

# CASE STUDY

● John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation ● Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting

*The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation is one of the largest supporters of independent journalism and public interest media in the country, with grants totaling \$25 million annually across three areas: professional nonprofit journalism, nonfiction multimedia storytelling, and participatory civic media. In 2016, the MacArthur Foundation made an unprecedented move in the field of philanthropy and journalism by announcing five-year, unrestricted grants to twelve nonprofit newsrooms, including the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting. At a time when most funders were providing shorter-term, project-based funding, MacArthur stood as an outlier among its peers.*

According to Kathy Im, director of the Journalism and Media program at MacArthur, “Unrestricted support for nonprofit news organizations is essential for two reasons: It is important for establishing the newsroom’s editorial independence, and it creates the conditions that spur authentic experimentation and innovation.”

MacArthur’s support of the Pulitzer Center allowed it the freedom to invest in journalism projects on critical emerging issues, as well as experiment with in-depth, multimedia partnerships with news organizations.

The Pulitzer Center first became a grantee of the MacArthur Foundation in 2013 when the Foundation made an initial one-year grant of \$75,000. With greater recognition of mutual goals and alignment, a second grant of \$300,000 over two years followed in 2014. In 2015, the Foundation made a \$500,000 grant explicitly aimed at strengthening the Pulitzer Center’s relationship with key national news outlets. In 2016, it approved a five-year unrestricted grant totaling \$2.5 million. The Pulitzer Center’s vast network of talented international reporters, its ability to work across a range of media forms, and its entrepreneurial and flexible publishing and partnership model were among the reasons why the MacArthur Foundation decided to make that significant and long-term unrestricted commitment.

Nathalie Applewhite, Pulitzer Center’s managing director, says the relationship with MacArthur opened up new opportunities for the organization to take more editorial and creative risks, work with more media outlets in new and different ways, and pursue unconventional and innovative methods of reaching audiences and having greater impact.

“With the generous infusion of funding from MacArthur, we really had to ask ourselves how we could take advantage of all of our relationships with reporters, news outlets, educational institutions and audiences,” Applewhite said. “The unrestricted support gave us a sense of both deep responsibility and profound freedom.”

MacArthur is not involved in the Pulitzer Center’s selection of reporting projects, or editorial process—a standard position for MacArthur and consistent with the American Press Institute’s *Guidance on Philanthropic Funding of Media and News*. From MacArthur’s standpoint, its support enables the Pulitzer Center to fund freelance reporters to pursue in-depth reporting on systemic global issues, place those stories in news outlets that have significant audiences, and create educational materials based on those reports for classroom use.





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**—Jon Sawyer, Executive Director, Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting**

"Pulitzer acts as a broker between amazing freelance talent and news outlets that need original content," Im said.

"And in between the two parties, Pulitzer brings a tremendous amount of editorial and creative oversight into the projects, bringing them to that next level. They have the capacity to work across many media forms and have relationships with both local/regional and national outlets to bring untold stories to audiences that need both deeper and broader appreciation of the world."

The Pulitzer Center has used the funds it receives from MacArthur to support impactful projects in a few different ways.

Grantee Erik Vance's cover story for the December 2016 issue of *National Geographic* looked at the science behind the placebo effect and the ways in which what people expect and believe can actually influence how they heal. The Pulitzer Center then brokered a follow-on

assignment for a broadcast version of the story for PBS "NewsHour."

"The Great Land Rush," a wide-ranging, multimedia series in the *Financial Times*, examined how global land grabs in Ethiopia, Myanmar and Indonesia can upend livelihoods and spark life-and-death struggles. Thanks to Pulitzer Center support, the package also included use of the Shorthand multimedia platform, a first for the *Financial Times* and a highly effective tool for educational engagement.

Grantee Ben Taub, just a year out of journalism school, got access to an explosive trove of material documenting Syrian war crimes. The Pulitzer Center gave him the funds required for a three-month investigation. The result, the *New Yorker* article "The Assad Files," was recognized by both the Overseas Press Club and the Robert F. Kennedy Awards.

MacArthur support has also been crucial to the Pulitzer Center's collaboration with regional news outlets across the country, from a groundbreaking investigation of a botched border wall with the *Texas Tribune* to multiple projects with the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel*, the *Des Moines Register*, the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, and the *Miami Herald*. That support has also helped the Pulitzer Center be a strong partner in the A Culture of Safety (ACOS) Alliance, a collaboration of nearly 100 news organizations dedicated to raising the standards on freelance journalism practices and ensuring that freelancers have the training they need to report safely in conflict zones. Over the past three years, the Pulitzer Center has partnered with ACOS, Thomson Reuters and the *New York Times* to provide nearly 50 freelancers with in-depth hostile-environment and first-aid training.



MacArthur support also facilitated the biggest single project in the Pulitzer Center's history: "Fractured Lands," the package of reporting, photography and virtual-reality video on the tragedy of the modern Middle East that took over an entire issue of the *New York Times Magazine* in August 2016. The project won the Society of Professional Journalists' prize for public service.

