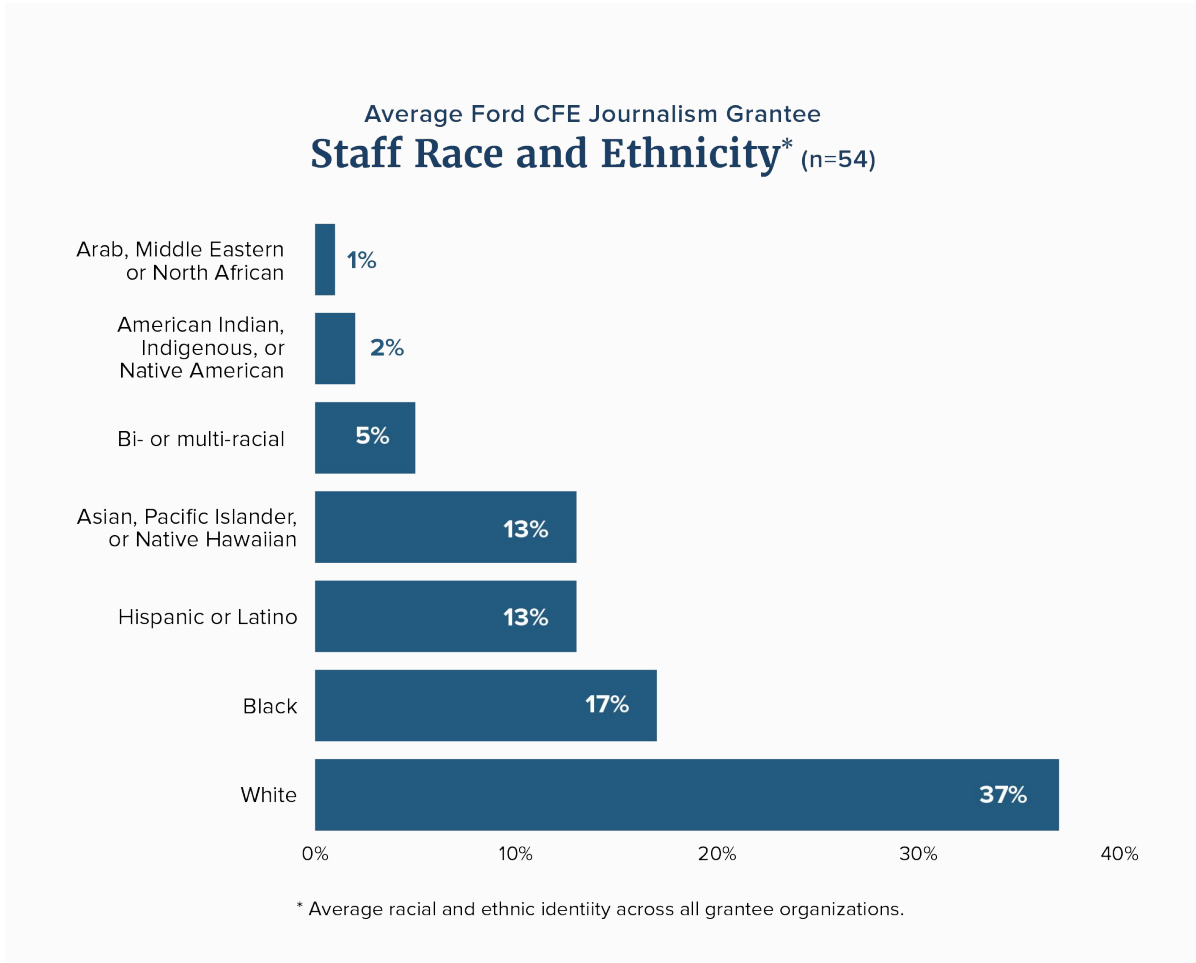
**Finding:** By supporting new and emerging organizations with diverse leaders and executives, Ford is effectively diversifying the overall field of journalism, but the evidence about the degree to which this is contributing to field-level change is mixed.

The CFE Journalism Program has intentionally moved to support early stage organizations with diverse leadership that are doing innovative work and do not otherwise have access to philanthropic investment. Initial grants that fit this approach range from about \$50,000 to \$300,000 and could include single or multi-year support. Even limited support is crucial for an organization without relationships in philanthropy, and initiating a relationship with Ford ultimately opens up new opportunities, as will be elaborated below. Moreover, grantees who received a single year of support then participated in the letter of inquiry (LOI) process, which has led to more robust multi-year support for some grantees.

