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Mapping philanthropic funding for **healthy information ecosystems**

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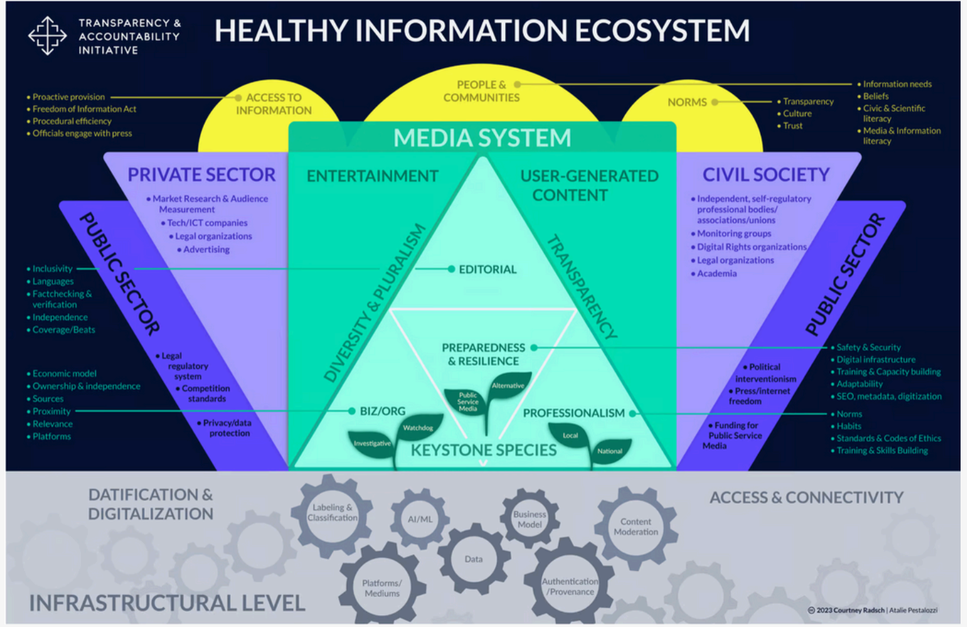
INTRODUCTION

A healthy information environment is essential for addressing today's global challenges. Access to reliable data empowers individuals, organizations, and governments to navigate crises, mobilize civil society, create more targeted public policies, and advance efforts against pressing issues such as pandemics and climate change.

Access to information is not only a "fundamental component of good governance" but also a linchpin to drive positive change on a local and global scale. Healthy information ecosystems provide the necessary infrastructure for holding governments and corporations accountable, supporting international cooperation, and maintaining public trust.

The role of healthy information ecosystems is also recognized by philanthropic donors, including the Trust, Accountability, and Inclusion collaborative (TAI) members. Philanthropy understands that healthy information ecosystems are fundamental to achieving trustworthy funding models and better support partners. By investing in information infrastructure, behavioral change, legal defense, freedom of expression, and media, they contribute to more effective, transparent, and evidence-based efforts.

Disinformation, privacy concerns, cybersecurity threats, and the spread of extremist ideologies are just a few of the challenges associated with information access, use, and impact. These challenges often feed into one another, making it imperative to address them comprehensively and systemically.



To understand the need to work towards healthy information environments that are also resilient, ethical, and responsive, TAI launched in 2023 an information ecosystem map, created in partnership with Dr. Courtney Radsch, fellow at the Center for Democracy and Technology, and currently Director of the Center for Journalism and Liberty at the Open Markets Institute. This visual tool considers all stakeholders, from media organizations and technology platforms to governments, civil society, and individuals, recognizing their interdependencies and roles in shaping the ecosystem. It pinpoints infrastructural, societal, and technological factors impacting the system.

Our next question was where support is going within the information ecosystem. Where is philanthropic funding currently targeted? Where are the gaps? How do different streams of support reinforce each other (if at all)? These are some of the questions that motivated this funder mapping that we hope is useful for funders and field partners alike.

PURPOSE OF THIS MAPPING

TAI is a collaborative of donors whose priorities include supporting evolution and sustainability of a healthy information ecosystem. Given our coordination role, it is important for TAI to understand the funding trends, determine the current distribution of grantmaking, and identify gaps that might merit more support.

This mapping complements the analysis performed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) DAC Governance Network (GovNet), who undertook a parallel review of Official Development Assistance (ODA) flows related to the information ecosystem as reported to (OECD). Therefore, the focus of our analysis is the philanthropic funding directed to aid recipient countries, which will allow us to compare it with the ODA flows to better understand the difference in scale between governmental and philanthropic funding to support information ecosystems. Additionally, it will further inform our understanding of where the lion's share of funds is going and where there are significant gaps.

METHODOLOGY

The key source of information is Candid's Foundation Directory, an updated research database of philanthropic giving organized by thematic codes. To ensure reliability of data, we specifically used the Foundation 1000 (F1000) dataset, a curated dataset that consists of all grants of $10,000 or more, awarded by 1,000 of the largest U.S. private and community foundations for a given year.[1]

We identified and analyzed those codes from within Candid's taxonomy (Philanthropy Classification System) that are most relevant to TAI members' support to information ecosystems. In this case, we've selected thirteen codes, distributed on different levels. It should be noted that 11 of the 13 codes selected are under the "Information and communications" code (only the codes "Freedom of association and expression" and "Freedom of information" are under the "Human rights" code).

