

A Strategy Evaluation of JustFilms 2017-2021

Expanding Inclusion, Equity, and Creativity
in the Documentary Film Space

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | OCTOBER 2023

Prepared for
Ford Foundation

Prepared by
Informing Change

FOREWORD FROM FORD FOUNDATION

Over the past five years, the documentary film sector has witnessed major stress tests, disruptions, and calls for structural changes around accountability and sustainability. Ford has been mindful of and responsive to these dynamics while trying to maintain a long-term perspective.

The social justice documentary ecosystem contains filmmakers, filmmaker support organizations, academia, journalism, tech, social movements, and more. With this in mind, we've intentionally made choices to support these sectors and identify meaningful ways to connect them through networks. We define impact in a dynamic expansive way that is led by the practitioners and believe that a more inclusive documentary sector and creative documentary forms can advance social justice.

As we consider the future of the JustFilms portfolio, we recognize that democracy is under attack—both in the United States and abroad. The Ford Foundation seeks to shape a multi-racial, gender-inclusive democracy and a society of belonging. At JustFilms, we're thinking about our work broadly along these lines where:

- Political power focuses on a robust civil society and fair governance
- Economic power focuses on workers' rights, and equitable and just economic policies
- Cultural power enables artists and culture bearers to shape narratives that promote equality

Our work is strengthened by collaboration with other programs and regional offices at the Foundation. Our global colleagues help ensure that our projects amplify larger justice movements around the world.

How're Making Decisions

We are always striving for balance. This means working to ensure that we are supporting film projects, organizations, individuals, and ideas. We also allocate resources in the United States and globally, keeping in mind how ecosystems and social change movements speak to each other across borders. We've also considered how to support the various sectors— production, exhibition, distribution, criticism, curation, and archiving— that build value and visibility for the documentary arts. Moving forward, we seek the right balance between all of this work, with a focus on how to best address inequality through the documentary film medium. We are also mindful of and thinking seriously about the sustainability of independent filmmakers and film professionals in a rapidly evolving landscape.

This evaluation relied heavily on data from our grantmaking from 2017-2021 and may not fully reflect the extent of our more recent regrantsing partnerships that expand support of Global South filmmakers through the IDFA Bertha Fund, and support disabled filmmakers with the International Documentary Association.

The Challenges Ahead

This evaluation will help inform a refreshment of our strategy. We acknowledge that our sector has many challenges and opportunities. Our task is to determine JustFilms' focus across these issues,

including the rapid growth of independent film infrastructure, the consolidation of the distribution landscape, documentaries becoming a trusted information source that are becoming entangled in culture wars, artificial intelligence, and public perceptions of truth.

What We Hope It Will Do

JustFilms hopes that documentaries—and those who make them— will continue to inspire and lead important ethics and accountability discourse that is pertinent to all creativity and freedom of expression fields. This evaluation reflects how JustFilms impacts the social justice documentary sector, and we hope it provides our grantee partners with a greater understanding of Ford’s efforts to strengthen the global documentary ecosystem infrastructure and diversify its makers and leaders. We also hope the evaluation will provide more insight into JustFilms’ grantmaking and strategy processes and provide transparency about our decision-making and priority areas.

THIS EXECUTIVE SUMMARY WAS PREPARED BY:

- Michael P. Arnold, Informing Change
- Ellen Schneider, Active Voice Lab
- Rossana Ramirez, Informing Change
- Rachel Kramer, Informing Change
- Zoe Bell, Informing Change
- Johnny Du, Informing Change



INTRODUCTION

Since 2015, the Ford Foundation's Creativity and Free Expression (CFE) program has invested in creative organizations and storytellers shaping a more inclusive, just world across three areas of focus—arts and culture, journalism, and documentary filmmaking through its JustFilms initiative.

Originally developed in 2011, JustFilms was designed as a five-year, \$50 million effort focused on social issue films that primarily funded just a few large and established institutions. Since then, JustFilms has grown to become one of the largest social justice documentary funders in the United States¹ and now funds a wide range of filmmakers, leaders, and field building organizations within the US and globally, creating networks and opportunities for underrepresented filmmakers and other key voices in the field, including critics and curators.

To assess impact and alignment with the changing needs of the field, the Foundation is conducting a series of evaluations around each area of focus under the CFE program. Ford commissioned Informing Change²—in collaboration³ with Active Voice Lab—to conduct **an evaluation covering five years of the JustFilms initiative (2017–2021)** that seeks to take stock of JustFilms' strategy over that time. There are two areas of inquiry:

1. What the Ford Foundation and JustFilms expected in terms of how change happens; and
2. How funding, program team support, and grantees' work contributed to outcomes.

The present evaluation is intended to strengthen and refine JustFilms' theory of how change happens. We explore progress toward outcomes, unpack Ford's contributions, and test assumptions undergirding the theory of how change happens. Ultimately, this evaluation aims to inform the next five-year cycle of strategic grantmaking and generate lessons learned that can support the documentary field and its funders.

THE EVALUATION

To better understand progress toward JustFilms' five-year outcomes, we identified four key evaluation questions to guide our data collection and analysis (**Table 1**).⁴

¹ Espaldon, D., Thompson, N., & Crump-King, J. (2022). The Story of JustFilms, 2014–2019. Internal Ford Foundation report: unpublished.

