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Philanthropy, big donors, and communication in Europe: Mapping the cases of Germany and Italy

Abstract

Philanthropy is not a new phenomenon. Traditionally associated with fields such as education, healthcare and humanitarian aid, in recent years there has also been a growing interest in initiatives in the field of communication, with a focus on areas such as journalism, access to technology, and platforms and applications. The super-rich not only control large amounts of the world's wealth but also make donations to support a wide range of projects in different countries. This article studies the big foundations that invest 'socially' in this sector in two European countries with different philanthropic traditions: Germany and Italy. Its aim is to demonstrate that American donors such as Bill Gates, Pierre Omidyar, and the Rockefeller family are among the biggest philanthropists in the field of communications in both countries, although other prominent names linked to the world's biggest fortunes also appear among the major donors. The article also analyses the programmes and priority areas of action of these billionaires to determine whether they have any overlapping interests within the field of communications in the two countries studied. In addition, it identifies the amounts donated and the types of organisations that receive them. The analysis draws on data provided by the Media Grants Data Map created by the organisation Media Impact Funders, for the period from 2009 to 2024.

Keywords

Philanthropy, Communications, Germany, Italy, Foundations.

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1. Introduction

The presence of donors in different areas related to education, healthcare, development, and communications has grown substantially since the global recession of 2008 (Citigroup Global Markets, 2024; Mediavilla Merino, 2016, p. 62; Marten & Seitz, 2015: 5; Rogers, 2011, p. 377). It is interesting to note that billionaires involved directly in communications and a range of other industries, such as Bill Gates, Pierre Omidyar, and Mark Zuckerberg, are among the biggest philanthropists in the world today. The financial and political connections of these individuals are strengthened by the conventional and social media platforms they control. In this way, philanthropists can participate in the communications sector either directly through their shareholdings or indirectly by funding certain projects (Padania, 2018). It is important to bear in mind that changes to the media system have expanded and altered the habits of media consumers (Buturoiu, Corbu & Botan, 2023), as new devices and platforms have hybridised genres and formats in the digital environment. In this context, the super-rich channel their wealth into communications initiatives through what is known as 'strategic philanthropy', which constitutes 'an attempt to address important community needs while promoting priority business goals in an increasingly competitive global economy' (Marx, 1999, p. 195). In the specific area of communications, these donors are interested in the symbolic capital of controlling the ideological perspective that gives legitimacy to their existence (Plank, 2017; Mediavilla & García Arias, 2018, p. 15).

In the last decade, social media and new digital platforms have expanded to become a fundamental tool for cultural globalisation. Fuentenebro, Bok, Rosenman and Acuto (2024, p. 8) explore how these philanthropists are able to use their own image to capture public attention and legitimise themselves with a sensationalisation of philanthropic issues, culminating in an affective form of 'celebrity humanitarianism' that is symbolic of a type of 'depoliticized global "care citizenship"' (Mitchell, 2016, p. 290). This constitutes the imposition of market ideology on philanthropy, mediated by different variables of neoliberalism. As Stolz and Lai (2018) have argued, philanthropy has gradually become ever more subjugated to "financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions" (Epstein, 2005, p. 3). These authors also astutely point out that the notion that these donors have of development, empowerment, or sustainability is bound up in a capitalist logic that fosters the dependence of the aid recipients on the assistance they receive. Their support thus affects the autonomy of particular communities, groups, or organisations, but it can also be decisive for prioritising certain agendas in terms of content, access, policies, or technological development in the communications sector.

This article is an exploratory study that aims to map philanthropic activity in the field of communications in Germany and Italy. Although we would argue that big donors behave in a way fully in keeping with global economic dynamics, a full qualitative or interpretative analysis, while identified as a future line of research, is beyond the scope of this study. The objective here is primarily to examine the major donors acting as benefactors of communications projects in Germany and Italy. These two European countries have been chosen for this study due to their very different philanthropic traditions. As Anheier and Daly (2007) suggest, the evolution of the philanthropic sector in Germany has led to what they refer to as a corporate model, associated with the welfare state, but redirecting its actions toward both government projects and non-governmental organisations (Paramés Montenegro, 2011). Meanwhile, in Italy, the powerful role of the Catholic Church as a welfare provider has had a direct impact on the evolution of philanthropy, although in recent years there have been changes that include the entry of the banking sector as a new participant in charitable

activities (Ricciuti & Turrini, 2018). Although these initial descriptions suggest very different philanthropic traditions, we will show that the impact of capitalism on a global level is reflected in the participation of US-based foundations in the communications sectors of both countries. In addition, this article aims to map the initiatives funded in order to assess whether there is a common trend in relation to priority areas of action, and to identify the beneficiaries of these donations in the communications sector and the amounts donated by these philanthropists.

2. Philanthropy and communications in Germany

Although historians generally trace the origins of philanthropy in Germany back to the sixteenth century with families such as the Fuggers in Augsburg, it would not be until the nineteenth century that big companies would become fully involved in the philanthropic sector (Witkowski & Bauerkämper, 2016, p. 3). This charitable tradition among corporate foundations was interrupted during the Third Reich and the Second World War and only partly recovered in the 1950s, subject to government control in both East and West Germany (Adam & Lingelbach, 2015). Various comparative studies (Adam, 2002; Anheier, 2018) also characterise the evolution of German foundations as shaped by their association, until the end of the twentieth century, with three institutional frameworks: the State, family businesses, and the Catholic and Protestant Churches (Anheier, 2018).