This approach was perhaps the single most impactful choice that the Journalism team made from 2016 through 2021. This evaluation has surfaced evidence that by supporting journalism organizations and leaders with a diversity of lived experiences, Ford is contributing to the growth of an equitable journalism sector, and to some extent, changes across the field overall. In general, Ford grantee organizations are more diverse than the journalism industry, which has historically been and continues to be predominantly white. On average 37% of organizations' staff that responded to our grantee survey identify as white. By comparison, the most recent survey of nonprofit newsrooms indicates that about 56% of all nonprofit news staff members are white. And in the American Society of News Editor's last diversity survey of the newspaper industry in 2018, 77.4% of staff identified as white.

<sup>9</sup>. In developing these criteria we considered qualitative and quantitative data from our survey of grantees and publicly available information about the field, as well as data from our survey of grantees, interviews with grantees, conversations with peer funders, and publicly available information about the state of the field from industry experts. Outcomes rated as "strong" indicate that we have high confidence of progress based on our qualitative and quantitative information; outcomes rated as "medium" indicate that the information provides some evidence, but not enough for us to confidently judge or confirm the progress as "strong;" outcomes rated as "weak" indicate that there is no evidence of progress, or perhaps evidence that runs contrary to Ford's desired outcome; "too soon to tell" indicates an outcome whose activities require more time to develop in order to make a judgment.

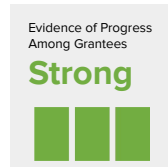
With respect to gender, according to our grantee survey, grantee staff are on average more than half woman identifying, and six organizations (of 54) have trans-identifying staff (11%). And in 2021, the median percentage of executive leadership that identified as women among Ford’s grantees was 73%.



It is less clear if there have been improvements in the diversity of commercially owned for-profit newsrooms. Industry-wide data is difficult to assess with confidence because of widespread unwillingness among commercial newsrooms to participate in an annual diversity survey that the News Leaders Association (NLA) (formerly the American Society of News Editors) has conducted since 1978. The unwillingness of organizations to put in the work to share diversity data is revealing in that it suggests either a lack of commitment to diverse staffing or a rejection of the idea that it's important in the news industry.

## Outcome 2

# Innovative models of journalism that reach and engage all U.S. residents



**Finding:** Grantee organizations led by people from Ford’s priority communities have grown the equitable journalism sector.



**Finding:** By supporting new and emerging organizations with diverse leaders and executives, Ford is effectively diversifying the overall field of journalism, but the evidence about the degree to which this is contributing to field-level change is mixed.

At Ford, “innovative models” refers to organizations that are re-defining journalism and engaging deeply with communities for reporting purposes. At times, these innovative organizations are trying new platforms, technologies, and methods for reaching and engaging key audiences with critical and trusted information.

There are two facets of the CFE Journalism Program’s approach that have contributed to innovative models of journalism that are reaching and engaging residents across the U.S.

1. In keeping with its expansive notion of innovation, Ford supported grantees that center equity in their work, regardless of what developmental stage the organization is in, rather than prioritizing those who have a long track record of audience reach and revenue. Some of the most innovative organizations in Ford’s CFE Journalism Program received funding as early as a year after being launched when they were still very much in “start-up” mode, meaning they were founded within the past two years and did not have full operating budgets but were able to demonstrate that they could reach one or more populations whose information needs weren't being met by mainstream media.
2. Ford’s approach to funding through general operating grants allows and supports organizations to innovate freely.

This evaluation observed a range of innovative approaches grantees are undertaking to engage their communities in the reporting process, produce relevant content, and ensure information is reaching audiences. For these emerging organizations, simply delivering information is not seen as sufficient; instead, emerging organizations are delivering actionable information to audiences so that they can directly engage in their communities and civic institutions. Some of these creative uses of mediums and platforms include podcasts, video, SMS text messaging, WhatsApp groups and newsletters, and live

events (both in-person and virtual). These approaches are important because they reach audiences in nontraditional ways. For instance, while only seven percent of the population gets news from podcasts "often," adults aged 18–29 are the most likely to do so. It is an

“Not only have we had a lot of impact in our communities, but we’ve forced other publications to think about how to reach and engage low income immigrants across the U.S.”