² The Informing Change team consisted of

³ Our collaboration also included Jahera Otieno, Principal-PAYO Collaborative.

⁴ These questions were defined during the design process and included in the Evaluation Plan approved by the Ford Foundation.

TABLE 1
Evaluation Framework

FIVE-YEAR STRATEGY OUTCOMES	KEY EVALUATION QUESTIONS
1. Artistically innovative documentaries and emerging media, created primarily by diverse makers, receive crucial funding to advance social justice stories consistent with Ford’s priorities.	Resourcing & Supports: How has JustFilms contributed to who gets to make films and what kinds of films get made?
2. The field of independent nonfiction film and emerging media is shaped by the values of equity and inclusion, evidenced by building the power of a more diverse set of leaders.	Equity & Inclusion: How has JustFilms contributed to expanding equity and inclusion in the leadership and decision making of the documentary field?
3. Innovative, effective practices connect audiences with social justice documentaries and emerging media to build more engaged and informed public discourse.	Discourse & Narrative: To what extent has JustFilms contributed to specific social, public engagement, and narrative shift efforts?
4. More resilient networks of independent documentary and emerging media actors, from and focused on marginalized communities, are better able to identify and address field and social justice priorities and needs.	Field Infrastructure: What kind of influence has JustFilms had on the documentary infrastructure?

The evaluation findings come from data and insights collected through the following quantitative and qualitative methods:



353

JustFilms grants from 2017-2021 totaling \$73.3 million



41

Interviews with Ford staff (10), JustFilms grantees (20), and key informants in the field (11)



110

Survey responses out of 180 individual grantees (61% response rate)



1

Focus group with 4 Rockwood Fellowship participants



55

Survey responses out of 83 organizational grantees (66% response rate)



1

90-minute sensemaking session with Ford and JustFilms staff

We assessed progress and insights related to each of these four overarching outcomes. In doing so, we also investigated some major contextual issues impacting the documentary field, such as:

- The ongoing struggle to ensure diverse representation amongst documentary professionals.
- Limited sources of revenue for documentary professionals to build and sustain their careers.
- Changes in the digital age's media distribution landscape and emphasis on profit affecting the types of films that get made and distributed.

We then provided an **overall progress rating** (limited,⁵ moderate,⁶ or substantial⁷) and **assessment of the evidence strength** (weak,⁸ some,⁹ or strong¹⁰) for each outcome area.

JUSTFILMS: HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

JustFilms envisions **a more equitable, democratic, and joyful world fostered by the contributions of independent nonfiction media makers, the voices of communities historically marginalized by culture, innovative artistic practices, and critical cultural discourse.** To that end, JustFilms holds the following assumptions:

- Visual culture, inclusive of film, photography and moving images, is a powerful force in shaping social narratives and public discourse;
- There is a global, interconnected documentary ecosystem that has great capacity to advance social justice at global, regional, and local levels;
- The marginalization, silencing, and exclusion of groups and communities have rendered their stories ignored, untold, or told in ways that reproduce harmful narratives;
- There is a need for greater investments and resources to help expand artistic freedom and economic sustainability amongst documentary practitioners;
- Supporting an inclusive and sustainable documentary sector, and lifting up work from historically marginalized communities, can advance social justice through narrative shift and cultural power building approaches.

JustFilms supports the production, sustainability, and engagement of social justice documentary filmmaking. JustFilms' grantmaking focuses on **content funding** (support for creatives working on specific films), **general organization support** (general operating support, core support, and regranteeing support), and institutional strengthening support (large multi-year grants through the foundation's Building Institutions and Networks **[BUILD]** program). Other support includes network-building, field leadership development, funding research and cultural criticism, and one-time Social

⁵ Limited progress: Lowest of three ratings (red), defined as "Some steps taken toward meeting the overall objectives of the outcome but advancing the needle might require a shift in strategy."

⁶ Moderate progress: Middle of three ratings (yellow), defined as "Significant developments toward achieving the outcome, with some additional efforts and possible reconsideration needed on strategy."

⁷ Substantial progress: Highest of three ratings (green), defined as "Major strides made toward achieving the outcome, indicating the strategy and programmatic actions are working."

⁸ Weak evidence: Lowest of three ratings (red), defined as "Limited available evidence to inform the assessment."

⁹ Some evidence: Middle of three ratings (yellow), defined as "Enough evidence to inform a general assessment, but not all data sources point to the same conclusion."

¹⁰ Strong evidence: Highest of three ratings (green), defined as "Plethora of evidence, particularly allowing triangulation and reinforcement of findings."


Bond grantmaking in 2021-2022 that supported a select number of organizations as a response to the global COVID-19 pandemic to stabilize and strengthen key organizations.

As articulated in JustFilms' theory of how change happens, these approaches relate to three primary constituencies:

1. **Artists, filmmakers, & stories:** Diverse storytellers who—and documentaries that—have the power to shape cultural narratives.
2. **Organizations & networks:** Entities that provide fiscal support, increase the visibility of films, advocate for filmmakers, and provide collaboration and partnership opportunities within the field more broadly.
3. **Engagement infrastructure:** Initiatives that support research, public discourse, audience engagement, and shape public conversations through documentary films.