This differs from both the liberal model of Great Britain and the Mediterranean model, which includes both Spain and Italy. The strong Ordoliberal tradition, which assigns the State a key role in the economy, thus also marks the philanthropic sector in Germany (Labio-Bernal & Romero-Domínguez, 2022, p. 447), whose foundations have a total expenditure of 17 billion euros, the largest in Europe (Observatoire de la Fondation de France, 2015). Donor growth in the country was consolidated in the first decade of this century, with the number of foundations rising sharply from 12,000 to 20,000 between 2003 and 2013 (Emerson, 2015). An important feature of the German case is the donations made by the country's richest people to traditional political parties, especially conservative parties. An example of this is Susanne Klatten's family (or the Quandt family), who donated more than 3 million euros to the conservative CDU, CSU and FDP parties between 2010 and 2019 (Dürmeier, 2020).

Although philanthropists in Germany have traditionally focused on areas related to education, healthcare, culture, and the arts (Anheier & Striebing, 2018), in recent years support for "digital, intercultural and communication competencies [has been] gaining momentum" (Phineo, 2024). The government itself supports initiatives such as Stiftung Digitale Chancen, which has been pursuing objectives such as equal internet access and media literacy since 2002. This foundation is a public-private partnership that receives donations from Accenture, Hubert Burda Foundation, and Telefónica Germany. In other cases, philanthropists act through pre-existing foundations, such as the Omidyar Network, which operates in the country through Open Knowledge Foundation Germany, focusing on the development of software, infrastructure, and open source projects. According to Van Kessel, Fayed, Homolová, and Wittenman (2023), Omidyar believes that 'even the technology sector that made him wealthy needs to be reined in and transformed.' The role of the Bill Gates Foundation in funding the ResearchGate scientific network is important in this respect. Gates, who visited ResearchGate's headquarters in Berlin in 2013, defines the network as 'a kind of LinkedIn for scientists around the world' (Gates, 2013).

The *Onlinezugangsgesetz* (Online Access Act), which came into effect in 2017, and the Digital Strategy 2025 programme have led to the development of projects to fund digital and technological infrastructures throughout the country. This has enabled foundations to

contribute to various initiatives, such as Vodafone Stiftung's participation in the LeseKI:DS project to promote reading skills through the use of generative artificial intelligence in schools. Another important source of funding in the communications sector has come through the European Network for Rural Development, which, although financed mainly with public funds, has admitted the participation of private donors. For example, the Toyota Mobility Foundation has developed a mobility platform and maps for people with disabilities and the elderly as part of the digitalisation of the Bitburg region. The particular characteristics of the German philanthropic model effectively facilitate public-private partnerships, such as the Fiware Foundation, a platform promoted by the European Union to develop software applications, which has also participated in digitalisation networks for smart city innovations in Germany.

Discussion around the relationship between philanthropy and journalism in Germany focuses on defining what a charitable organisation means in the media sector (Working Group on the Sustainability of Journalism, 2021). German authorities are cautious about donor involvement in news media initiatives. In fact, media outlets cannot simply be defined as charities in order to receive funding; rather, they must be recognised as such based on the subject matter they cover and on the articulation of their activity as non-profit journalism. Specifically, such initiatives have to focus on issues with charitable objectives defined by law or engage in activities that constitute a public service, as is the case of *Correctiv* (Bartsch, 2015). These restrictions mean that in order to finance media projects, donors in Germany sometimes have to resort to indirect mechanisms. For example, when the Rudolf Augstein Foundation wanted to fund the *Krautreporter* website, it could not do so directly because it did not meet the legal requirements. To support the project, the foundation instead offered 1,000 crowdfunding memberships to journalism students at German universities, which allowed it to 'comply with the principle laid down in law (promotion of young journalists) while promoting a news startup committed to the common good' (Buttkus, Ryabinin & Hinze, 2020, p. 37).

There have been calls for reform by politicians and professionals alike, not only to loosen fiscal restrictions but also to recognise journalism initiatives as activities eligible for donor funding. For example, the State Parliament of North Rhine-Westphalia, the Research Network, and foundations such as the Schöpfung Foundation have called for journalism funding to be classified as charitable donations (Kowark, 2020, pp. 92–93). And in 2020, various prominent media companies, foundations, and educational organisations, such as VOCER, the August Schwingenstein Foundation, Netzpolitik, Correctiv, and MedWatch, promoted the creation of the *Forum Gemeinnütziger Journalismus* (Forum for Non-Profit Journalism), based on the British example of the Charitable Journalism Project (CJP). In an interesting study, Katrin Kowark evaluates the dynamics established between charitable foundations and journalism initiatives. In Germany, Kowark found that close to 120 foundations support projects of this type, but they do so through the provision of prizes or funding for journalist training, seminars, conferences, and media literacy campaigns (Kowark, 2020, p. 90). Kowark suggests that while these strategies allow the inclusion of initiatives of this kind on the news media agenda, the absence of funding for projects to promote independent journalism and pluralism constitutes a missed opportunity (Kowark, 2020, p. 91).

3. Philanthropy and Communication in Italy

Historically, Italy's philanthropic tradition dates back to the Renaissance, when patronage of the arts flourished, and to Catholic institutions that promoted mutual aid (Quine, 2002).

Despite a long process of secularisation, the Catholic Church still plays a significant role in philanthropy today. In the post-war era, Italy, like much of Western Europe, institutionalised a welfare state, with the government assuming responsibility for the provision and funding of essential social services. Although the welfare system has undergone progressive privatisation since the 1990s, healthcare, education, and other key social services remain largely state-run (Sacchi, 2019).

