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Does Gates funding of media taint objectivity?

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📷 1 of 2 | With funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, PBS NewsHour senior correspondent Ray Suarez reports on HIV treatment in Mozambique.

Better-known for its battles against global disease, the Gates Foundation has also become a force in journalism. The foundation's contributions to nonprofit and for-profit media have helped spur coverage of global health, development and education issues. But some people worry that its growing support of media organizations blurs the line between journalism and advocacy.

By [Sandi Doughton](#)  and [Kristi Heim](#)

Did you catch ABC's recent special on an incubator to boost preemie survival in Africa and a new machine to diagnose tuberculosis in the developing world?

Perhaps you saw Ray Suarez's three-part series on poverty and AIDS in Mozambique on the PBS NewsHour. Or listened to Public Radio International's piece on the rationing of kidney dialysis in South Africa.

Beyond their subject matter, these reports have something else in common: They were all bankrolled by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

Better-known for its battles against global disease, the giant philanthropy has also become a force in journalism.

The foundation's grants to media organizations such as ABC and The Guardian, one of Britain's leading newspapers, raise obvious conflict-of-interest questions: How can reporting be unbiased when a major player holds the purse strings?

But direct funding of media organizations is only one way the world's most powerful foundation influences what the public reads, hears and watches.

To garner attention for the issues it cares about, the foundation has invested millions in training programs for journalists. It funds research on the most effective ways to craft media messages. Gates-backed think tanks turn out media fact sheets and newspaper opinion pieces. Magazines and scientific journals get Gates money to publish research and articles. Experts coached in Gates-funded programs write columns that appear in media outlets from The New York Times to The Huffington Post, while digital portals blur the line between journalism and spin.

The efforts are part of what the foundation calls “advocacy and policy.” Over the past decade, Gates has devoted \$1 billion to these programs, which now account for about a tenth of the giant philanthropy's \$3 billion-a-year spending. The Gates Foundation spends more on policy and advocacy than most big foundations — including Rockefeller and MacArthur — spend in total.

Much of the money goes to analyses of policy questions, such as the best way to finance vaccines for poor countries. But the “advocacy” side of the equation is essentially public relations: an attempt to influence decision-makers and sway public opinion. The ultimate goal is to boost funding and focus from governments, businesses and other foundations for the battle against disease and poverty — particularly now, as Congress considers deep cuts in foreign aid.

“As big as the foundation is, there is no single area we work in where we can remotely succeed without other partners and actors,” said Mark Suzman, head of policy and advocacy for the foundation's global-development programs.

While the aims may be laudable, the ability of one wealthy foundation to shape public discourse is troubling to some.

“Even if we were to satisfy ourselves that the Gates Foundation were utterly benign, it would still be worrisome that they wield such enormous propaganda power,” said Mark Crispin Miller, professor of media, culture and communications at New York University.

Some of the foundation's approaches are controversial, such as its embrace of genetically modified crops and emphasis on technological fixes for health problems. Critics fear foundation funding of media will muffle those debates. And with only three trustees setting the overall strategy — Bill and Melinda Gates and fellow billionaire Warren Buffett — there's something “deeply anti-democratic” about such a concentration of influence, Miller said.

“We're not dealing with a lively discussion among players. We're dealing with one gigantic entity ... that seems to be very skilled at promoting its agenda,” he said.

Foundation officials say they're not out to control the way the media cover global disease and poverty, or even the foundation's own programs. They just want increased visibility for life-and-death issues that often get ignored, especially in the face of shrinking newsroom budgets.

“We're trying to do everything we can to make sure people understand not just the need, but the opportunity, to make a huge difference in the lives of millions of people around the world,” said Joe Cerrell, who oversees the foundation's policy, advocacy and communications work in Europe. “For us, it's about making sure that these stories get told.”

A growing media force

There's nothing new about powerful organizations attempting to massage media and get attention for their causes.

“It would be naive to believe big-money foundations don't play the same game that corporations and other special interests do,” said Marc Cooper, assistant professor at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication & Journalism. “I don't find that inherently troubling.”

New York Times columnist Nicholas Kristof recently argued that “good people engaging in good causes” need to sell the public on the need to take action when children are starving or being stunted by preventable disease.

No charity is better positioned to take on that challenge than Gates, with assets totaling more than \$60 billion (including Buffett's donation) and Microsoft's media-savvy legacy to draw upon.

The foundation's direct funding for media and media programs, which so far totals nearly \$50 million, initially followed the path taken by other foundations and corporations: Money for journalist training and for nonprofits such as NPR and PBS. But rather than providing general support, Gates usually stipulates reporting on the issues it cares about most: diseases such as HIV, malaria and TB; poverty in the developing world; and education in the United States.

The International Center for Journalists got nearly \$6 million for a program that pairs veteran journalists with news organizations in Africa. One collaboration helped reverse a ban on midwives in Malawi by pointing out the hazards faced by pregnant women en route to clinics, said program supervisor Jerri Eddings. 484 developing-world journalists have been trained in reporting about AIDS through a Gates grant to the National Press Foundation.

At PBS' NewsHour, Suarez said a \$3.6 million Gates grant has allowed him to cover stories that would otherwise have been out of reach, such as river blindness in Tanzania and Mexican programs to improve nutrition among the poor.

Other grants include \$3.3 million to Public Radio International, \$5 million to NPR and \$1 million to Frontline. Grumbling among media observers peaked late last year when the foundation for the first time teamed up with major for-profit operations such as ABC and the Guardian.

The foundation provided ABC \$1.5 million to fund overseas travel for reports on global health and development. ABC put up \$4.5 million. Neither the foundation nor the Guardian will reveal the dollar amount of the deal that helped the British daily establish an online forum on global health and development.