TAXONOMY OF SELECTED CODES:

Level 1: Information and communications
- Level 2: Communication media
- Level 2: Information communications technology (ICT)
- Level 2: Media access and policy
  - Level 3: Information and media literacy
  - Level 3: Media democracy
- Level 2: News and public information
  - Level 3: Journalism
    - Level 4: Investigative journalism
    - Level 4: Advocacy journalism
  - Level 3: Open data

Level 1: Human rights (not analyzed)
- Level 2: Individual liberties (not analyzed)
  - Level 3: Freedom of association and expression
- Level 2: Social rights (not analyzed)
  - Level 3: Freedom of information

[1] "While this dataset may at first seem quite small (e.g., it represents only 1% of the total number of funders), the set includes a significant portion of total U.S. philanthropic dollars awarded each year. This is because institutional grantmaking data is incredibly skewed, with the largest foundations accounting for a disproportionately large amount of philanthropic dollars." (Candid (2023). Candid research manual: Analyzing grants and other philanthropic transactions. doi.org/10/gsfhbw)

CODE DEFINITIONS ACCORDING TO THE CANDID'S PHILANTHROPY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM:[2]

Advocacy journalism: News gathering, distribution, and analysis that deals with specific issues and delivers an opinion about those issues (opinion and editorial pages of mainstream or alternative media outlets).

Communication media: Platforms and channels that include newspaper, television, cable, video, film, website, or radio production, training and programming, and/or educational programs related to the media.

Freedom of association and expression: Work to support the right of the press to freedom of expression without censorship or other restrictions by government. Work for the right of the media to maintain confidential sources and to maintain defense funds to pay legal expenses of media representatives.

Freedom of information: The right to access information, often held by a public agency, as prerequisite for the transparency and accountability of governments; to safeguard citizens against mismanagement and corruption; and to empower citizen oversight and the right to know.

Information and communications: The gathering, storage, organization, manipulation, dissemination, and display of data, information, communication, and narrative. Included are programs that develop or make use of information technology to increase the amount and complexity of data that can be managed; policies that work to ensure broad availability of information; programs that gather and broadcast news and information about current events; libraries that store and make available information in a variety of formats; media organizations and programs that broadcast information across a variety of platforms; telecommunications services; and information science and computer applications.

Information and media literacy: Efforts to develop and increase the public's ability to find, understand, use, and create media and information.

Information communications technology: Study, development, and use of the constantly developing, interconnected mass of technologies that provide the means of creating, transmitting and receiving, storing and using information, including telecommunications and computer systems: national infrastructures; community wifi services or business networks; individual pieces of hardware or software, etc.

I**nvestigative journalism:** Reporting on a subject of interest or importance which is based on deep, extensive research of long duration. It is often delivered or communicated in long or serialized form.

Journalism: Reporting of news and current events to the public. Includes associations of journalists, reporters and newspapers, reporting organizations, and wire services. Refers to journalism in all forms of media, such as web, print, television, radio, etc.

CODE DEFINITIONS ACCORDING TO THE CANDID'S PHILANTHROPY CLASSIFICATION SYSTEM:[2]

Media access and policy: The right and ability of the public to have direct access to media content, and the right and ability of a content provider to have direct access to the public. This includes access to the appropriate technologies, to full and complete data, to a wide range of information sources, and to resources that allow transparency and comprehensibility in communication.

Media democracy: Activities that serve democratic principles of openness and inclusiveness across a range of mass media, making entertainment, information, opinion, and news available to all citizens. It includes efforts to promote wide and equitable access to media outlets and telecommunications services, fair and neutral provision of information services, and encourage inclusive public discourse through these channels.

News and public information: Study and practice of the provision of news by media and provision of information by businesses and government.

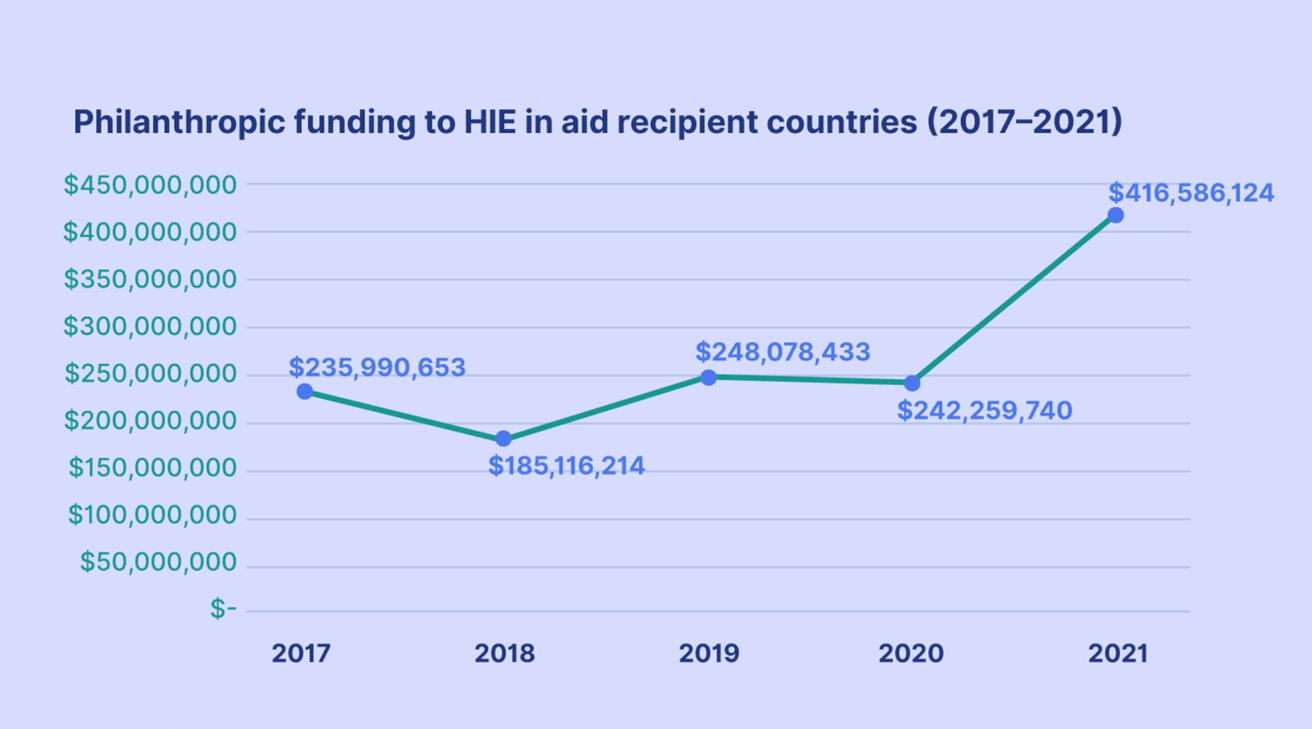
Open data: Making some kinds of data and information freely and widely available for public use, without undue restriction and in a usable format, especially in regard to educational, research, and good government contexts. The focus is often on data made available in a digital, machine-readable format on the internet.