JustFilms staff see all these approaches working together to support a documentary culture, strengthen field infrastructure, and ultimately add value and diversity to the field. Through these, JustFilms hopes to see changes in the four long-term (five-year) outcomes outlined in **Table 1**. These outcomes guide the present evaluation.

JUSTFILMS – THEORY OF HOW CHANGE HAPPENS

CONSTITUENCIES & APPROACHES	SHORT-TERM	LONG-TERM	IMPACTS
<p>1. ARTISTS, FILMMAKERS, & STORIES</p> <p>Support of film, media projects, and artists that advance social justice</p> <p>Support creative and professional development of filmmakers and field leaders</p> <p>Production, Travel, Promotion, Leadership Development</p>	<p>More people with unique perspectives create innovative stories and media projects addressing social justice issues</p> <p>Diverse filmmakers in the US and Global South have more equitable and inclusive processes to secure funding and resources</p>	<p>Color matched to primary constituency</p> <p>Increased networking and collaboration amongst different actors in the documentary film ecosystem</p> <p>A more vibrant and sustained core of networks and organizations, and a stronger and deeper pipeline of leaders of color and leaders from the Global South</p>	 <p>1. Resourcing & Supports: Artistically innovative documentaries and emerging media, created primarily by diverse makers, receive crucial funding to advance social justice stories consistent with Ford's priorities.</p>
<p>2. ORGANIZATIONS & NETWORKS</p> <p>Support capacity building of social justice media organizations</p> <p>Strengthen networks within social justice documentary sectors and build connections with other sectors</p> <p>Gen Ops, Convenings, Regranting, Programs, Resources</p>	<p>More funding for filmmakers of color and creative forms of social justice documentary</p> <p>Increased safety and security for all social justice documentary media makers</p>	<p>More people in marginalized communities experience stories that sound like theirs</p>	<p>2. Equity & Inclusion: The field of independent, nonfiction film and emerging media is shaped by the values of equity and inclusion, evidenced by building the power of a more diverse set of leaders.</p>
<p>3. FIELD INFRASTRUCTURE</p> <p>Increase capacity, networking, and support for cultural critics and curators of color</p> <p>Support for research, campaigns, and initiatives that generate informed public discourse about social justice issues</p> <p>Archiving, Criticism, Curating, Events, Research, Impact Campaigns</p>	<p>More independent media projects produced by and for people of color, people with disabilities, and the Global South</p> <p>Increased sustainability and stronger infrastructure for documentary media makers</p>	<p>Wider distribution of and audience engagement with people of color and Global South media</p> <p>More funding in infrastructure for socially engaged documentary filmmakers</p>	<p>3. Discourse & Narrative: Innovative, effective practices connect audiences with social justice documentaries and emerging media to build more engaged and informed public discourse.</p> <p>4. Field Infrastructure: More resilient networks of independent documentary and emerging media actors, from and focused on marginalized communities, are better able to identify and address field and social justice priorities and needs.</p>

VISION
 A more equitable, democratic, and joyful world fostered by the contributions of independent nonfiction media makers, the voices of communities historically marginalized by culture, innovative artistic practices, and critical cultural discourse.

Who: People of Color; Historically Marginalized Communities; People with Disabilities; Global South; Creative and Political Practitioners/Filmmakers; Organizations Rooted in Ideas of Diaspora & Place; Ford Priority States & Global Regions

OUTCOME 1: RESOURCING & SUPPORTS

OUTCOME	PROGRESS RATING	EVIDENCE STRENGTH RATING
Artistically innovative documentaries and emerging media, created primarily by diverse makers, receive crucial funding to advance social justice stories consistent with Ford’s priorities.	Substantial progress	Strong evidence

Strengths & Successes

- JustFilms supports the documentary field directly through its content grants¹¹ and indirectly through regranteeing via intermediaries. During 2017–2021, JustFilms awarded \$27.3 million to 187 films through 223 content grants, including six grants through fiscal sponsors. JustFilms granted between \$4.4 and \$6.8 million each year, with the average and median grant sizes staying consistent across all years. Films received anywhere from 1–4 grants (though 82% of films received just one grant) and typical support size for an individual film ranged between \$15,000 to \$300,000, with a median of \$125,000.
- JustFilms’ grantmaking and programming reflect its intentions to prioritize diverse filmmakers and social justice stories.
 - JustFilms-funded project leads were diverse and had mostly similar funding levels across recorded race/ethnicity categories (**Exhibit 1**¹²).
 - JustFilms funds filmmakers at all career stages, though almost half (48%) of grants went to established filmmakers who have made five or more films.
 - JustFilms-funded project leads¹³ were mostly diverse with respect to gender; 58% of content grants had a female project lead, but only 2% had a trans project lead.
 - Diversity among project leads was consistent regardless of if the project leads were US-based or based outside of the US; 63% of grants with a US-based project lead had BIPOC project leads,¹⁴ while 74% of grants with a project lead based outside the US had BIPOC project leads.

