Towards a charter of philanthropic engagement in the media sector

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Foreword

How this initiative began

This study of philanthropic engagement in the media was prompted by a simple, worrying observation widely shared by both professionals and observers, notably academics.

Democracy and media output, particularly information, are inextricably linked. Today, their ties are even closer, as both are increasingly being called into question.

When it comes to media production and information, the situation is fraught with tension. Both public and private media outlets are undergoing cultural and structural crises.

In cultural terms, a growing number of people believe that information is no longer a value-added service, but rather a constant flow of raw emotions and short news items that should be provided free of charge.

On a more structural level, digitalisation, social networks and AI are radically shaking up the news business, devaluing traditional media and eroding their audiences and business models. This situation is compounded by the massive transfer of advertising investment from traditional media to digital platforms, which aggregate all kinds of content without separating journalistic and commercial sources or distinguishing between what is true and what is false.

This threat to private and public media comes at a time when accurate, verified information, impartial debate and reasoned opinion-forming are more vital than ever. Mistrust of authoritative discourse has never been so widespread, mass manipulation has never been so powerful, and disinformation has never been so daunting. Clearly, amid the turmoil of digital flows and the erosion of reference points, information is becoming a fundamental asset of the 21st century.

This situation cannot go unchallenged. And the stakes go far beyond the health of a single economic sector.

Of course, not all media are beneficial to democracy. In fact, some even contribute, whether intentionally or not, to the degradation of public debate. However, if independent media outlets are to focus on providing insight, perspective and a plurality of viewpoints, they must have the freedom to operate in compliance with professional standards, without pressure from shareholders or the state, and unhampered by influential networks and lobby groups.

This means finding new resources and alternative funding sources in order to maintain a functioning, pluralistic media sector.

Alongside commercial revenue from advertising or sales and public service fees, a third, complementary source is emerging. On the one hand, this stems from philanthropy and civic engagement. On the other hand, there is growing support from public bodies committed to media diversity in their political and cultural spheres. These bodies do not have the authority to issue public service licences and the associated funding, but they can take action within their respective territories, particularly in terms of framework conditions.

By definition, philanthropy can be understood as altruism in the service of society and the public good. This is especially true if it aims to contribute to the commons, of which democracy is the primary manifestation. Philanthropy therefore fulfils its purpose when it supports media outlets that themselves serve democracy.

However, for the operation to be effective and virtuous, a chain of requirements and controls must therefore connect media, democracy and philanthropy; in other words, an effective and relevant professional framework must be guaranteed.

It is particularly important to ensure the quality of this inherently paradoxical relationship. On the one hand, genuine proximity must enable a philanthropic project to understand the characteristics of the media outlet it supports and to be able to follow its operations. At the same time, the media outlet must have a clear understanding of the source of the funding that supports its existence, and there must be a transparent governance structure underpinning its relationship with the donor. On the other hand, there must be absolutely no possibility of the funding provider exercising any influence over the recipient. If the media outlet's independence is compromised by pressure from those providing support, whoever they may be, then it will no longer meet the criteria required for it to uphold democratic ideals and, therefore, the public interest.

So the parameters to define are numerous. Assessment methods must be developed, and monitoring and control mechanisms must be devised.

This is the very essence of this reflection, which is embodied in a 'charter of philanthropic engagement in the media' offered to all those who wish to support media activity, as well as to media outlets in need of support.

The charter is in no way binding. However, it lists a number of key parameters that clarify the relationship between an entity wishing to support media production and a media outlet wishing to benefit from this support. The aim is simple: by clarifying the terms and conditions of this relationship, any suspicion of a hidden agenda or ideological or economic motives behind philanthropic engagement is significantly reduced. As a result, this clearer and more harmonious relationship is likely to attract greater support and therefore more resources for the media.

This is a preliminary version of the charter. The assumptions set out in this document will be validated through empirical research conducted on media outlets that have received philanthropic support, taking into account their perceived public value.

A second version of this charter will be proposed in late 2026 or early 2027.