To complement the codes, we also undertook keyword searches of relevant terms such as "disinformation," "misinformation," and "information ecosystem" that are not currently reflected in that taxonomy.

It is important to note that this approach has some limitations. First, U.S.-based philanthropic organizations are not required to disclose their data to Candid. While some information is provided directly, some is scraped and tagged from foundation public disclosures required by the tax authority. In these cases, the information may not be fully exhaustive. In addition, when submitting information to Candid, funders may label their grants subjectively. That is why there may not be full consistency between how different funders tag a grant.

[2] https://taxonomy.candid.org/subjects

How much funding is going to support healthy information ecosystems in aid recipient countries?



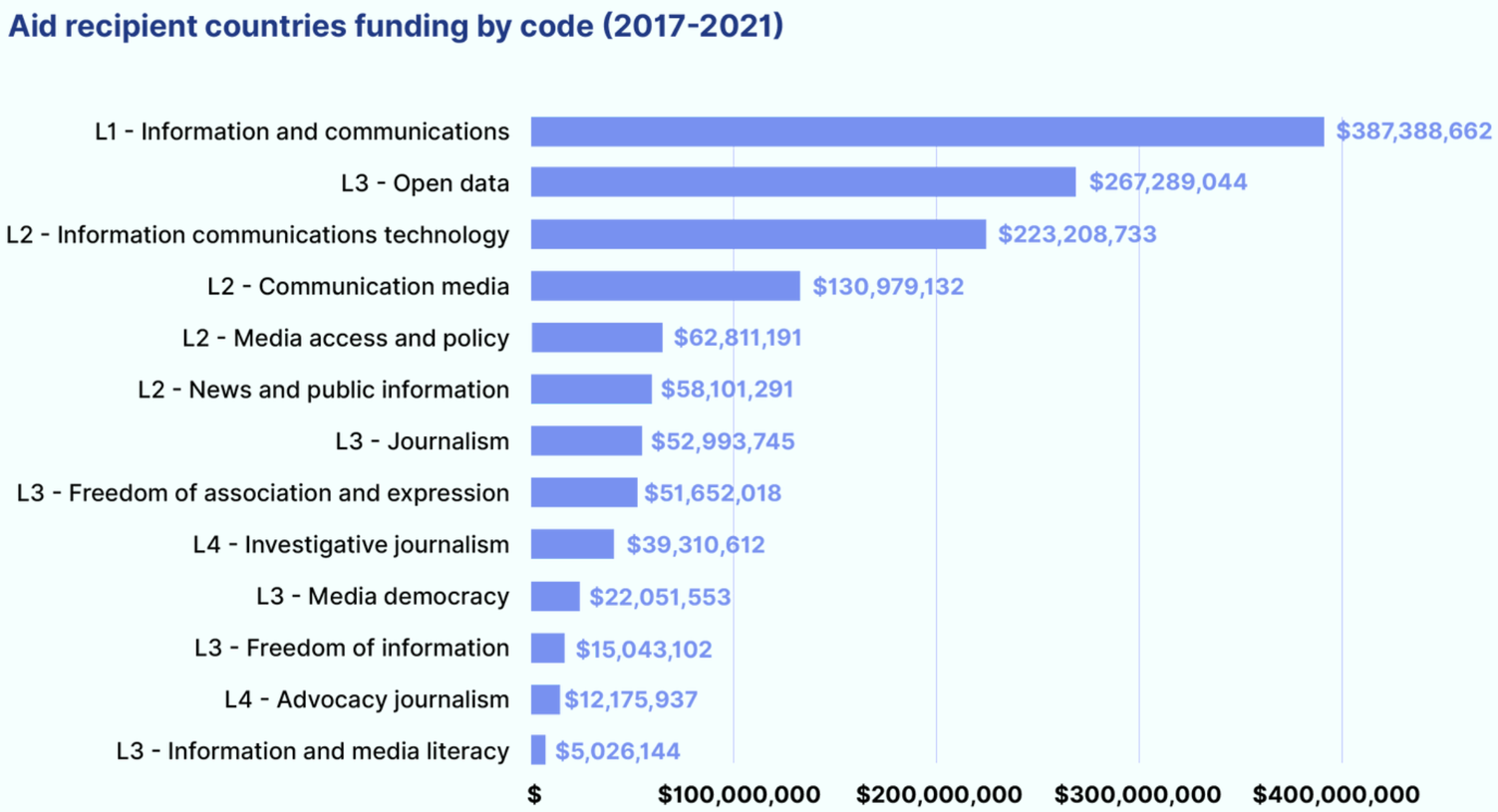
Philanthropic funding to support healthy information ecosystems (HIE) at global level between 2017 and 2021 amounts to US$ 21.3 billion. This represents 2.7% of total philanthropic funding (for all codes) during those years.