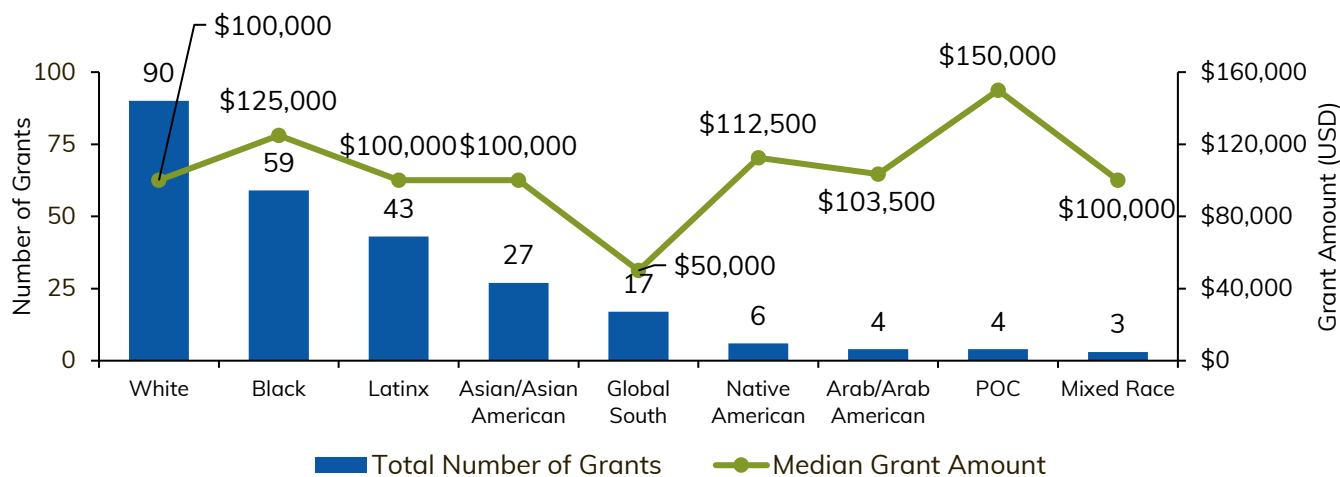
¹¹ Content grants are direct artist support grants to fund specific film projects.

¹² The grant amounts in **Exhibit 1** are from the Fluxx grants tracking database, while the demographic data is from the supplementary Airtable database used by JustFilms. The demographic data reflects the tags that JustFilms program staff applied to project leads for each grant; each grant contained multiple demographic codes for project lead, so the individual n’s will add up to more than the total number of content grants. The demographic categories themselves may also be inappropriate for describing filmmakers outside of the US, as the categories are very US-centric. For more information about the limitations of JustFilms grants data, please see **Appendix B** of the main report.

¹³ Creatives, directors, and/or producers.

¹⁴ If the geography of the filmmaker contained a “US” or “USA” tag, it is considered to have a US-based filmmaker. We included all race/ethnicity tags except for “White” in our count for BIPOC. The race/ethnicity tags in the database include African American, Arab American, Asian American, Native American, Mixed Race, POC, White, and Global South. Many of these categories are US-centric and may not accurately reflect the identities of non-US project leads.

EXHIBIT 1
Content Grants Filmmaker Funding by Race/Ethnicity
(n=223)



- JustFilms funding has played a critical role in maintaining the independence of filmmakers’ creative choices, has been fundamental in allowing grantees to engage in thoughtful and meaningful work, and has influenced filmmakers’ capacity to attract new funding.
 - All 103 surveyed filmmakers noted JustFilms funding propelled their project toward its next stage of completion, and one-third specified funding was critical for advancing or completing their films. Of surveyed individuals, 96% said JustFilms’ contribution to the production of social justice documentaries is “significant” or “transformative,”¹⁵ while 75% said JustFilms’ contribution to the sustainability of individual filmmakers and producers is “significant” or “transformative,” indicating JustFilms support is crucial to the careers of documentary grantees.
 - By providing social justice-focused creatives with invaluable resources and validating their artistic vision, JustFilms bolsters imaginative documentary filmmaking. Most surveyed organizations (61%) and individuals (65%) said JustFilms’ contribution to the expansion of creative approaches to storytelling in the documentary field was “transformative” or “significant.” Only a small number of organizations and individuals (7% and 4%, respectively) indicated JustFilms made “no” or only a “minor” contribution.
 - Grantees we interviewed, including filmmakers and organizations, and survey respondents indicated JustFilms funding gives them better access to other funders that hear about key projects from JustFilms staff and recognize the engagement and rigor in their vetting process. Additional funding sources that grantees mentioned during interviews include the National Endowment for the Humanities, the MacArthur Foundation, PBS, and the New York State Council on the Arts.
 - Survey respondents shared they have leveraged JustFilms’ grants to secure additional sources of funding, with over 50% of grantee organizations and individual

¹⁵ This and subsequent results highlighting “transformative” influence of JustFilms on organizations and individuals are derived from closed-ended survey responses presented as a Likert scale from 1–5, with 1 being “no contribution” and 5 being “transformative contribution.” In some cases, respondents shared examples of types of changes or influences they witnessed. Where available, we highlight these. However, as this was a largely closed-ended survey—to facilitate higher response rates—our understanding of what respondents meant by “transformative” is limited. We recommend future efforts to explore this in more depth.

grantees citing JustFilms' contribution to their ability to attract more funding as "transformative" or "significant."