The Pulitzer Center then organized a national tour with reporter Scott Anderson, making more than 20 presentations at the Center's partner schools and universities. Whitney Young High School in Chicago worked with the Center's education staff to build an eight-week unit around "Fractured Lands," with student teams writing and illustrating children's-book versions of Anderson's work that were then presented in local middle schools. Another impactful offshoot of the project: bipartisan presentations at Pulitzer Center schools and universities by former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and

former National Security Advisor Stephen J. Hadley.

Jake Silverstein, editor in chief of the *New York Times Magazine*, says the Pulitzer Center is “sort of a laboratory of audacity.”

“This is, undoubtedly, a new age of journalism that we’re in,” Silverstein said. “It’s a challenged age. And we have to be creative. And part of that creativity is in finding partners you can work with to amplify what you’re trying to do. That’s true for everybody. It’s true for small outlets and individual journalists, and it’s even true for the *New York Times*. The Pulitzer Center has an absolutely huge role to play in all of this.”

Jon Sawyer, the Pulitzer Center’s founder and executive director, says that MacArthur’s support has been essential to the Center’s success—and a model very much worth following by other foundations and donors. “The unrestricted, long-term support from MacArthur, and its belief in our model, has meant the world.” Sawyer said. “At a time when so much of the discussion about journalism has focused on what is lost, or what can’t be done, MacArthur has allowed us to think big.”

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### **Key Takeaways for Funders:**

Unrestricted support for nonprofit newsrooms is vital for many reasons:

- With declining public trust of the news media, it is imperative to support and promote the idea of a free and independent press, not bound to or influenced by funders.
- Lacking a true business model for sustaining public interest news, funders should acknowledge and address the financial instability that results from newsrooms heavily supported by many, small, short-term, restricted grants.
- Reject the notion that general operating support leads to complacency. Quite the contrary: Unrestricted support creates the necessary conditions within an organization for experimentation and innovation.

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*About the MacArthur Foundation:* The John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation supports creative people, effective institutions, and influential networks building a more just, verdant, and peaceful world. With an endowment of \$6.3 billion, MacArthur focuses on major global issues, among them over-incarceration, climate change, nuclear risk, and building financial capital for the social sector. The Foundation has a significant international presence, with offices in India, Mexico and Nigeria as well as projects in more than 50 countries around the world. The goal of the Journalism and Media program is to strengthen U.S. democracy by supporting just and inclusive narratives that inform, engage, and activate Americans to build a more equitable future. The program aims to do this by investing in the creation, dissemination, and amplification of accurate, authentic, and well-told narratives across three areas of media: Professional Nonprofit Reporting, Nonfiction Multimedia Storytelling, and Participatory Civic Media. In Professional Nonprofit Reporting, the Foundation’s focus is on supporting national nonprofit newsrooms that conduct explanatory, investigative and international reporting, and strengthening the supportive infrastructure that promotes and protects a free and independent press. In Nonfiction Multimedia Storytelling, MacArthur supports organizations that nurture professional media makers who work in many different storytelling forms. In Participatory Civic Media, the Foundation works with organizations that encourage and enable diverse groups and individuals to express and organize themselves for social change using new media tools and practices. [macfound.org](http://macfound.org) | [@macfound](https://twitter.com/macfound)

*About the Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting:* The Pulitzer Center on Crisis Reporting is a nonprofit journalism organization dedicated to supporting in-depth engagement with global affairs through quality international journalism created independently and distributed across media platforms and through partnerships with a network of hundreds of schools and universities. It holds open calls for independent reporting projects on underreported issues around the globe. In 2017, the organization funded 125 professional reporting projects and produced more than 600 stories that were published in more than 150 media outlets. The Pulitzer Center has become the recognized leader in this space, providing nearly \$2 million per year in direct support of reporting projects and educational outreach. The Center employs strong editorial standards in the selection of projects to support and then works with its networks of media outlets and educational partners to maximize the impact of its work. It’s also built a diverse mix of funding sources, from large foundations and individual donors to fee-for-service arrangements. The Center also serves as a buffer between donors and journalists, assuring the proper role of each. It places stories in a variety of outlets from PBS “NewsHour” and the *New York Times* to the *New Yorker*, BuzzFeed, PRI’s “The World,” *Science*, and *National Geographic*. Projects supported by the Pulitzer Center have won nearly every major journalism award, from the Pulitzer and Peabody Prizes to national Emmys and World Press Photo Awards, as well as best-online-reporting awards from the National Press Foundation, the Society of Professional Journalists, and the National Press Club. Its innovative collaborations include poetry-as-journalism, museum exhibitions, and theatrical productions. In addition, the Center does extensive outreach work in the education space, particularly within secondary schools and universities. Staffers and journalist grantees hold close to 600 events that reach nearly 100,000 students each year with lectures, panel discussions, film screenings and photography exhibits and workshops. Its online curricular materials include hundreds of lesson plans tied to Pulitzer reporting that are freely available to educators worldwide. University students receive international reporting fellowships and mentorship from professional journalists—producing award-winning stories on critical issues. The Pulitzer Center is as strong a presence in red-state Missouri and North Carolina as in blue-state New York and Washington, D.C.; in all venues it is a voice for civil discourse on critical issues facing the globe. [pulitzercenter.org](http://pulitzercenter.org) | [@pulitzercenter](https://twitter.com/pulitzercenter)