Only 6.2% of the philanthropic funding to support information ecosystems was channeled to aid recipient countries: $1.328 billion in five years. This is no surprise, given the funding is coming from U.S. philanthropy, which is, in large part, domestic-oriented.

Between 2017–2020, funding levels remain relatively stable, but in 2021, there is a significant funding jump of 72%. This is because the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which as we will see below, accounts for 50% of total funding to HIE in aid recipient countries (mainly focused on media for development and health communication), rises from $89 million in 2020 to $238 million in 2021. Surprisingly, this is not due to an increase in funding to address COVID-19 issues, with only $24 million in 2021 going to that cause.The rest of the funding goes to common activities funded by the Gates Foundation, including a $40 million grant to Agra, a Kenyan organization focused on driving inclusive agricultural transformation in Africa that has an information and communications component. When data for 2022 and 2023 become available, it will be interesting to see if the trend continues to increase.

To which parts of the information ecosystem in aid recipient countries is funding being directed?

Grants in Candid are labeled with different thematic codes. The following graph shows the distribution of funding according to the main code related to information ecosystems with which they have been labeled.



“Information and communications,” the level 1 code, appears on 29% of the grants. However, it is noteworthy that 20% of the grants correspond to the code “Open data,” which is a level 3 code. Sixty percent of the grants tagged as “Open data” are combined with codes related to health, mainly from the Gates Foundation. The third most frequent code is “Information communications technology,” with 17% of the funding.

To investigate beyond the codes already predefined by the Candid Foundation Directory, we selected five important keywords related to information ecosystems, reflective of TAI member and fellow funder interests: “information ecosystem,” “misinformation,” “disinformation,” “fact-checking,” and “public interest media.” The increasing use of these terms reflects a growing awareness of the critical role that information and media play in society and the importance of taking systemic approaches to ensure that accurate and reliable information is accessible to the public.

However, we realized that the adoption of these terms is not yet reflected in the actual grant descriptions. Of the 2,421 grants analyzed, only 34 include the words “disinformation” or “misinformation,” that is, 1.4% of grants and 0.54% of total funding. “Fact-checking” appears only seven times (0.3%), “public interest media” only once, and “information ecosystem” is not even mentioned. This snapshot can be an early indicator of the lack of the philanthropic sector’s responsiveness to emerging challenges in the information landscape. However, it should be noted that our database only goes up to 2021. Our assumption is that when we have reliable data for 2022 and 2023, we will see an increase in grants referencing these terms.

Who specifically is giving and receiving the most philanthropic funds?

It is useful to look at who is giving the funds: Is it a few funders dominating grantmaking related to the information ecosystem or is it widely distributed? Similarly, are a few grantee partners receiving the bulk of the funds, or are they broadly distributed? To answer, we looked at the top 10 grantmakers, top 10 recipient countries, and top 10 grantees by volume between 2017–2021. It should be noted that Candid’s database contains both funders and regranters, and the latter can be intermediary organizations or NGOs.

Top 10 grantmakers

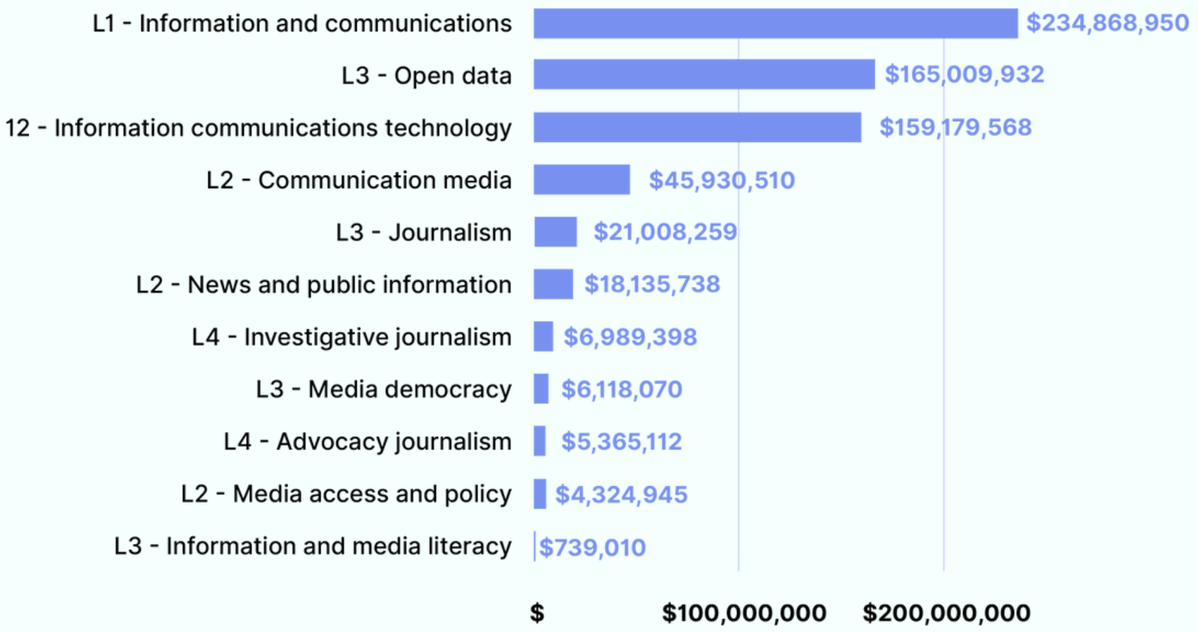
Nº	GRANTMAKER	AMOUNT
1	**Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation**	$667,669,492
2	**Open Society Foundations**	$121,252,615
3	**Ford Foundation**	$67,717,090
4	**The William and Flora Hewlett Foundation**	$55,656,666
5	**The Rockefeller Foundation**	$52,448,655
6	**John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation**	$37,989,388
7	**Bloomberg Philanthropies, Inc.**	$35,948,000
8	**Silicon Valley Community Foundation**	$30,915,850
9	**Omidyar Network Fund, Inc.**	$24,211,940
10	**Gordon E. and Betty I. Moore Foundation**	$12,655,096