Italy has traditionally been considered an example of the Latin/Mediterranean philanthropic model, characterised by a strong, interventionist State and a civil society that has struggled to assert its independence from political actors (Macdonald & Tayart de Borms, 2008, pp. 7–8). This has limited the development of a robust space between the State and the Church for civil society organisations. Until recently, the legal framework provided few incentives for private or corporate donations, especially when compared to the Anglo-Saxon model, where fiscal incentives encourage charitable contributions.

However, in the past 25 years, the ‘third sector’ in Italy has experienced significant growth, both in terms of the number of non-profit organisations and the number of people involved, whether as volunteers, employees, or temporary workers (ISTAT, 2009; ISTAT 2024). This sector received a clearer legal structure following the adoption of the Third Sector Code in 2017 (Legislative Decree No. 117/2017).

A study offering an overview of Italian foundations highlights ‘the extreme variety of the philanthropic sector’ (Ricciuti & Turrini 2018, p. 1822). The sector remains highly fragmented, with independent (private or family) foundations, corporate foundations, community foundations, and public-law foundations all playing a role. A distinctive feature of the Italian philanthropic landscape is the presence of Foundations of Banking Origin (FBOs), a peculiar type of foundation (Arrigoni 2024; Leardini, Rossi & Moggi 2014; Barbetta, 1999) created in the early 1990s following the privatisation of savings banks and the separation of banking activities from philanthropic initiatives. Most FBOs focus their grant-making activities on the communities where they are located, operating at regional and city levels. In her investigation of Italian banking foundations, Paola Arrigoni highlights how from a legal perspective, FBOs ‘have no founder other than an act of law, and this makes them unique compared to all other kinds of foundations in the world (corporate, familial, individual, communitarian)’ (Arrigoni, 2024, p. 186). She also argues that FBOs ‘are located in a murky space that straddles finance, business, politics, philanthropy, and academia’ (2024, p. 189), with board members appointed by both public actors (such as elected bodies or universities) and private entities (such as chambers of commerce).

Although in 2023 there were only 86 FBOs in Italy (ACRI 2024) out of a total of over 8,000 foundations overall (ISTAT, 2024), they constitute the country’s largest institutional donors by a wide margin. According to Ricciuti and Turrini (2018, p. 1825), FBO endowments account for over half of all foundation endowments. In 2023, their endowments collectively amounted to 41 billion euros (ACRI, 2024, p. 82). They have been estimated to represent 21% of the total assets of the philanthropic sector in Europe (Observatoire de la Fondation de France, 2015). The FBO sector itself is highly concentrated, as the 17 largest FBOs control 75% of the sector’s total assets, while the two biggest FBOs of all—Fondazione Cariplo and Fondazione Compagnia di San Paolo—manage one third of the sector’s assets (ACRI, 2024, p. 82). These foundations are predominantly based in northern Italy. Between 2000 and 2019, FBOs awarded over 22 billion euros in grants (Arrigoni, 2024), and in 2023 they funded nearly 22,000 projects, distributing a total of 1.05 billion euros in grants (ACRI, 2024, p. 109). Their key areas

of intervention included social services, the arts and cultural heritage, education, scientific research, and local development (ACRI, 2024, pp.112– 13).

Philanthropy in support of journalism is a relatively recent phenomenon in Italy and is not as widespread as it is in other countries such as the US or the UK. Support by FBOs for 'Publishing and Other Mass Media' amounted to 6.2 million euros in 2023, representing only 2.5% of funding within the macro-category of 'Art, Cultural Activities, and Cultural Heritage' (ACRI, 2024, p. 119). In comparison, in the same year FBOs invested 78.4 million euros (31.2%) in 'Literary and Artistic Creation and Performances', 68.6 million euros (27.3%) in museums, and 62.8 million euros (25%) in the conservation and enhancement of cultural heritage (ACRI, 2024, p. 119). This relative neglect of media-related projects is due to cultural factors, including a privileging of funding for Italy's rich cultural heritage sector, and the prevalent project-based funding model adopted by foundations, which does not align well with the long-term needs and operational structures of news and media organisations.

However, in recent years, there have been some significant developments with funding for journalism projects based on a combination of crowdfunding, government grants, corporate donations, and support from the third sector. US and other foreign foundations have played an important role in this. Although Italian FBOs operate on a larger scale within the national context, with overall resources that exceed those of foreign foundations, their primary areas of intervention, as mentioned above, are cultural, educational, social, and local development. Even though US and other foreign foundations invest fewer resources in Italy compared to FBOs, investigative journalism and press freedom are among the niche sectors where these foundations are particularly active. Two notable instances of non-profit journalism projects that receive philanthropic support are IrpiMedia and Scomodo. The first is a non-profit centre for investigative journalism. Founded in 2012, initially its investigative reports appeared on other national and international news outlets, but since 2020 they have been posted on its own website. IrpiMedia has received funding from both national and international foundations, while also obtaining support through crowdfunding campaigns, reader subscriptions, and donations. Scomodo is described as Italy's first news service for under-30s. It invests in investigative journalism and produces a monthly print magazine. Launched in 2016, it receives funding from Fondazione Charlemagne, an Italian philanthropic foundation supporting projects aimed at promoting social justice and civil rights, as well as from readers through donations and subscriptions.