The Seattle Times received a \$15,000 Gates grant through Seattle University for a series of stories on homelessness in 2010.

Some uneasiness

Recipients of Gates' largesse all say the foundation does not dictate the specific stories they cover.

Foundation officials did provide the NewsHour a list of potential story subjects, but no mandates, Suarez said. "The beauty of this relationship is that they trust our editorial process," he said. "It's not like we're getting calls from

Washington state saying: It's time to do HIV. It's time to do malaria.”

But some journalists are uneasy with the arrangements. Seattle freelancer Robert Fortner stopped writing about Gates for Crosscut after the local online news site received general support grants that total \$500,000, contingent on matching funds. Guardian health Editor Sarah Boseley has said she often shies away from coverage of the foundation — positive or negative — for fear of being accused of a conflict.

Cooper, the journalism professor, finds it “laughable” when media claim Gates money doesn't influence their coverage. Every grant comes with at least one string attached, he said: the hope that the grant will be renewed. Recipients can be reluctant to bite the hand that feeds them.

Indeed, few of the news organizations that get Gates money have produced any critical coverage of foundation programs. The Guardian is an exception, with a recent blog post that blasted the foundation's associations with agricultural giant Monsanto, a leader in genetically modified crops.

“I don't know if the Gates Foundation's projects work,” Cooper said. “And if the Gates Foundation is going to pay for all the news coverage around this, we're never going to know.”

A blurry line

A larger question is whether Gates funding steers media coverage in directions that serve specific foundation goals, both humanitarian and political, diverting attention from other issues.

Some grants have indeed spelled out coverage topics, including male circumcision to reduce transmission of AIDS, and clinical trials — the latter of which are crucial for Gates-supported vaccines and drugs being tested in the developing world.

The foundation's latest media push, launched by Melinda Gates in 2010, is to shift coverage from stories of despair to stories that show problems can be solved.

“People need to hear and see these success stories,” she said. “In the U.S. media, too often you hear what is not working.”

There’s nothing wrong with telling positive stories, said global- health expert Laurie Garrett, of the Council on Foreign Relations, which has received Gates funding. But it’s important to recognize that it’s also a political tactic, she pointed out. Everyone who works in international aid and development is terrified government spending will be slashed. Gates-sponsored research shows people are more likely to donate or support foreign aid after seeing hopeful news. Success stories also show that past investments haven’t been wasted, the foundation’s Suzman said.

To get those positive stories to the public, the foundation has launched a blitz that covers multiple bases, including the establishment of digital outlets that bypass conventional media. After commissioning a British think tank to identify development and health successes, the foundation showcased such stories in a series of videos and articles called “Living Proof.”

At least one of the “Living Proof” stories touted by Melinda Gates has already found its way into the mainstream media. The use of skin-to-skin cradling called “kangaroo care” to boost newborn survival was featured recently in a New York Times column.

When ABC launched its Gates-funded global health initiative, “Be the Change: Save a Life,” it mirrored that positive approach. Each segment of the inaugural program, hosted by Diane Sawyer, paired problems with possible solutions, like a low-cost incubator for premature babies.

A website encourages people to donate money. Within the first week, more than \$600,000 poured in.

Foundation officials say they don’t require ABC to report positive stories, though one of the grant’s goals is to “inspire and motivate the millions of viewers to take action.”

Another foundation grant, to California-based LinkTV, is explicit in its aim of spreading good news. The satellite network got \$2 million to create a digital video library that spotlights progress in global development and health.

Called ViewChange, its target audience includes bloggers and journalists, as well as nonprofits that can use the videos in their own advocacy campaigns, said general manager Wendy Hanamura.

Some news outlets present reports from Gates-funded health organizations as “news,” but those reports aim to inspire people to donate money, rather than uncover facts, according to a recent analysis of global-health journalism.

And while many positive stories are valid, media observers point out that an emphasis on good news can mean less watch-dogging of programs that may not be working.

A wide reach

Beyond direct links to media, the foundation also supports a dizzying mix of organizations whose goals include influencing media coverage. An interested citizen might think she’s getting news and information from a variety of sources, but many of them might be funded by Gates.

The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, a health-care think tank, has received nearly \$20 million from Gates to provide global health information and analyses. That includes media fact sheets and reporting guides, a free video library for journalists and an influential daily roundup of global health news.

Gates gives money to policy magazines such as Health Affairs and Global Health Magazine, and has funded scientific journals to publish articles on global health. Scientists trained in a Gates-funded program to “engage policy makers, thought leaders, the media and the public” brief lawmakers and write op-ed pieces that appear in newspapers and on news sites.

In the field of education, where Gates’ emphasis on teacher quality and small schools has been hotly debated, a \$500,000 grant to the Brookings Institution aims to “re-engineer media coverage of secondary and postsecondary education.” Education Week magazine has received \$4.5 million from the Gates Foundation.

These are just a smattering of the hundreds of policy and advocacy grants the foundation has issued. Gates isn’t the sole funder for most of the groups, nor does Gates money mean grantees march to the same beat. But with virtually

every major player in global health — and many in education — receiving Gates money, it's clear the foundation's voice is highly amplified in the media and beyond.

“It's an echo chamber,” Cooper said.

Garrett, a Pulitzer-Prize winning journalist, said she would prefer a more diverse set of voices. But without Gates funding and interest, long-neglected diseases and the suffering of the world's poor would receive far less attention than they do today, she pointed out.

“Back when I was covering global health, I was pretty much the only person on the beat,” she said. “That's not the case anymore, and that's good news.”

Seattle Times reporter Justin Mayo contributed to this report.

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