Four of the top ten funders that direct their funding to activities in aid recipient countries are TAI members: Open Society Foundations (OSF), Ford Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, and MacArthur Foundation. The top 10 grantmakers account for 83% of the overall funding for HIE, however, the Gates Foundation alone accounts for 50% of the overall funding.

It is worth reviewing the distribution of funding by code of the three major donors—the Gates Foundation, OSF, and the Ford Foundation—to understand to which parts of the information ecosystem they direct their efforts.

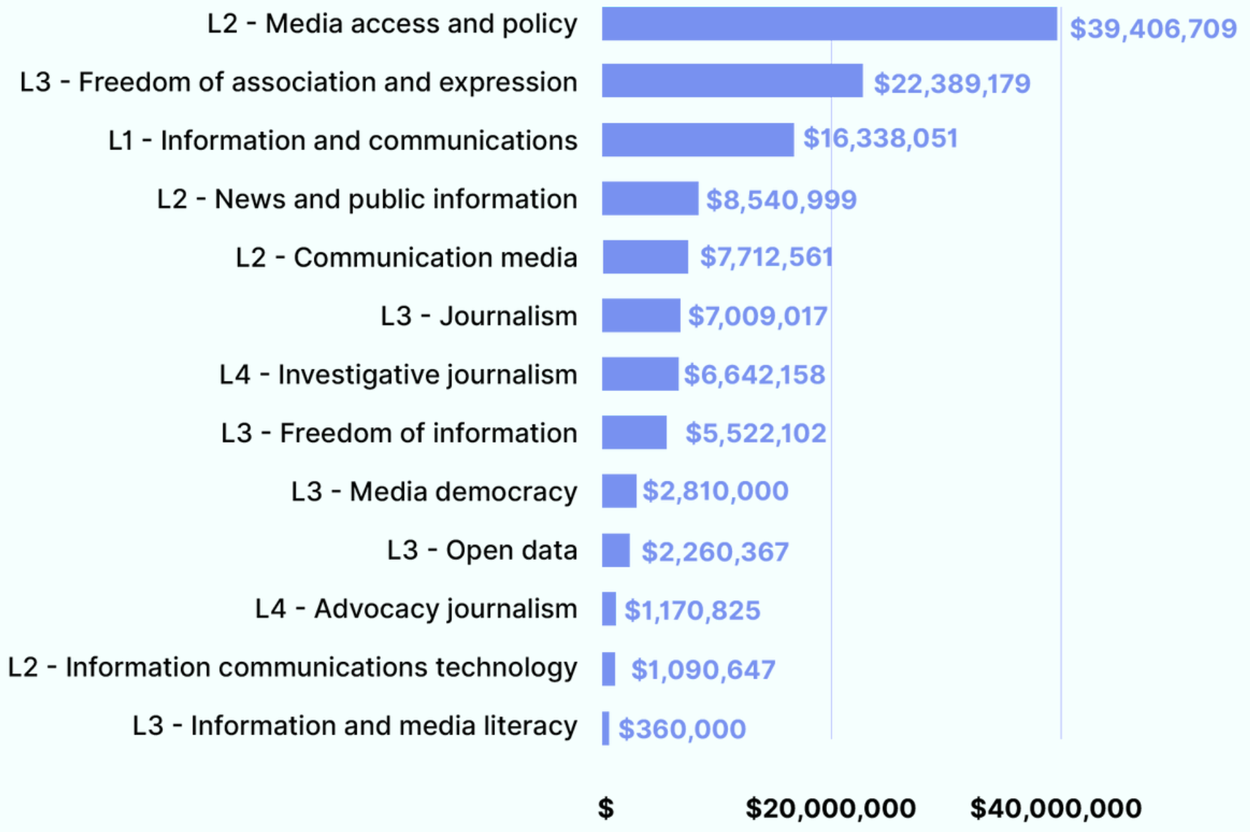
The Gates Foundation's distribution is similar to the overall distribution, favoring the codes "Information and communications," "Open data," and "Information and communications technology"; codes directed to media and information-related topics are not prioritized, as their funding is mostly related to development media and health communications. No grants related to the codes "Freedom of information" and "Freedom of association and expression" were found.