While philanthropic support for journalism is still limited, funding for digital communication projects is larger in scale and often involves public-private partnerships. For instance, ACRI, the association representing FBOs, manages the *Fondo per la Repubblica Digitale* (Fund for the Digital Republic) established in 2022 as part of the Italian government's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which is aimed at accelerating the country's digitalisation process, reducing the digital divide, and promoting digital skills among citizens, businesses, and government. The objective is to provide approximately 350 million euros for digital training and technological transition projects by 2026. In 2023, 72 foundations joined the Fund, contributing a total of 83.7 million euros in resources, representing 8% of total funding by FBOs for projects that year (ACRI, 2024, p. 13). The Fund was also awarded 2.5 million euros from Google.org (Google's philanthropic arm) to manage the CrescerAI call for proposals, dedicated to supporting the development of free AI technology for small and medium-sized enterprises in Italy, including social enterprises (ACRI, 2024, p. 13).

4. Methodology

The analysis in this article draws on data provided by the Media Grants Data Map created by the organisation Media Impact Funders.¹ Developed in partnership with Candid (formerly Foundation Center), this tool maps trends in media funding around the world. Our study focuses on initiatives in the communications sector funded by private and public foundations in Germany and Italy in the period 2009–2024. The choice of 2009 as the starting point of our examination was made for basically two reasons. The first refers to a technical issue: Media Impact Funders has no data in its system prior to that year. Secondly, the year 2009 was decisive for understanding the acceptance and consolidation of contemporary philanthropy. The debilitation of countries in the face of the 2008 financial crisis created a loss of trust in public administrations as governing bodies capable of resolving the social conflicts that had arisen (Bishop, 2013; Domhoff, 2009; Edwards, 2009).

The donation records were downloaded from the Media Impact Funders website and subjected to an initial manual clean-up prior to indexing, information extraction, and analysis. The donations are classified according to the foundations' own reporting of their activities, and thus the information may vary depending on the way each foundation defines its donation programmes. We recognise that this is a limitation of the tool used for this analysis. The rest of the grant data has been analysed by Data Map specialists, based on a classification system developed in 2013 with the support of the Knight Foundation. The descriptions of the donations and the public information on the beneficiaries has been taken as a reference.

The Media Grants Data Map covers two basic categories: *journalism* and *media*. The first category includes various specialisations in the field (advocacy journalism; citizen journalism, constituency journalism; investigative journalism), as well as journalism education and awareness-raising activities. *Media*, on the other hand, is a broad concept covering a wide range of areas: media access and policy, applications, communications infrastructure and media formats beyond the scope of journalism such as films, educational games, etc. The term *media* thus encompasses activities as diverse as developing mobile phone apps, launching advertising campaigns, or strengthening policies and infrastructures related to media access, broadcasting, and content creation.

The *media* category includes four main subject areas:

Media content and platforms (formerly known as media platforms)

Telecommunications infrastructure

Media applications and tools

Media access and policy

Table 1 specifies the programmes and sub-programmes of the Media Grants Data Map, as these constitute a key element of our analysis.

¹ <https://mediaimpactfunders.org/>

Table 1. Programmes and sub-programmes on the Media Grants Data Map

Programmes	Sub-programmes
Journalism, news and information	General
	Advocacy journalism
	Citizen journalism
	Constituency journalism
	Investigative journalism
	Journalism Education
Media Content and Platforms	General
	Audio
	Film/Video
	Mobile media
	Print
	Radio
	Television
Media access and policy	Web-based media
	General
	Freedom of Expression/First Amendment
	Intellectual property
	Media democracy
	Media justice
	Media literacy
	Open government
Media applications and tools	School and public library media centers
	General
	Geographical Information Systems
Telecommunications infrastructure	Interactive games
	General
	Internet access
	Internet and broadband
	Telecommunications

Prepared by authors. Source: <https://mediaimpactfunders.org/>

Based on these two general categories, we have investigated the geographical origins of the foundations, the types of recipient organisations (private, public, non-governmental and religious) and the types of donations. The results obtained with these criteria supported the pursuit of the objectives established at the beginning of this study, to identify the donors acting as the major benefactors of media projects in these two countries, the amounts they have donated and the activities they have prioritised.

It should be noted that for communications activities and priority areas (programmes and sub-programmes, respectively), we have selected only the first activity funded, to avoid duplications in the total number of donations and to offer a clearer picture of the priority areas of action.

For the purpose of this analysis, we have developed a descriptive statistic with the variables outlined above in order to answer the following questions:

Q1. Which country invests the most money in communications activities in Germany and Italy?

Q2. What are the top ten philanthropic organisations in terms of donations to communications activities in Germany and Italy?

Q3. How have foundations' investments in communications activities in Germany and Italy evolved during the period of study (2009-2024)?

Q4. Which communications programmes receive the most money from foundations in Germany and Italy?

Q5. Which programmes do foundations operating in Germany and Italy invest the most money in?

Q6. Within these programmes, what are the priority areas of action (sub-programmes) funded in Germany and Italy?

Q7. What types of organisations are prioritised as recipients of donations by foundations in Germany and Italy?

5. Results

The data related to Q1 and Q2 reveal that foundations based in the United States provide the largest volume of donations to communications activities in both Germany and Italy. In Germany, US-based foundations were responsible for ‘social investments’ of just over USD44.5 million (51.4% of the total), while in Italy, the money donated by these foundations amounted to more than USD24 million (71.9% of the total).