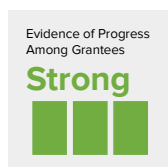
-Grantee

area of potential growth<sup>10</sup>. Within the Journalism Program, grantees with innovative models to reach and engage specific audiences tend to be emerging organizations that don't have the institutional baggage of legacy organizations and can develop approaches based on where their ideal audience is and be flexible enough to change as circumstances dictate.

While the CFE Journalism Program has not employed specific approaches to directly intervene in mainstream media innovation, there is evidence that its investments to support a robust equitable journalism sector have catalyzed the spread of innovative models across the field. Many of Ford’s grantees, such as Documented, AI for the People, Futuro Media, and City Bureau, among others, are at the forefront of redefining journalism in order to reach and engage historically underserved audiences and are being recognized industry-wide for their efforts. And Ford has supported collaborative efforts, including innovative work between journalism organizations and nonprofits, such as a collaboration between the Puerto Rican Centro de Periodismo Investigativo (CPI) and a small, independent, non-media organization, Todas, to advance public discussion about gender equity in Puerto Rico.

### Outcome 3

Increase in production of journalism created by and reflecting the experiences and concerns of women, people of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and those in underserved rural communities



**Finding:** Grantees' work and contributions have directly led to more journalism created by and for Ford’s priority communities.



**Finding:** There is some evidence that Ford’s approach has resulted in an increase in production of journalism by and for Ford priority communities across the field, beyond Ford grantees.

<sup>10</sup>. According to the Pew Research Center, about 23% of U.S. residents say they get news from podcasts, while only 7% say they do so often, "suggesting there is still quite a lot of growth potential for this nascent industry." "Nearly a quarter of Americans get news from podcasts," by Mason Walker. Pew Research Center. February 15, 2022. <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/02/15/nearly-a-quarter-of-americans-get-news-from-podcasts/>

While Ford's support has resulted in an increase in production of journalism by and for Ford's priority communities across grantees, this outcome is most pronounced in established newsrooms. In the grantee survey, when asked how organizations made use of Ford's support, all twelve "established" newsrooms that serve general or statewide audiences said that they were able to directly apply these resources to staff diversification and increased coverage by and for Ford's priority communities.

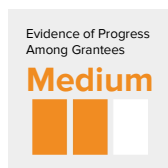
Futuro Media, a multi-time grantee that most recently received a Building Institutions and Networks (BUILD) grant that provides multi-year general operating support, is a prime example of how Ford's unrestricted, long-term investment in an established organization proved to be transformational. Futuro Media has evidence that its content, of which there is now significantly more due to Ford's funding, is reaching millions of people across the U.S. Latino USA continues to air on more than 300 public media stations across the country, Futuro Studios' productions garner millions of podcast downloads, and Latino Rebels reaches "hundreds of thousands" of unique web visitors monthly. In addition to direct support in the form of the BUILD grant, Futuro told us that Ford's investment has yielded interest and philanthropic support from other institutional funders, resulting in significant growth since 2019, when it received the grant. In 2021, Futuro Media's budget was \$4.7 million; in 2022, it's on track to be \$6.7 million.

Among grants given from 2016–2021, 70% of grants and 82.5% of dollars were designated for general support.

While BUILD grants are the exception, not the rule (BUILD grants comprise 20% of dollars given from 2016–2021), many of the grants from the CFE Journalism Program's regular funding source are designated as general support, allowing organizations to use the funds as they deem most necessary and important.

#### Outcome 4

### Promising models for sustainable local news



**Finding:** Grantees are moving toward sustainability through Ford's general operating support and by leveraging their success to access more resources and increase their influence in the field.



**Finding:** It is too soon to tell if Ford's approach is contributing to the spread of promising models for sustainability across the field.

Ford's flexible approach to supporting news organizations as they strive for greater sustainability has yielded early signs of progress. Most notably, Ford's CFE journalism strategy is agnostic about models for financial sustainability for any organization; grantees have flexibility to try new things and pivot based on what they're learning. Furthermore, Ford's grants to journalism organizations see a combination of revenue with stable and inclusive organizational practices as contributing to overall organizational resilience.