Gates Foundation funding by code (2017-2021)



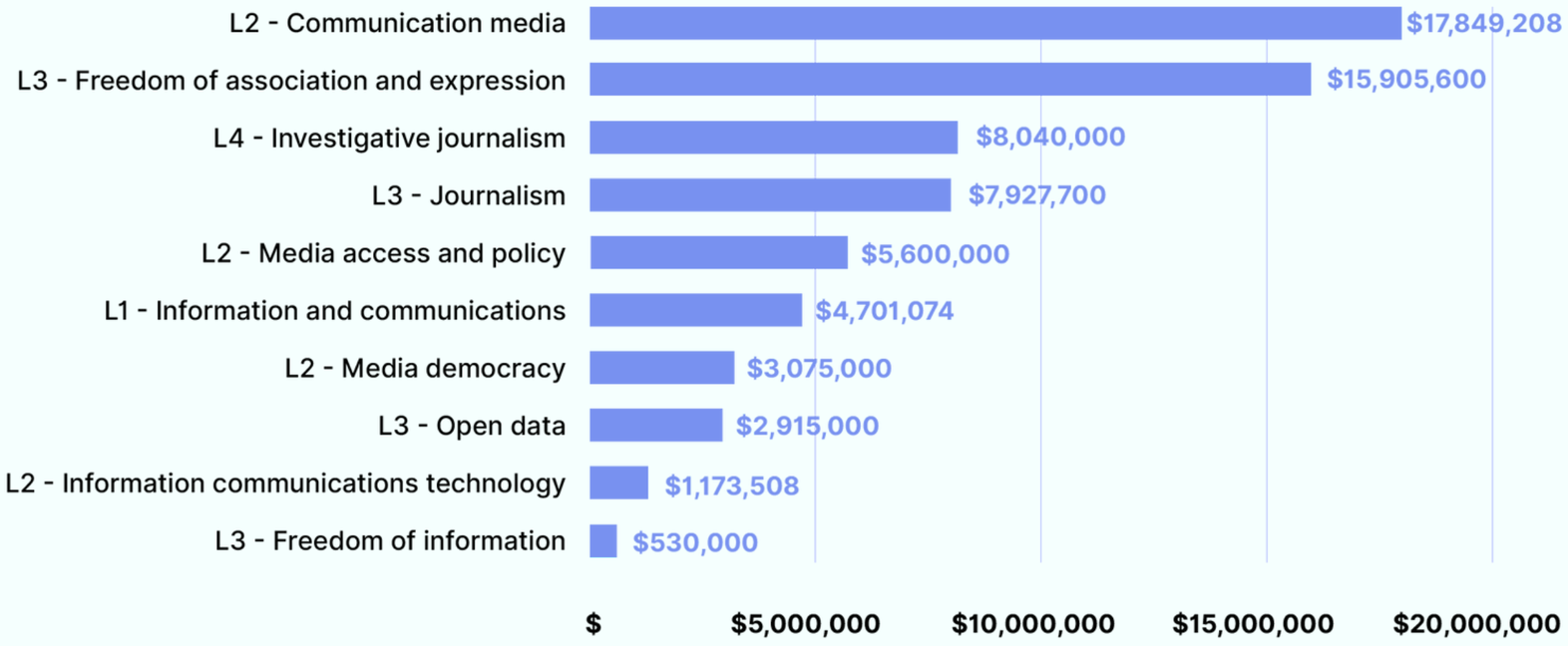
In contrast, in the case of OSF and the Ford Foundation, the “Open data” and “Information and communications technology” codes receive the least funding. OSF prioritizes the codes “Media access and policy,” “Freedom of association and expression,” and “Information and communications,” while Ford invests in the codes “Communication media,” “Freedom of association and expression,” and “Investigative journalism.”

Open Society Foundations funding by code (2017–2021)



Given the current situation of mis and disinformation we live in, the funding directed to “Information and media literacy” seems very low. In the same sense, the investment allocated to “Freedom of information” and “Media democracy” (which includes “a fair and neutral provision of information services and efforts to encourage inclusive public discourse”) is very low in comparison with other codes. These are areas that philanthropic organizations should strengthen if they want to comprehensively address the effects of misinformation and disinformation.

Ford Foundation funding by code (2017–2021)



TOP 10 RECIPIENT COUNTRIES AND GRANTEES

The table below shows an important fact: half of the top ten countries receiving funding, ultimately directed to aid recipient countries, are in the Global North, and those countries receive 69% of total funding (the United States leading with 57%).

This means that most of the philanthropic funding directed to countries in the Global South is channeled through intermediary organizations, such as regranting organizations or international NGOs, that are located in the Global North.This is confirmed by the list of the top 10 recipient organizations:

Nº	RECIPIENT COUNTRY	AMOUNT
1	**United States**	$753,892,964
2	**United Kingdom**	$107,618,987
3	**India**	$106,107,962
4	**Kenya**	$74,367,868
5	**South Africa**	$42,459,722
6	**Switzerland**	$26,918,299
7	**Nigeria**	$19,766,896
8	**Brazil**	$17,220,904
9	**Netherlands**	$14,710,654
10	**Canada**	$10,949,950

Nº	ORGANIZATION	RECIPIENT COUNTRY	AMOUNT
1	New Venture Fund	**United States**	$44,885,00
2	Agra	**United Kingdom**	$40,000,012
3	PATH	**India**	$28,821,899
4	Digital Green	**Kenya**	$28,798,124
5	World Health Organization	**South Africa**	$25,580,151
6	United States Fund for UNICEF	**Switzerland**	$21,502,516
7	International Institute of Information Technology, Bangalore	**Nigeria**	$19,270,000
8	Ted Foundation Inc	**Brazil**	$16,242,624
9	Open Society Foundation of South Africa	**Netherlands**	$16,220,236
10	eGovernments Foundation	**Canada**	$15,945,248

Official Development Assistance and philanthropic support to information ecosystems in aid recipient countries