In Germany, UK-based foundations are in second place, with donations of USD30,776,047 (35.5%). Third and fourth places go to foundations based in Germany itself and in Switzerland, each one representing 5.4% of the total (USD4,707,616 and USD4,645,524, respectively). Canada is in fifth place, with USD1,108,450 in donations, or 1.3% of the total. The rest of the countries in the top ten are Hungary, Spain, the Netherlands, Belgium, and Denmark, whose respective donations represent little more than 0.3% of the total donated, as can be seen in Table 2.

In Italy, second place is held by Italian foundations, which are responsible for almost 8 million US dollars in donations, representing 23.5% of the total. A long way behind in third place are foundations based in the United Kingdom, whose donations represent only 1.27% of the total (USD427,691). The other seven countries in the top ten in Italy’s case all account for less than 1% of total donations, as can be seen in Table 2. These countries are the Netherlands, Switzerland, Spain, Belgium, Denmark, France, and Hungary.

Table 2. Origin of donations in Germany and Italy

Origin of donations in Germany		Origin of donations in Italy	
United States	51.4%	United States	71.9%
United Kingdom	35.5%	Italy	23.5%
Germany	5.4%	United Kingdom	1.3%
Switzerland	5.4%	Netherlands	1.0%
Canada	1.3%	Switzerland	0.8%
Hungary	0.3%	Spain	0.8%
Spain	0.3%	Belgium	0.4%
Netherlands	0.2%	Denmark	0.2%
Belgium	0.1%	France	0.1%
Denmark	0.1%	Hungary	0.0%

Prepared by authors. Source: <https://mediainpactfunders.org/>

Considering the foundations individually, British Arcadia is the biggest donor in Germany (USD29,442,200, or 34% of the total), followed by the US-based foundations Wikimedia (USD9,544,078, or 11%), the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation (USD6,691,475, or 7.7%) and the Rockefeller Foundation (USD5,631,716, or 6.5%). In fifth place is the Swiss-based Oak Foundation, with USD4,067,715 in donations (4.7%). The rest of the foundations in the top ten, as shown in Table 3, are all based in the United States (Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, Agua Fund Inc, the Ford Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund Inc., and Foundation to Promote Open Society).

In Italy, technology magnate Bill Gates' foundation is in first place, with donations amounting to USD11,715,984 (34.8%). In second place is the Italian Fondazione Cariplo (USD4,563,659, or 13.6%), while third place is held by another US-based organisation, the Rockefeller Foundation (USD3,300,000, or 9.8%). The rest of the top ten donors are all either based in the United States (Ford Foundation, Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Open Society Foundations, and Wikimedia) or in Italy itself (Fondazione CRT, Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lucca, and Fondazione con Il Sud). None of the foundations in third through to tenth place provide more than 10% of total donations, as can be seen in Table 3.

Table 3. Funders in Germany and Italy

Foundations in Germany

Funders (global)	Origin country	Donation amount	%
Arcadia	United Kingdom	29,442,200	34%
Wikimedia Foundation Inc.	United States	9,544,078	11%
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	United States	6,691,475	7.7%
The Rockefeller Foundation	United States	5,631,716	6.5%
Oak Foundation	Switzerland	4,067,715	4.7%
The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation	United States	3,976,000	4.6%
Agua Fund Inc.	United States	3,006,208	3.5%
The Ford Foundation	United States	2,715,000	3.1%
Omidyar Network Fund Inc	United States	2,205,244	2.5%
Foundation to Promote Open Society	United States	1,790,000	2.1%

Foundations in Italy

Funders (global)	Origin country	Donation amount	%
Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation	United States	11,715,984	34.8%
Fondazione Cariplo	Italy	4,563,659	13.6%
The Rockefeller Foundation	United States	3,300,000	9.8%
The Ford Foundation	United States	2,305,000	6.8%
Conrad N Hilton Foundation	United States	1,400,000	4.2%
Fondazione Crt	Italy	1,271,625	3.8%
Open Society Foundations	United States	1,060,904	3.2%
Fondazione Banca Del Monte Di Lucca	Italy	813,698	2.4%
Wikimedia Foundation Inc.	United States	804,748	2.4%
Fondazione Con Il Sud	Italy	797,654	2.4%

Source: Prepared by authors

In relation to Q3, 41% of all money donated in Germany in the period from 2009 to 2024 was donated in 2021 (USD35,500,484), while the years 2020 and 2022 together account for 17% of all donations for the period (USD14,723,135). The last two years (2023 and 2024) saw the lowest

amounts, with 0.2 per cent (USD180,000) and 0.4 per cent (USD327,070), respectively. Indeed, donations in Germany have declined sharply in the past few years, from more than 35 million in 2021 to just over 320,000 in 2024.

In Italy, 2021 was also the biggest year in the period, accounting for 40% of all donations (USD14,043,493). The year 2009 is in second place with 18.4% of the total (USD6,190,503). Donations dropped from 14 million in 2021 to just 623,375 in 2023, while no donation data for 2024 was available on the Media Impact Funders website at the time the search was conducted.

Our analysis of the data related to Q4 and Q5 yielded the following findings. Among the communications programmes that receive the most money from foundations, in first place in Germany are activities in the category of 'Media Content and Platforms', which have received more than 70% of all money donated since 2009 (USD63,410,167). This is also the only programme that has received donations consistently throughout the period studied. Donations made to this programme grew between 2020 and 2022, while suffering a decline in the two years since. Donations to other programmes breaks down as follows: 'Media Access and Policy' received a total of USD9,174,999 (10.6%); 'Media Applications and Tools' received USD7,170,727 (8.3%) and 'Telecommunications Infrastructure' received USD4,459,572 (5.1%). The programme related to conventional journalism activities ('Journalism, News and Information') received barely 3% of total grants (USD2,418,698).