"The huge investment in programs that invite and welcome and engage people of color, women, and nonbinary folks into the documentary filmmaking field has really made an impact on the numbers, and it's made an impact on the kinds of storytelling we see. It's insider storytelling as opposed to what we would consider outsider storytelling."

– US-BASED SUPPORTING ORGANIZATION, GRANTEE

Gaps & Opportunities

- JustFilms has contributed to the growth and sustainability of a diverse pool of filmmakers and creative films. However, its funding for key geographies, such as the Global South and US Southeast and Midwest, has been more limited, though the actual investment needs in this region is unclear.
 - Over half (57%) of US-based grants went to the US Northeast region (mainly New York), and only 5% and 4% went to the US Southeast and Midwest regions, respectively.
 - Despite a stated focus on the Global South, only 8% of content grants had a Global South project lead and only 17% of films are focused on Global South subjects.
- JustFilms-funded projects were also not as diverse with regards to disability (less than 5% of grants allocated to project leads with disabilities) when compared to project lead funding by gender and race/ethnicity.
 - However, it should be acknowledged that much of the grantmaking support for filmmakers with disabilities is done through intermediary organizations¹⁶—typically organizations with a disability focus—so not all funding to films by or about persons with disabilities is reflected in the grants databases we relied on to compile this data.
- While JustFilms' funding has expanded opportunities for underrepresented filmmakers, pathways for creatives of color are still limited in the documentary field. As a result, the same professionals of color are in high demand, get tapped repeatedly, or are booked with work for long periods of time.
- Many survey participants (40% of surveyed individual grantees and 24% of surveyed grantee organizations) recommended JustFilms expand the parameters of the funding it offers. Both individuals and organizations suggested JustFilms offer funding throughout the entire film process, from initial research and development through post-production and impact campaigns. In reality, JustFilms does fund projects across all stages, suggesting a lack of clarity in the field around the scope of JustFilms' grantmaking.
 - A recurring theme among survey respondents was a desire for more general operating support and/or unrestricted funding. While JustFilms does provide general and core support to some grantees, it also has to balance internal Ford legal limitations on what

¹⁶ Communication with JustFilms program officers.

they can award when grantees use for-profit corporations in the form of LLCs to receive funding.

OUTCOME 2: EQUITY & INCLUSION

OUTCOME	PROGRESS RATING	EVIDENCE STRENGTH RATING
The field of independent nonfiction film and emerging media is shaped by the values of equity and inclusion, evidenced by building the power of a more diverse set of leaders.	Substantial progress	Some evidence

Strengths & Successes

- JustFilms is broadly advancing equity and inclusion through its financial support of BIPOC- and People with Disabilities (PWD)-led organizations in the field (**Exhibit 2**). Many interviewees, including programmers, curators, producers, scholars, and peer funders see these grassroots organizations as challenging the mainstream documentary world and influencing how film festivals operate.
- A more diverse cadre of documentary leaders has emerged over the last few years. One key driver of this emerging leadership is JustFilms’ support of the Rockwood Fellowship, which is highlighted by some respondents as a successful effort to identify and uplift field leaders. This fellowship brings together leaders working across a wide range of topics, including storytelling, film, and social change, to enhance their leadership skills and engage in meaningful collaborations. The Rockwood Fellowship participants we talked to say the personal and professional connections they made through the fellowship were, in one Fellow’s words, “transformational” at a personal level.
- JustFilms has been instrumental in helping facilitate inclusion and power-shifting for a more diverse set of organizations, leaders, and individuals working in the arenas of criticism and curation.
 - Increasing diversity of perspectives in the field requires diversifying the voices who critique and curate films. JustFilms has provided 18 grants (14% of 127 organizational grants) which included work on “criticism and commentary” for a total of \$5 million. Our grantee survey found 72% of organizations and 80% of individuals believe JustFilms’ contribution to the visibility and inclusion of curators and programmers of color is “significant” or “transformative” (**Exhibit 3**).¹⁷ In the same survey, 20% of organizations specified using some of their general operating funds for curation and archiving activities.

¹⁷ Data comes from individual and organization grantee surveys. “I don’t know/NA” responses have been removed from the data.

EXHIBIT 2

Examples of Organizations Funded by JustFilms

JustFilms-supported organizations mentioned by interviewees as playing a role in advancing equity and inclusion, with descriptions taken or summarized from their respective websites:

BIPOC-Led Organizations

- **Asian American Documentary Network:** A “national network that works to increase the visibility and support of Asian Americans in the documentary field.”
- **BlackStar Film Festival:** An “annual celebration of the visual and storytelling traditions of the African diaspora and of global communities of color.”
- **Brown Girls Doc Mafia:** An initiative advocating for women and nonbinary POC working in the documentary film industry.
- **Color Congress:** An intermediary body, funder, and collective that supports the ecosystem of POC-led documentary organizations by fostering connections and shifting field infrastructure.
- **Cousin Collective:** A “collective supporting Indigenous artists expanding the form of film.”
- **Firelight Media:** Nonprofit filmmaking company for “non-fiction cinema by and about communities of color.”
- **Undocumented Filmmakers Collective:** A coalition that “tackles the systemic inequities that undocumented immigrants face in the field of filmmaking.”