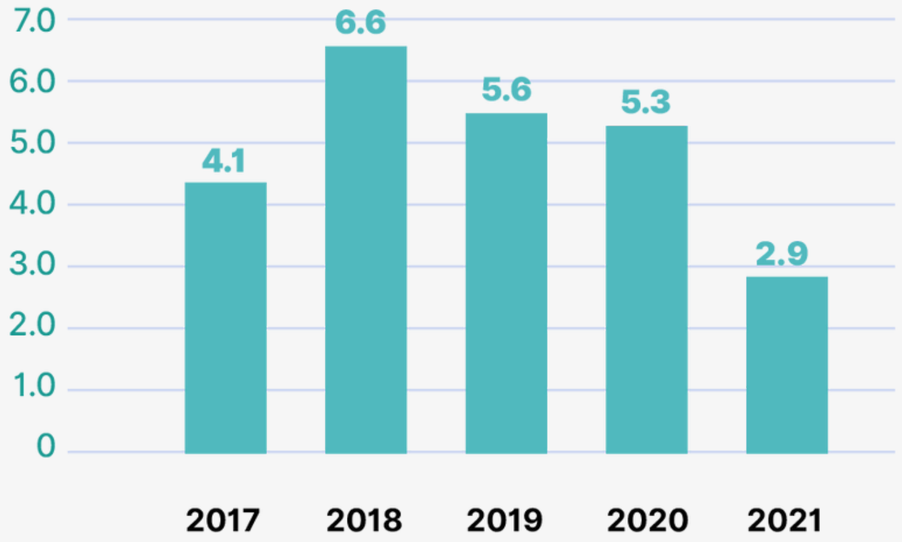
The OECD DAC GovNet developed a report that reflects findings from a quantitative mapping of ODA support (from DAC and non-DAC development partners who report to DAC) to public interest media and the broader information environment. The analysis is based on the OECD Creditor Reporting System (CRS) Aid Activities data and focuses on five Purpose Codes related to information ecosystems. To enhance the understanding of ODA trends, they recategorized the codes into two categories for clearer visualization and more streamlined analysis. To make a comparative exercise between ODA and philanthropic funding in these areas, we have also recategorized Candid's codes as follows:

Category	CRS Purpose Codes	Candid's Codes
Media and Information	• Media and free flow of information (15153) • Communications policy and administrative management (22010) • Radio/television/print media (22030)	• Information and communications (SH000000) • Communication media (SH040000) • Media access and policy (SH030000) • Information and media literacy (SH030200) • Media democracy (SH030100) • News and public information (SH010000) • Journalism (SH010100) • Investigative journalism (SH010101) • Advocacy journalism (SH010104) • Open data (SH010200) • Freedom of association and expression (SR010500) • Freedom of information (SR020300)
Infrastructure	• Telecommunications (22020) • Information and communication technology (22040)	• Information communications technology (SH050000) *Note: This level 2 code includes the following level 3 codes: "Computer security," "Software applications," and "Telecommunications"*

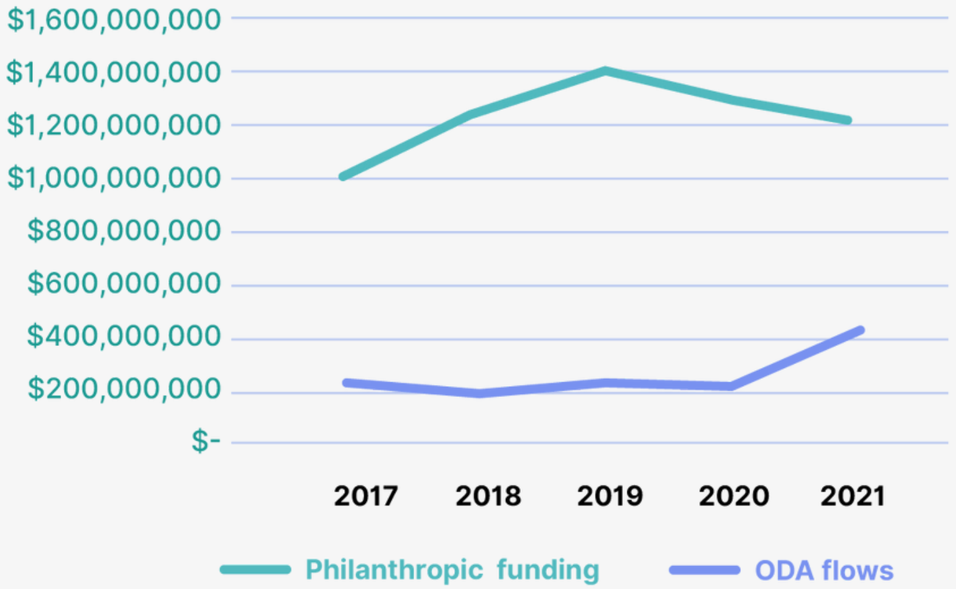
Comparing the data between these two funding sources, the first conclusion is that ODA to support information ecosystems was 4.6 times higher than philanthropic funding between 2017–2021. If we don't take the Gates Foundation funding into account, the ratio rises to 9.2 times.

On average, philanthropic funding amounts to $265 million per year, while ODA flows represent $1.2 billion per year. However, between 2019 and 2021, ODA flows decreased by 12%, while philanthropic funding increased by 68% over the same period (mainly due to increased Gates Foundation funding in 2021).