Of the ten biggest donor foundations in Germany, six foundations (five of US origin and the British-based organisation Arcadia) gave the highest percentage of their donations to 'Media Content and Platforms'. Specifically, Agua Fund Inc., Arcadia and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation gave 100% of their donations to this programme (USD3,006,208, USD29,442,200, and USD6,691,475, respectively), while the Ford Foundation gave 86% (USD2,335,000), Wikimedia Foundation gave 84% (USD8,010,377), and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation gave 73% (USD2,902,500).

In the case of Italy, 'Media Content and Platforms' also received the highest percentage of grant money (47%, or USD15,873,582), with the largest amounts being donated in the years 2009 (USD5,915,991) and 2021 (USD2,350,011). In second place is 'Telecommunications Infrastructure', representing 41.4% of the total (USD13,928,000). Far below these top two programmes is 'Media Applications and Tools' with only 4.5% of the total (USD1,524,990). Journalism activities received 3.6% of total donations (USD1,196,197), while 'Media Access and Policy' is in last place with 3.4% (USD1,134,067).

In Italy, there are also six foundations (three Italian and three based in the US) that prioritise donations to 'Media Content and Platforms' in their strategic action plans. The amounts donated break down as follows: Fondazione CRT donated 100% of its budget to this programme (USD1,271,625), Fondazione Cariplo donated 98% (USD4,469,103) Wikimedia Foundation donated 88.5% (USD712,162), Fondazione Banca del Monte di Lucca donated 87.3% (USD710,774), the Ford Foundation donated 70.5% (USD1,625,000), and the Open Society Foundation donated 66.3% (USD703,400).

In response to Q6, the results reveal that 'Web-based Media' is the priority funding area in Germany, receiving 46% of all donations. The range of activities in the country within this sub-programme is very wide, including the generation of content related to wiki culture (the organisation of talks and workshops, user participation in European institutions), support for publishers to incorporate their publications into Open Journal Systems, the creation of online databases of plant and animal species, the opening of safe reporting channels for victims of sexual assault, and the promotion of cultural diversity in the templates of online media editors, among others.

The second biggest priority area in Germany is 'Media Content and Platforms, General' (22.8%). Notable here are various immigration-related programmes with objectives such as the prevention of human rights violations against unaccompanied minors, the creation of inclusive networks for migrant women, and the empowerment of young people in Muslim communities. This sub-programme also includes activities related to the history of the Nazi regime, such as the creation of materials taking a feminist perspective on the victims of the Holocaust and a collection that documents the forced labour that millions were subjected to under the Third Reich. Other initiatives focus on activism (such as funding for anti-TTIP protest groups), cybersecurity and surveillance programmes, as well as the promotion of the Sustainable Development Goals, the digitalisation of cultural archives, and machine learning programmes.

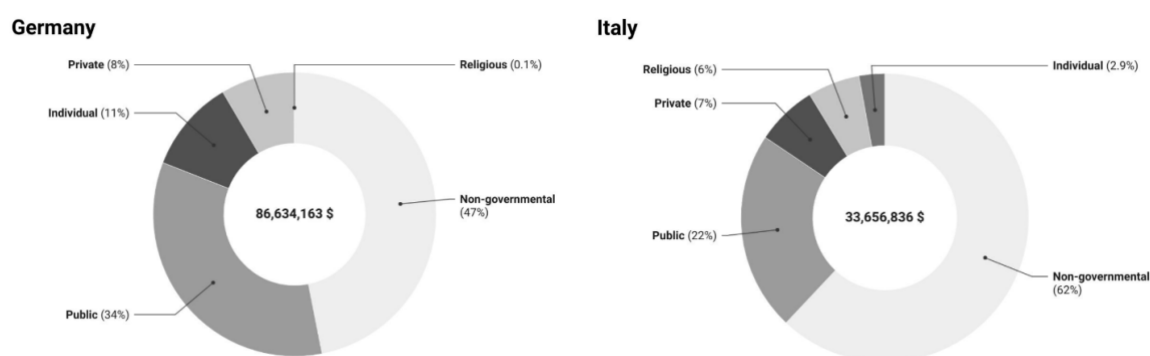
Other prominent areas are the 'General' sub-programme of 'Media Applications and Tools' (7.9% of the total for activities such as the creation of simulation software, data sharing platforms, augmented reality applications, and multimedia guides), 'Media Democracy' (4.7%), and 'Film/Video' (3.1%). Accounting for less than 3% of the total are the sub-programmes 'General – Journalism, News and Information', 'Internet and Broadband', 'Telecommunications', and 'General – Media Access and Policy'. The remaining categories received even lower percentages of total funding. Notably, initiatives related to 'Media Literacy', 'Constituency Journalism' and 'Radio' are all found at the bottom of the list.