This view of sustainability is gaining momentum in the field, and in our interviews, all grantees indicated that sustainability means more than financial sustainability. Instead, they defined it in terms of organizational infrastructure, competitive salaries and benefits for staff, succession planning, and staff professional development. The industry support organization LION Publishers defines sustainability as a combination of financial health, operational resilience, and journalistic impact,<sup>11</sup> wherein all three are required in order to have a truly sustainable news organization that is having a positive effect.

Early evidence suggests that Ford's trust in grantees to pursue sustainability in this manner pays off. This is most evident in the grantees' ability to secure additional funding that allows them to invest not only in editorial work, but also in business development, fundraising capacity, and in general to work toward operational resilience.

“Other funders ask us for a membership plan or a specific revenue strategy. Ford’s support allows us to take opportunities as they come and pivot based on what we’re learning.”

-Grantee

Additionally, Ford's support, guidance, and advice have helped organizations achieve independence and move in the direction of sustainability. Many emerging organizations that focus on Ford's priority populations start with fiscal sponsors or are otherwise attached to an institution. Because Ford's CFE Journalism Program officers are deeply familiar with the field, they are able to provide sound advice for becoming independent and set the foundation for growth and sustainability.

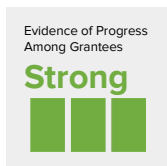
In general, from 2016 through 2021, while the CFE Journalism Program supported many individual organizations in ways that contributed to their resilience and sustainability, it did not directly support any journalism-sector sustainability initiatives.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup> "What does it mean to be a 'sustainable' news business?" by Ben DeJarnette, LION. <https://www.lionpublishers.com/what-does-it-mean-to-be-a-sustainable-news-business/>

<sup>12</sup> Examples of sector-wide sustainability initiatives include the American Journalism Project, the News Revenue Hub, and the National Trust for Local News.

### Outcome 5

More attention to and support for leaders and organizations led by and primarily serving women, people of color, disabled people, LGBTQ+ people, and those in underserved rural communities.

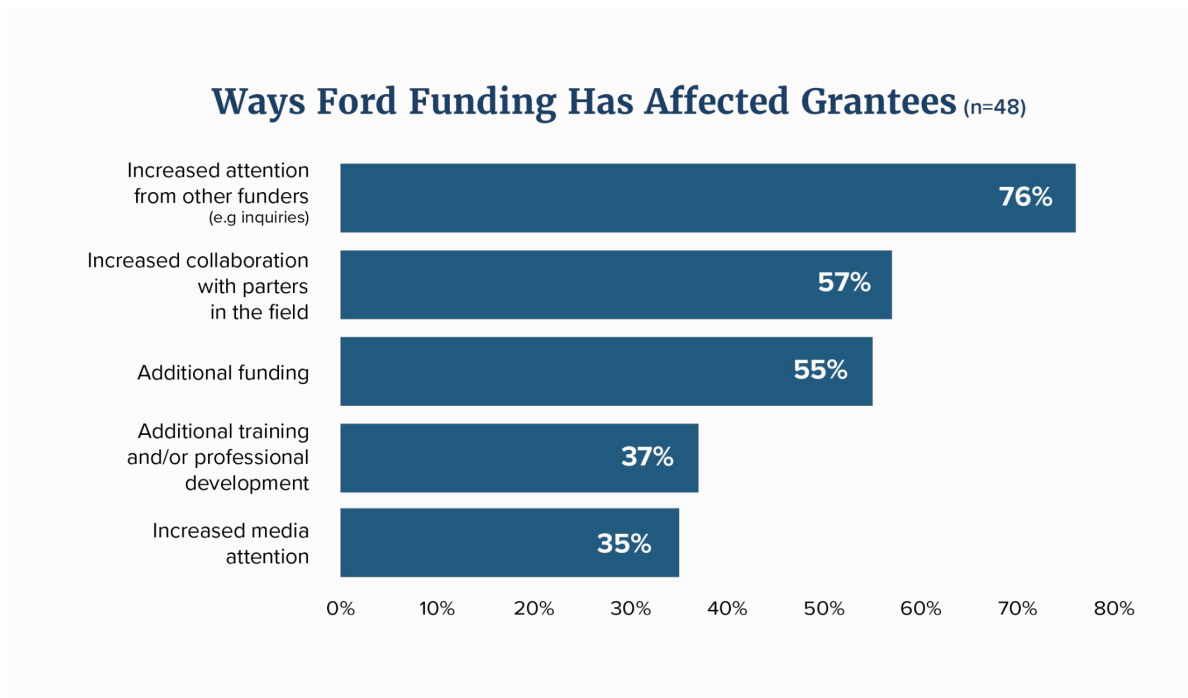


**Finding:** There is a “halo” effect of Ford funding for grantees whereby organizations receive increased attention and often funding as a result of being a Ford grantee.