Ratio: ODA vs Philanthropic funding



ODA vs Philanthropic funding to aid recipient countries (2017-2021)



Finally, when grouping the codes by the categories suggested by GovNet, we find that:

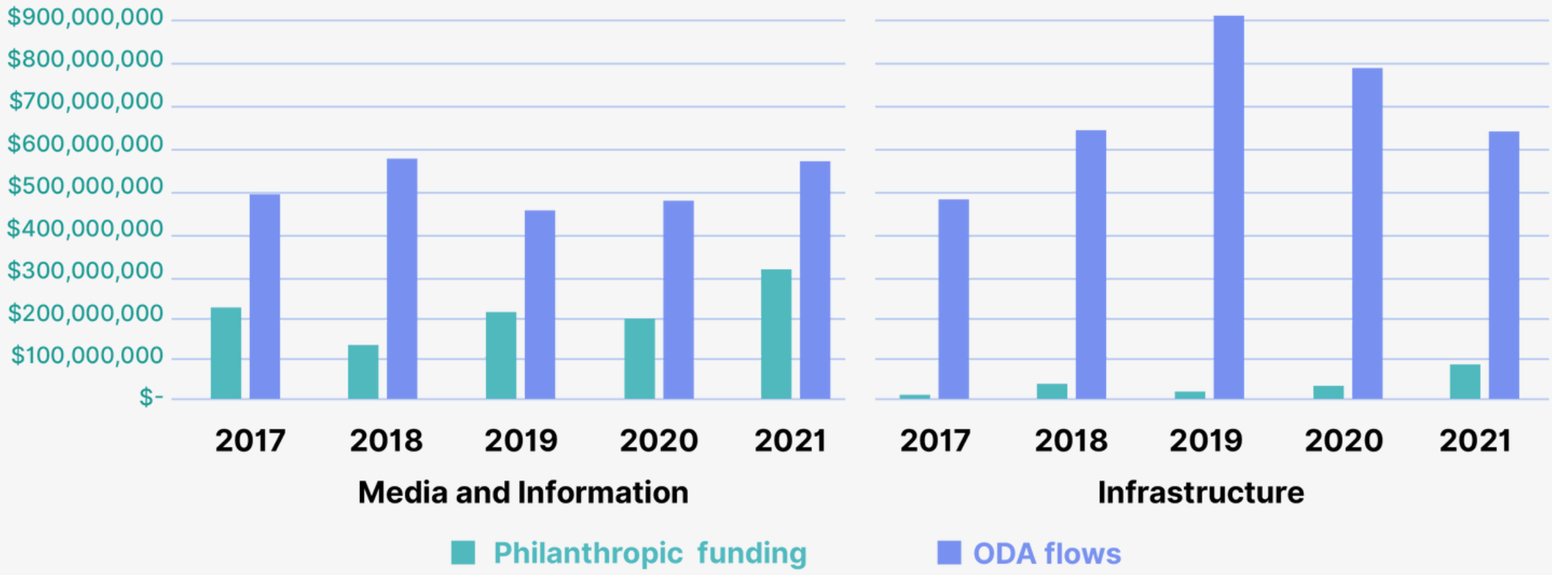
- ODA donors prioritize information and communications technology infrastructure over media and access to information. ODA for the “Infrastructure” category is systematically higher than funding for “Media and information” between 2018–2021 and similar in 2017. “Infrastructure” accounts for 57% of ODA flows, while “Media and information” accounts for 43%.

- ODA flows for “Infrastructure” increased between 2017–2019 and decreased between 2019–2021. On the other hand, ODA for “Media and Information” has increased from 2019, reaching 2018 level.

- In contrast, philanthropy is mainly focused on funding the “Media and Information” environment in aid recipient countries. It represents 83% of funding, versus 17% directed to “Infrastructure.”

- Philanthropic funding to “Media and information” shows an increasing trend since 2018. In 2018, philanthropic funding to “Infrastructure” had a significant jump and has been growing to peak levels in 2021. It will be interesting to see if this trend continues when the 2022 and 2023 data become available.

ODA vs Philanthropic funding to aid recipient countries by category (2017–2021)



CONCLUSION

Between 2017 and 2021, more than $21 billion in philanthropic funding was allocated globally to support different aspects of building healthy information ecosystems. While this is a significant sum, it is a tiny share of overall philanthropic giving in the period (2.7%).

Philanthropy invested only $1.3 billion in supporting information ecosystems in aid recipient countries in those years. Two-thirds of the funding is allocated to “Information and communications,” “Open data,” and “Information and communications technology” codes. When analyzing by keywords, the data suggests that buzzwords as “disinformation,” “misinformation” or “information ecosystem” were not yet significantly showing up in grant descriptions as of end of 2021.

The Gates Foundation provides half of the funding to aid recipient countries, but its grantmaking is primarily related to media for development and health communications. In addition, four of TAI’s members play a leading role in funding other components of healthy information ecosystems in aid recipient countries, like “Media access and policy,” “Freedom of association and expression,” “Communication media,” and “Investigative journalism”: Open Society Foundations, Ford Foundation, Hewlett Foundation, and MacArthur Foundation.

However, it is worrying that codes like “Information and media literacy,” “Freedom of information,” and “Media democracy” are being neglected in the overall funding, in a context where misinformation and disinformation reign. This must be considered by grantmaking organizations if they are to build more healthy information ecosystems.

One of the interesting findings of this study is that most U.S. philanthropic funding directed to aid recipient countries is channeled through intermediary organizations in the Global North, primarily based in the United States. This leads to reflection on how to improve localization and ensure that most of the resources intended to strengthen information ecosystems reach the countries and communities that need them most. Similarly, the OECD DAC study found that only up to 8% of ODA for media and the information environment went directly to local media or media support organizations in the Global South.

Finally, the comparative analysis between ODA flows and philanthropy showed that bilateral and multilateral donors provide the largest share of funding to support information ecosystems, and that “Infrastructure” is a priority for ODA flows, while supporting the “Media and information” environment is a priority for philanthropy.

Much of the quantitative information gathered in this study needs to be cross-checked and validated with qualitative research to better understand donor trends and motivations in this space. Nonetheless, this provisional analysis suggests that there is a case to be made to scale philanthropic investment in building healthier information ecosystems in aid recipient countries, including investment direct to journalism and media houses as well as regulation, standards, and enablers.

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