The data obtained reveal that the top priority in Italy is the telecommunications sector, which receives the highest percentage of donations (39.9%). This includes activities related to the installation of computer systems and Wi-Fi networks as part of the EU's 'Internet for Everyone' programme, the digitisation of cultural archives, and the creation of network security for filtering. Also worthy of note are initiatives aimed at educating young people about the impact of technologies on their future employability, and campaigns to raise awareness among youth or people at risk of technological exclusion. Grants are also given to religious associations to promote these same kinds of initiatives. Events for the European Day for Computer Programming are also included here. In second place in Italy is the general sub-programme of 'Media Content and Platforms' (25.4%), which includes grants to programmes to digitalise public library services, to give greater visibility to women (such as communications schools with a gender perspective and programmes to empower migrant women), to strengthen indigenous communities, to promote digital culture through festivals, to monitor the media and their impact on public opinion, and to support small and medium-sized enterprises, scientific activities (renewable energies, haematology research, etc.), and educational projects. Initiatives included in the 'Film/Video' sub-programme, which received 9% of total donations (USD3,036,550), focus on the production of social documentaries, the recovery of footage by prominent figures in Italian film production (such as Fellini), and funding for film festivals.

Other important areas include online media (8.9%), geographic information systems (3.0% to create satellite image banks using GIS tools), investigative journalism (2.2%), freedom of expression (2.0%), and the press (1.9%). The money donated to journalism activities has been used, for example, for cash prizes for awards, the organisation of specialist courses, and financial support for investigative journalism initiatives (such as the Investigative Reporting Project Italy). The remaining categories receive lower percentages: 'Internet Access', 'Open Government', 'Internet and Broadband', 'Media Democracy', and 'Media Literacy' each received less than 1% for activities aimed at strengthening the concept of open government by providing open access to data and organising 'wiki' events to engage the community.

Finally, the data related to Q7 reveal that in Germany, non-governmental organisations and public institutions (educational institutions and German public broadcasting) received 80% of the total amount donated by the foundations, as shown in Table 4. Specifically, NGOs received 46% (USD40,625,369) while public institutions received 34.1% (USD29,496,528). In third place are individual recipients (10.6%, USD9,169,153), while private organisations received 8.4% (USD7,287,993). Religious organisations (Buddhist and Jewish) have a marginal presence on the map of German recipients, representing just 0.1% of the total (USD55,120). NGOs are the only recipients to have received funding on a stable basis throughout the period of study from 2009 to 2024.

Table 4.



Source: Prepared by authors

The data also show that more than half of the foundations ranked among Germany's top ten donors provided most of their donations to NGOs. The foundations that did so were Agua Fund Inc., Foundation to Promote Open Society, Oak Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund Inc., and the Rockefeller Foundation (6 out of 10). These organisations gave almost 40.5% of their donations to non-governmental organisations (USD27,958,083). Public institutions are in second place, accounting for 39% of the total (USD27,186,000). Anonymous individual recipients were given 11.22% while almost 9% went to private organisations (USD6,171,475). None of the top ten donors in Germany donated money to religious organisations.

In Italy, NGOs were also the biggest donation recipients, accounting for 62.04% of the total (almost 21 million out of the USD33.5 million donated), as shown in Table 4. In second place are public institutions (schools and universities, municipal councils, national research councils, the FAO, and the UN through its World Food Programme), representing 22.37% of total donations (USD7,529,460). A long way behind in third place are private organisations (including private research centres and universities, publishers, and journalist organisations), which received 6.85% of all donations. In fourth place are religious institutions, which received 5.85% (USD1,968,368). In last place are individual recipients, representing 2.89% of the total (USD972,999). NGOs were the only recipients to have received funding on a stable basis throughout the period of study from 2009 to 2023 (bearing in mind that there are no data available for 2024 in the case of Italy).

The data also show that more than half of the foundations ranked among Italy's top ten donors provided most of their donations to NGOs. The foundations in this category are the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Fondazione Cariplo, the Ford Foundation, Fondazione CRT,

Open Society Foundations, Fondazione Banca del Monte di Luca, and Fondazione con il Sud (7 out of 10). Totalling USD16,804,291, donations to non-governmental organisations in Italy represented 60% of the total donations made by the ten biggest foundations. The second biggest category of recipients of donations made by these foundations was the public sector (23.14%, USD6,488,544), while private organisations received 7.4% (USD2,074,886), religious organisations received 6.58% (USD1,847,133), and private individuals received almost 3% (USD818,418).

6. Discussion of results and conclusions

This analysis reveals that although Germany and Italy have different philanthropic traditions, the prominence of US foundations in the communications sector is a common feature of both countries. Moreover, both countries reflect the trend of relying on other big donors who also participate in global economic and philanthropic dynamics. There are also small differences between the two countries, such as the relative presence of locally based foundations that also play a major philanthropic role.

There is some overlap in relation to other countries of origin (totalling 10 in both cases), as foundations based in the United Kingdom (ViiV Healthcare, for example), Switzerland (Foundation Open Society Institute – Switzerland), Hungary (Open Society Institute Budapest Foundation), Spain (Open Society Initiative for Europe), the Netherlands (different foundations in each country), Belgium (King Baudouin Foundation), and Denmark (Euro-Mediterranean Foundation of Support to Human Rights Defenders) are present in both countries, although with different rankings in terms of donation amounts.

Although the aforementioned foundations are active in both countries, there are some differences in their position among the top ten biggest donors. In Germany, UK-based foundations rank second, with an investment of over 30 million dollars (35.5%), while in Italy foundations from this country rank third, with donations of just over 4 million dollars (1.3%). The Netherlands plays a bigger role in Italy, where it is in fourth place with donations of USD325,618 (1%), while in Germany it is in eighth place, representing only 0.2% of all donations (USD168,250). On the other hand, Hungary is more prominent in Germany, where it is in sixth place with USD300,000 in donations (0.3%), while in Italy it is in tenth place, accounting for only 0.01% of total donations (just over USD3,500). The only countries of origin that are not present on both lists are Germany and Canada in the German case, and France and Italy in the Italian case. Canada contributes 1.3% of all donations in Germany (USD1,108,450), while France is in ninth place in Italy, with donations amounting to just 0.09% of the total (USD29,263).