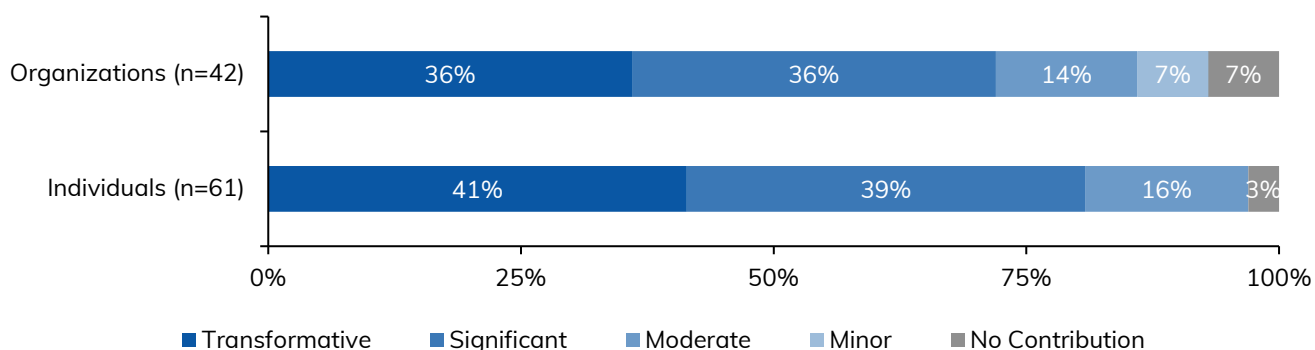
People with Disabilities-Led Organizations

- **FWD-Doc (Center for Independent Documentary):** A group of filmmakers with disabilities (FWDs) and active allies working in documentary film.
- **AXS Lab:** A “social enterprise that is building a coalition of individual and organizations to boost the movement for inclusion and accessibility.”
- **1IN4 Coalition (Edward Charles Foundation):** An “intersectional coalition of disabled creatives currently working in Hollywood focused on long-term institutional shifts to increase employment and authentic representation of disabled people.”
- **Morpheyes Studio (Rochester Institute of Technology):** A “Deaf-led creative production studio established at National Technical Institute for the Deaf.”
- **SignLight:*** A “nonprofit organization dedicated to building a powerhouse for professional development accessible for the deaf and hard of hearing artists, technicians and filmmakers.”

* Grant funded in collaboration with the CFE's Arts & Culture focus area.

EXHIBIT 3

Thinking about the places and spaces in which you work, how much has JustFilms positively influenced the inclusion and visibility of curators/programmers of color?



- The diversity in funding has major implications for the landscape of documentary film: 94% of surveyed individual filmmakers and 78% of surveyed organizations described JustFilms' contribution to the inclusion and centering of creatives of color in the documentary field as "significant" or "transformative."

"There's an emerging ecosystem being funded by philanthropy, organizations recognizing the ways in which they might have marginalized people in the past. And they're giving the money to the people actively organizing and curating the field in a diversified way."

– US-BASED RESEARCHER

Gaps & Opportunities

- Filmmakers expressed a concern about an outsized influence by a small number of organizations and individuals that JustFilms is supporting. As one US-based filmmaker explained, "funding has really dwindled to a very small set of gatekeepers ... smaller organizations are doing their best to fill in the gaps, but they really don't have the wherewithal to support more than a handful of filmmakers every year. There's just been a huge amount of consolidation of who gets to make these sizable grants in the granting world." However, by funding a wider array of BIPOC-led organizations JustFilms aims to decentralize decision-making and reach individuals and organizations with grants that would be too small for Ford to provide. This disconnect in intent and external perception is an area that could be clarified with grantees.

OUTCOME 3: DISCOURSE & NARRATIVE

OUTCOME	PROGRESS RATING	EVIDENCE STRENGTH RATING
Innovative, effective practices connect audiences with social justice documentaries and emerging media to build more engaged and informed public discourse.	Moderate progress	Some evidence

Strengths & Successes

- JustFilms’ support is significant for grantees wanting to contribute to social change and public engagement through films via educational resources, impact campaigns, and public discourse.
 - Interviewees discussed how educators have used their documentaries in and out of the classroom to support social and moral insights, teach values and character, and introduce new ideas and understanding. Some of the most common approaches include teacher’s guides, screenings at schools, and resources such as websites, books, and articles for further exploration.
 - Impact campaigns integrate documentaries into social justice movements and are essential for deepening the connection between storytelling and change by building awareness and action for issues. JustFilms directly funds films to implement these campaigns, and also supports organizations that are investing in impact campaigns and the impact ecosystem more broadly, such as Working Films and Doc Society. A quarter of surveyed organizations and 18% of surveyed individuals used their JustFilms grant to fund an impact campaign or activities.
 - JustFilms plays a critical, sometimes even leading role, in creating public discourse around the issues raised by documentaries through its support of a variety of platforms—panels, workshops, blogs, webinars, and podcasts.