**Finding:** Collaborative funding through the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund has generated more than \$20 million in new support for journalism organizations aligned with Ford’s goals and brought new funders into the space.

Ford’s CFE Journalism Program grantees say that there is a “halo” effect that comes along with Ford support in that it serves as a mark of validation that often results in more attention and often resources for these organizations. In the grantee survey, more than three quarters of grantee respondents say that funding from Ford has resulted in increased attention from other funders (76%). Other significant ways that receiving funding from Ford has affected grantees include additional funding (55%) and increased collaboration with partners in the field (57%).



Ford's main tactic to bring more attention to journalism leaders and organizations of and serving its priority communities has been collaborative funding, specifically through the co-founding of the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund (REJ Fund). The REJ Fund seeks to bolster the capacity and sustainability of news organizations led by and serving people of color and partners in equity in order to increase civic engagement for communities of color, housed at Borealis Philanthropies. The Fund launched in September 2019 with \$3.6 million with donors including the Ford Foundation, Craig Newmark Philanthropies, Democracy Fund, Google News Initiative, and the News Integrity Initiative at the Craig Newmark Graduate School of Journalism at CUNY. The fund made its first round of investments in April 2020, immediately following the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, investing \$2.3 million in grants to 16 news organizations serving communities of color across the country. In its third year of operation, the REJ Fund has now mobilized more than \$20 million of support, and also counts the American Journalism Project, the Heising-Simons Foundation, and the JPB Foundation among its funders.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, when the REJ Fund first organized and launched, it was composed entirely of journalism funders. The REJ Fund's current director, Alicia Bell, believes Ford's involvement early on in the launch of the REJ Fund played a role in bringing in donors from other sectors. Another founding member, the Democracy Fund, noted that Ford's "moral authority" in not only the journalism sector but in the social justice sector more broadly brought attention to the fund and attracted potential funders outside of historical journalism supporters.

## Outcome 6

### Improve industry practices regarding newsroom equity & inclusion



**Finding:** At this point in time, there is little evidence that Ford's investments intended to directly influence industry practices regarding newsroom equity and inclusion are contributing to significant progress.

<sup>13</sup> Ford directly supports three of the 16 REJ Fund grantees: Documented, Epicenter-NYC, and MLK50: Justice through Journalism. These grantees said the benefits of being a REJ grantee, in addition to a Ford grantee, include exposure to other funders and a new shared network with other equitable journalism organizations.

The CFE Journalism Program has employed two main tactics in an attempt to directly influence industry practices to be more equitable and inclusive:

1. Field-building research to shift norms and practices.
2. Support for field-building organizations that directly support journalists and leaders from Ford's priority communities as well as providing resources to other newsrooms to improve equity and inclusion practices.

Ford has had mixed results from its supported research and direct outreach. Ford commissioned three major pieces of research in 2019 and 2020 — Reconstructing American News, Investing in Equitable News and Media Projects, and Gender Equity in the News Media. While one peer funder recognized this research as some of the “most valuable” in the field, they said that it goes “underutilized” because people don’t

“Ford has funded some of the most valuable research in the field, but it goes underutilized because people don’t know about it.”

*-Peer Funder*

know about it. Other funders and grantees alike said they were unaware of Ford supported research. Beyond that, both peers and grantees suggested they are unfamiliar with Ford’s overall approach to journalism funding due to a lack of external communication, challenges finding publicly available information, and, in the case of philanthropic peers, a lack of relationship with Ford staff through journalism philanthropy networks.

Ford's support of journalism's most important association organizations is an essential component of supporting equity and inclusion in the field, as these organizations support individual journalists from Ford's priority communities, in addition to creating materials and resources for the field more broadly in order to improve coverage of and for these communities. Ford supports all major associations, including, the National Association of Black Journalists (NABJ), the National Association of Hispanic Journalists (NAHJ), the Asian American Journalists Association (AAJA), the Native American Journalists Association (NAJA), and the National Lesbian and Gay Journalists Association. Ford has provided foundational support for the Disabled Journalists Association, which has not yet officially launched.