A. Philanthropy and public engagement

In all cases, the first step is to look at the basic intention behind the philanthropist's involvement, regardless of the scale of their commitment and the means of intervention used.

This means discussing the values underpinning the initiative and publicly stating both the purpose and the reasons behind the support. The expectations associated with the support must also be specified and expressed as clearly as possible.

For example, does the donor aim to contribute, in the long term, to the recipient's economic sustainability? Is their objective related to the social or cultural impact, or is it about building civic engagement?

It is also important to ascertain whether they have any specific expectations regarding the public value of the media outlet they are supporting (see below).

And they must also be clear about the intended duration of their engagement. Do they plan to give short-term or long-term support? Is it possible to set a clear deadline and even the terms of a possible renewal at the start of the collaboration? This transparency will be valuable for the media outlet, particularly if the aim is to ensure its economic sustainability.

The second stage relates to the governance underpinning the relationship. For example, it is necessary to verify whether the supporting entity is prepared to clearly respect the media outlet's independence by following the editorial team's code of ethics and the stated editorial priorities. It is also important to discuss how to incorporate public opinion on media content. This could include committing to supporting an independent mediation mechanism or validating a transparent response system in the event of flaws in the media production process.

Another key aspect of governance involves clarifying the terms of the interface between the supporter and the recipient. In other words: who reports to whom, on what, how often, in what format, and with what potential consequences?

This mechanism must be precise in order to avoid misunderstandings, frustrations and disappointments that can irreparably damage the relationship.

Finally, it is important to consider the type of contribution envisaged. What form will the support take? Is the origin of the funds transparent and acceptable from a legal standpoint, but also, more subjectively, from an ethical one? The supported media outlet must be fully informed and entirely comfortable with the funding it receives.

There is also scope for discussing whether support should be exclusive or, conversely, open to other interventions, both public and private.

It must then be established whether the support is earmarked for a specified activity, conditional on a specific and mutually agreed deliverable, or whether it can be used freely within the current operating budget.

The support itself can take many forms. It can include cash or in-kind donations, long-term investments in infrastructure, cost relief, or intervention in market conditions (taxation). These various levers can be combined with managerial or operational support provided to the media outlet.

In the event of a fully successful outcome, is the potential return on investment moderate or capped? Are any profits reinvested in media production, and if so, how? Is a reserve fund always required to cover any potential future shortfalls? On the other hand, is it acceptable to pay dividends

and, if so, to whom and in what proportion? And what happens in the event of losses? What is the extent of the supporting entity's commitment? Does it go as far as joint responsibility?

All these issues must be addressed and ideally agreed upon before the support is finalised and implemented.

The Media & Philanthropy Initiative (IMP) proposes that the elements of this triangle (intention-governance-contribution) apply to all types of entities: 'primary' foundations that act directly; 'secondary' foundations, often organised into 'pools of funding' that channel support from several primary foundations; public bodies and even companies operating within the framework of corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes.

B. The public value of the media, or its contribution to the commons

Clear governance, guarantees of independence and specific support arrangements are not enough to forge a strong and demonstrable link between the media and the production of the commons.

This is why it is essential to work towards a definition of public value in the media sector.

Other types of additional requirements are useful for determining the public value of the supported media outlet.

Demonstrating this value is what gives the media outlet the legitimacy to receive philanthropic funding or support from a public body.

The IMP has developed four hypotheses on this subject, based on professional expertise: the public value of media is measured in terms of plurality, anchoring, dialogue and transparency.

These four hypotheses centre on two areas. The first concerns the content offered, while the second looks at how this content is produced.

Each value is then described using specific criteria backed by operational indicators, which the media providers can supply as part of this process.

These hypotheses will be verified by research on specific cases of philanthropic engagement in the media.

1. Endogenous plurality, exogenous plurality

The IMP does not work with concepts of quality or objectivity, which are very hard to define. Plurality, on the other hand, is easier to observe. Respect for plurality and diverse viewpoints is undoubtedly the primary requirement. Balanced information allows everyone to freely form an opinion on national and international issues in all areas. This is referred to as endogenous plurality, i.e. from within the media outlet.