“Water cooler conversations are now turning into public conversations about how people are radically approaching change-making and getting people involved that normally would not be.”

– US-BASED FIELD LEADER, KEY INFORMANT

- JustFilms funding is helping films advance social justice and narrative shifts, both in near-term change (e.g., building support for policy initiatives) and long-term change (e.g., encompassing bigger-picture narrative and cultural shifts).¹⁸
- A recurring theme in interviews was the challenge of reaching audiences in the streaming age, particularly when streamers tend to work with White filmmakers and prioritize stories focused on White protagonists. JustFilms may facilitate opportunities to help counter this tendency by expanding support for the distribution of diverse, independent films through a

¹⁸ Moore, M., & Sen, R. (2022). Funding Narrative Change, An Assessment and Framework. The Convergence Partnership. <https://convergencepartnership.org/resource/funding-narrative-change.html>

variety of non-commercial mechanisms, including film festivals (e.g., Sundance, BlackStar), distribution and presenting initiatives (e.g., Doc Society and its Good Pitch distribution initiative, Distribution Advocates for non-festival distribution), and field building organizations that distribute films through public broadcasting (e.g., ITVS).

- JustFilms' grantmaking and programming is enabling new ways of creating and viewing documentaries, especially by tapping into new technologies (e.g., virtual reality, immersive media, AI, virtual screenings). These technologies have widened the definition of 'documentary film' and changed how these stories are made and how audiences see, engage, and interact with them.
- The emerging emphasis on virtual screenings has benefited communities—such as people with disabilities, rural residents, and very low-income people—that typically have less access to mainstream venues, such as movie theatres or film festivals, due to physical or economic constraints.

Gaps & Opportunities

- While some documentaries have had a significant effect on the social issues they address, the evidence of this impact is not always readily evident or documented. There are challenges in operationalizing and measuring "impact" and audience engagement, particularly as some changes may be difficult to attribute or take several years to take hold. Investments in tested and emergent evaluation approaches may yield substantially more insights than could be gleaned in this study.^{19,20,21}
- Field informants lamented a lack of resources dedicated to filmmaking and audience development beyond established locations such as New York and Los Angeles. Indeed, JustFilms funding in the Southeast region of the US is quite limited, with only 6% of content grants funding films by filmmakers from the Southeast and only 10% of funded films produced in the Southeast. One way JustFilms tackles the challenge of broad geographical reach is through its regranteeing approach. For instance, JustFilms supports the New Orleans Film Society, which makes grants to filmmakers based in the US South that are typically too small for JustFilms to make (\$5,000–\$10,000).
- Although JustFilms has strengthened the infrastructure supporting filmmakers, independent filmmakers still struggle with effective ways to distribute their films more widely and successfully navigate the opportunities and perils of commercial streamers.

¹⁹ The Norman Lear Center Publications (n.d.). *A 2-in-1 Guide: Impact Assessment & Metrics Guide*. <https://learcenter.org/publication/impact-assessment-metrics-guide/>

²⁰ Rosenthal, E.L., Watson-Currie, E. and Shin, H.-S. (2022). *The Social Dilemma*, USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center Media Impact Project. https://learcenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/TheSocialDilemma_Appendix.pdf

²¹ Offline Impact Indicators for Documentary Film (n.d.). Media Impact Project. The USC Annenberg Norman Lear Center. <http://www.mediaimpactproject.org/uploads/5/1/2/7/5127770/offlineimpact.pdf>

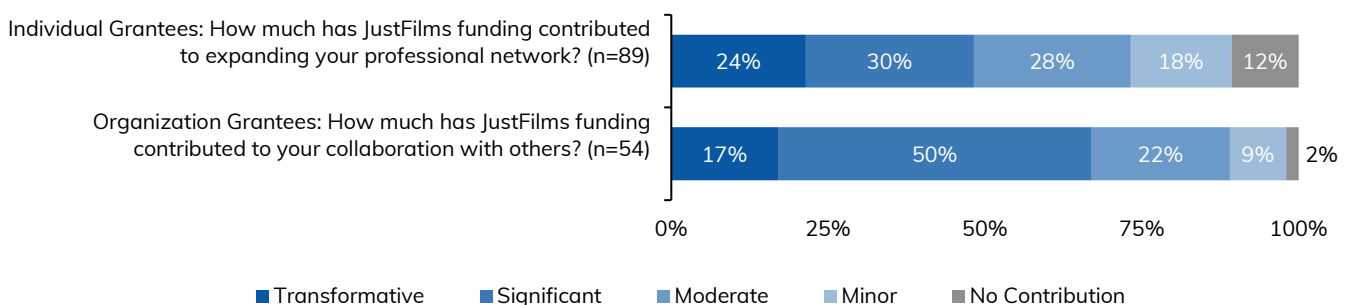
OUTCOME 4: FIELD INFRASTRUCTURE

OUTCOME	PROGRESS RATING	EVIDENCE STRENGTH RATING
More resilient networks of independent documentary and emerging media actors, from and focused on marginalized communities, are better able to identify and address field and social justice priorities and needs.	Moderate progress	Some evidence