It is also interesting to note the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the amounts donated to communications activities in both Germany and Italy, as there was a sharp increase in donations in 2020 that was not sustained beyond the year after the outbreak. In subsequent years, donors in both countries reduced their contributions, in keeping with the general pattern worldwide. According to journalist Miguel Ángel García Vega, the decline in big donors, especially from the US, is due to the fact that they have decided to limit their generosity ‘mainly to their own causes.’ They have thus prioritised ‘religion over humanitarian aid or education in poor countries’ in their choice of donation recipients (García Vega, 2023), although Ukraine has been a major beneficiary of philanthropists since the outbreak of the war there in 2022. Another factor common to both countries is that only one country maintained its presence in both throughout the period analysed: the United States, whose foundations were active throughout the 15 years for which data is available.

The areas of communications that received the most funding differ between the two countries in relation to the foundation's country of origin and the specific recipient. In Germany, 'Media Content and Platforms' was the top choice of donors from Belgium, Canada, Germany, Hungary, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States. In Italy, foundations based in France, Hungary, Italy, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom were the only ones that gave priority attention to this category when deciding which area to invest in. The two countries studied differ in terms of all the other programmes that received funding. In Germany, where the government has prioritised programmes to promote equal internet access by funding app development and digital and technological infrastructures throughout the country, these areas received more than USD20 million (24% of the total) through the programmes 'Media Access and Policy' (USD9,174,999, or 10.6%), 'Media Applications and Tools' (USD7,170,727 or 8.3%), and 'Telecommunications Infrastructure' (USD4,459,572, or 6%). On the other hand, the category of conventional journalism activities ('Journalism, News and Information') received barely 3% of total donations (USD2,418,698).

Notwithstanding the differences identified between Germany and Italy in relation to priority areas of action, there are three elements that the two countries have in common. Firstly, the second most funded category in both countries is the 'General' sub-programme of 'Media Content and Platforms' (albeit with a marked difference in terms of the amount of money donated: 8.5 million in Italy, and almost 20 million in Germany). Secondly, donations to support initiatives related to media literacy, constituency journalism and radio are at the bottom of the list in both countries. And third, there is a marked distance between the top two priority areas and the rest. In Italy, 'Telecommunications' and 'General – Media Content and Platforms' account for more than 65% of total donations (39.9% and 25.4%, respectively), while in Germany, 'Web-based Media' and 'General – Media Content and Platforms' account for almost 70% of total funding (46.3% and 22.8%, respectively). All other categories account for less than 10% of all donations in both countries.

The data also show that more than half of the foundations ranked among the top ten donors in both countries provide most of their donations to NGOs. These foundations are Agua Fund Inc., Foundation to Promote Open Society, Oak Foundation, the Ford Foundation, Omidyar Network Fund Inc., and the Rockefeller Foundation in Germany (6 out of 10), and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Fondazione Cariplo, the Ford Foundation, Fondazione CRT, Open Society Foundations, Fondazione Banca del Monte di Luca, and the Fondazione con il Sud in Italy (7 out of 10).

However, the percentages donated differ. With a total of USD16,804,291, donations to non-governmental organisations in Italy represent 60% of the total donations made by the ten biggest foundations. In Germany, these account for almost 40.5% of total donations by the major donors (USD27,958,083). Public institutions are in second place, accounting for 39% of the total (USD27,186,000). Anonymous individual recipients received 11.22% while almost 9% went to private organisations (USD6,171,475). None of the top ten donors in Germany donated money to religious organisations. The second biggest category of recipients of donations made by these foundations in Italy was the public sector (23.14%, USD6,488,544), while private organisations received 7.4% (USD2,074,886), religious organisations received 6.58% (USD1,847,133) and private individuals received almost 3% (USD818,418).

The breakdown of the data by programme is similar in the two countries: four of the five grant-receiving areas involved prioritising donations to non-governmental organisations. The only difference is that Italy donated more to the public sector in the 'Media Applications and Tools' category, while in Germany the public sector was the biggest beneficiary in the

'Media Content and Platforms' programme, although non-governmental organisations came in second place.

The analysis provided in this article has effectively answered the seven questions posed for this study. The findings confirm that the major US-based philanthropic foundations have a prominent presence in the communications sector in both Italy and Germany, despite the different philanthropic tradition characterising each of these countries. While it is clear that large foundations from other countries also participate in these projects, the corporate dominance of the United States is reflected in its hegemony in philanthropic projects as well. With respect to priority areas, it is important to note that 'Media Content and Platforms' is the programme that received the most support in both Italy and Germany, while funding for journalism and news initiatives is considerably lower in both countries. The reasons for this lack of philanthropic interest are unclear, but it is worth noting that new hybrid media systems have established new channels for communication via platforms and applications. Although not the focus of this paper, the funding needs of the media sector could be considered for future research, particularly in relation to non-commercial initiatives "that strengthen media diversity, for example in local, investigative or cross-border journalism" (Forum Gemeinnütziger Journalismus, 2021) in both Italy and Germany. Another possible future lines of research could include comparative studies of different countries in Europe, where different charitable traditions coexist, all shaped by the norms of philanthrocapitalism.

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