These professional journalism member associations have increased their revenues in recent years, and it is partially credited to Ford's general operations support. The executive directors we interviewed said that the support has allowed them to add staff

capacity as a way to establish an organizational infrastructure, as opposed to relying on contractors or member volunteers for programming.<sup>14</sup> However, because these organizational efforts have only recently been supported, there is less evidence that their work is contributing to shifts in equity and inclusion practices more broadly across the field.

## Outcome 7

### Improve industry practices regarding inclusive content creation and narratives



**Finding:** The distribution strategies of some key investments in journalism organizations are designed to influence mainstream narratives, especially with regard to Ford's priority communities; however, it is too soon to tell if this approach is contributing to improved industry practices regarding inclusive content creation and narratives.

While the Ford CFE Journalism Program does not generally fund journalism organizations for specific types of content creation, it has intentionally selected grantee partners that have specific approaches for inclusive content creation and have distribution models designed to place their content in other mainstream media. These grantees work to intentionally push the industry to develop more inclusive content creation practices by freely syndicating their own reporting, as well as through trainings, reporting guides, and other field resources.

“The stories we tell are the stories people focus on. And what they focus on is what they will care about and take action on.”

*-Grantee*

The Economic Hardship Reporting Project is a prime example of a grantee that is mission-built to influence mainstream media coverage with respect to priority Ford communities. EHRP hires freelancers with first-hand experience of economic hardship and works to identify partners with broad audiences across the U.S. for publication. EHRP's attempt to shift the narrative about what it means to be poor in the U.S. and solutions for solving income insecurity, is based on a collaborative publication model designed to influence its partners' thinking, ultimately leading to better reporting in journalism as a whole.

# Strategic Considerations

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This evaluation has surfaced a series of considerations for the Ford CFE Journalism Program to include in its next five year strategy.

- **At what stage of an emerging organization’s development is Ford’s support no longer essential for continued organizational maturation and resilience?**

For new and emerging organizations, Ford’s support has proven to be critical in establishing sound organizational practices, increasing content production, and engaging with audiences. This early support, which often took the form of short-term project support followed by long-term general operating grants, has contributed to revenue growth in these organizations both by supporting proof-of-vision as well as the halo effect of Ford’s stamp-of-approval.

In the next five years, there is opportunity for Ford to observe at what point these organizations are strong enough to sustain beyond Ford’s support so that it can continue to invest in a wide range of new and emerging organizations.

- **How can Ford continue to support emerging organizations to conduct deeper audience learning and research?**

As elaborated in the How Change Happens model, the CFE Journalism Program is ultimately interested in understanding what communities are being reached and served by grantees, whether this work is resulting in increased trust among community members and newsrooms, and subsequent effects of these relationships on individuals’ civic engagement in support of American democracy. Nonprofit news organizations, and particularly those that are young, rarely have capacity and expertise to conduct this deep audience research.

There is opportunity for Ford to encourage and support this work in its grantees, as well as to facilitate sharing of approaches and learning across its cohort of grantees and with the field more broadly.

- **Can Ford further develop a definition of “sustainability” that acknowledges a diversity of models and includes aspects of organizational resilience beyond revenue?**

The journalism philanthropy sector has dedicated significant energy and resources to addressing sustainability in news. However, much of this conversation focuses on revenue, with an emphasis on individual paying members/subscribers. Ford’s more expansive understanding of sustainability, which is agnostic about revenue streams and creates space for organizations to define sustainability with respect to staff experience, power sharing, and more, is a perspective that, if further elaborated, would add value to the space.

- **How can Ford continue to support grantees to expand notions of “Journalism” — who does it, how is it published, how is it consumed and engaged with — and socialize these with the field?**

Ford supports journalism that looks familiar to many in the space — investigative reporting, daily reporting, and explanatory journalism. But it also supports organizations that are innovating both the methods of production of journalism and the means of distribution and engagement. As the field grapples with defining what journalism *is* in our increasingly digital, networked reality, it would benefit from more transparency from Ford around who its Journalism Program funds and why.