This internal plurality applies in particular to media outlets with a public service mandate. By analogy, it is possible that a private media outlet receiving public or philanthropic support may also need to demonstrate its inherent plurality. This is contingent on being able to observe the balance of opinions expressed, strictly verify the sources of the information presented, and ensure the transparency

of external contributions proposed by the media outlet. Furthermore, the political, economic, or thematic positioning of a media outlet is not incompatible with this plurality-based approach.

The mechanism is strengthened if a clear process of regulation and balance is established before democratic elections.

A further level of endogenous plurality can also be observed. This time, it concerns the media organisation itself, specifically the diversity of the staff, particularly management, but also the editorial teams. This also involves observing any potential bias in recruitment, programme commissioning, access to content, etc.

Plurality also applies to the media sector itself. This is called exogenous plurality, and comprises respect for plurality based on the coexistence of different types of media, which enable different points of view, perspectives and positions within a given market or territory to coexist.

This coexistence within an ecosystem must be handled with care when it is supported by philanthropic or public engagement: major donors sometimes use this approach to gain control of media outlets and promote their own ideas and interests under the guise of providing financial support for diversity of opinion or even freedom of expression. This stance is the exact opposite of a philanthropic intention centred on supporting the commons for the benefit of society as a whole.

All these criteria for plurality can be found in specific indicators, which are generally used by the media, either in their annual activity reports or in programme and content statistics.

2. Anchoring vs. disembodied international aggregatione

The second requirement concerns media output itself, which must be anchored in the social, political and cultural reality of the territories covered. This is the exact opposite of large aggregate platforms, which produce nothing and merely repost content whose origin is often obscure.

Anchoring can be assessed by looking at the volume of original output – created or commissioned by the media outlet in its territory – compared with the volume purchased or supplied by third-party sources.

Anchoring is also measured by the type of advertising broadcast or published by the media outlet.

Other factors include the distribution of editorial coverage in the geographical area concerned, as well as direct or indirect support for regional cultural and/or sporting events.

Another interesting criterion to monitor in this area is the capacity for local employment and ongoing training in professions linked to content production.

3. A constructive dialogue

The third major requirement concerns public debate. A media outlet that contributes to the common good must be capable of establishing and sustaining a forum for public debate.

As the antithesis of the vehemence that flourishes on social media, this space for debate must guarantee free access that is technologically neutral, secure and beyond the reach of trolls and other bots that manipulate exchanges. Discussions should ideally take place face-to-face, which is feasible if participants are required to register. The data collected must not be exploited for commercial purposes or used without the explicit consent of its owners, i.e. the public who created

it and not the media outlet that collated it. Finally, conversations, debates and comments must be professionally moderated by the media outlet itself.

A media organization's capacity for self-reflection also falls within the sphere of dialogue. This includes its contribution to media education programmes, its openness to the public, and its role in media cultural mediation.

4. Building trust through transparency

Finally, the last requirement relates to media transparency, which is a sine qua non for building trust: transparency in media conduct and the use of available resources, and transparency in making a clear distinction between commercial content and other content. Close examination of the media outlet's commercial documentation and monitoring its marketing practices can be a useful addition to internal ethics rules.

Transparency of sources has also become an important issue, particularly with regard to the use of AI in content creation.

Finally, transparency in the processes for managing issues and complaints about the media has become a key indicator of the relationship between the media and its public. There can be no trust or sense of public value if it is accompanied by a feeling of injustice. Mistakes are tolerated if they are acknowledged and, where appropriate, corrected in good faith, both in substance and in form.

Again, all these criteria can be backed up by specific indicators that the media generally have at their disposal.
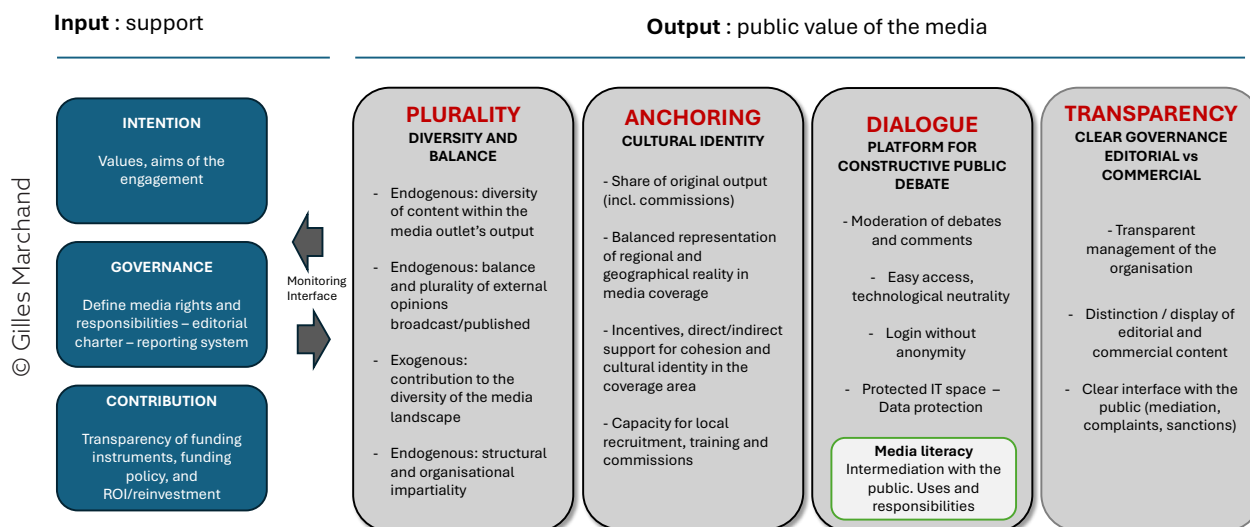
C. Establishing dual legitimacy to support philanthropic engagement in the media

Strengthening the dual legitimacy of both the supporting entity and the recipient is a key condition for boosting this alternative means of media funding.

Regardless of their formats, business models or histories, media outlets that have the freedom to operate without direct pressure from shareholders, the state or advertisers add public value and benefit our democratic societies. As we have seen, they help to forge social ties, inform public debate and, ultimately, encourage civic engagement.

This public value can be proven, and the four aspects proposed by the IMP help to do so. If, on the other hand, the relationship between the supporting entity and the recipient lacks clarity and legitimacy, the process breaks down. Potential funding sources are then lost, and the vicious circle continues. This relationship must therefore be given the support it needs.

❑ A charter of philanthropic engagement in the media – standard model

Input : support

Output : public value of the media

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INTENTION
Values, aims of the engagement

GOVERNANCE
Define media rights and responsibilities – editorial charter – reporting system

CONTRIBUTION
Transparency of funding instruments, funding policy, and ROI/reinvestment

Monitoring Interface

PLURALITY
DIVERSITY AND BALANCE

- Endogenous: diversity of content within the media outlet's output
- Endogenous: balance and plurality of external opinions broadcast/published
- Exogenous: contribution to the diversity of the media landscape
- Endogenous: structural and organisational impartiality

ANCHORING
CULTURAL IDENTITY

- Share of original output (incl. commissions)
- Balanced representation of regional and geographical reality in media coverage
- Incentives, direct/indirect support for cohesion and cultural identity in the coverage area
- Capacity for local recruitment, training and commissions

DIALOGUE
PLATFORM FOR CONSTRUCTIVE PUBLIC DEBATE

- Moderation of debates and comments
- Easy access, technological neutrality
- Login without anonymity
- Protected IT space – Data protection

Media literacy
Intermediation with the public. Uses and responsibilities

TRANSPARENCY
CLEAR GOVERNANCE EDITORIAL vs COMMERCIAL

- Transparent management of the organisation
- Distinction / display of editorial and commercial content
- Clear interface with the public (mediation, complaints, sanctions)