Strengths & Successes

- JustFilms’ grantmaking and programming is supporting connected networks of individuals and organizations by hosting or sponsoring events that provide spaces for creatives, thought leaders, and journalists to share ideas, network with each other, find opportunities to collaborate, and heighten awareness of films.
- Almost half of individual grantees surveyed agreed JustFilms’ contribution to expanding professional networks was “significant” or “transformative.” Even more—two-thirds of organization grantees—thought JustFilms’ contribution to their ability to collaborate was “significant” or “transformative” (Exhibit 4).²²
- JustFilms is strengthening the infrastructure of the documentary field through its organizational grants, as well as Ford’s BUILD program. By bolstering key field-building organizations, JustFilms is fortifying the resilience of network organizations and enabling these organizations to better serve their constituencies by improving organizational health through improving aspects such as financial stability, organizational capacity, and staffing capacity.
- Globally, there is an emerging and expansive network funded and facilitated by JustFilms. This network is invested in collaborating on shared solutions to field-wide challenges and is able to reach filmmakers and organizations in local contexts, globally.

EXHIBIT 4
Collaborations and Networks



²² Data is from grantee survey. I don’t know/NA answers have been removed.

Gaps & Opportunities

- Grantees expressed a desire for more facilitated gatherings and networking opportunities, with 37% of individual and 22% of organization grantees agreeing that JustFilms could do more to facilitate connections. The small number of professionals of color in the documentary field restricts opportunities for mentoring and connections that emerging professionals need to break into the field. To that end, one US-based established filmmaker shared “something that was lacking throughout [was] ... for [JustFilms] to create a space for fellow grantees to connect with each other.”
- A few interviewees and survey respondents, as well as JustFilms staff, recognize the COVID-19 pandemic as a limiting factor in the number of in-person interactions in the last couple years.
- Ethical considerations as they relate to documentary films are a growing concern. JustFilms has played a key role in those conversations, but as Ford is a major player in the field, some field participants see a greater leadership role for JustFilms in ensuring a field-wide, ethical-based approach to documentaries.
- Strategies identified by field participants to address accountability and shift power dynamics include examining power dynamics between subjects and authors; prioritizing co-creation with communities and groups centered in a given film; compensating film subjects; and centering audiences from marginalized communities.

“[JustFilms] for us plays a real critical role and it's a different role ... because they're thinking about the industry of film [and] not only just an individual film.”

– US-BASED FILMMAKER AND FIELD BUILDER, GRANTEE

REFLECTIONS & CONCLUSION

JustFilms is supporting a more diverse slate of evolving documentary field participants, raising the visibility of social issues among and related to historically marginalized communities, and connecting audiences to stories from under-resourced, overlooked, and emergent talent. Three questions are worth considering as JustFilms approaches its strategic refresh:

1. **What is the focus/foci of change (people, geography, and/or content)?** While the evidence shows JustFilms has supported a diverse array of filmmakers and organizations to center in their work, there remains an ongoing need for increased support in domestic areas outside the East and West coasts. There is also a question about the scope and focus of JustFilms' global work, specifically which regions of the Global South to support. If either the identity- or place-based focuses are refined, JustFilms should consider a person's ecosystem for the former (e.g., the institutions and resources available to a potential grantee, distribution venues outside of major film festivals). JustFilms can also consider how to balance its focus on investing in filmmaking that advances social justice stories or with its broader funding emphasis on exemplary creative or emerging storytelling methods to tell these stories.
2. **How will JustFilms support this focus/foci?** The grantmaking apparatus has several variables worth reassessing within the legal limitations of a Foundation such as transparency in the application process, more frequent access and communication with the

JustFilms team, being clearer about the scope of JustFilms' grantmaking, and expanding or reassessing its funding scope (e.g., where to fund and how to leverage funding intermediaries to support filmmakers, especially as a mechanism to reach filmmakers outside of the East and West coasts in the US). Additionally, continuing to provide non-monetary support such as guidance, feedback, leadership development, networking opportunities, capacity building, and distribution support is key to bolstering the values of equity and inclusion.

3. **How can JustFilms optimize its resources?** JustFilms has made strides in working towards trust-based philanthropy by fostering a broader decision-making system for funding the documentary field and partnering with grantees in the spirit of service. Moving forward, Ford and JustFilms can consider how to utilize their visibility and leadership in the field to continue addressing power differentials by focusing on approaches that challenge the status quo in philanthropy through more collaborative and participatory grantmaking processes.

As we conclude our evaluation efforts, we offer these additional questions for JustFilms to consider and assess as it reflects on its approach and aims and looks toward its next grantmaking cycle:

- Who ultimately will benefit from access to JustFilms' investments, supports, and programming? Why are these individuals, groups, and communities a priority for JustFilms?
- Who stands to lose with shifts in strategy, and what resources and alternatives outside of JustFilms might be available to help them continue to contribute to the broader vision?
- Which five-year and shorter-term outcomes might JustFilms prioritize, if any?
- How might narrowing or expanding JustFilms' current approaches contribute to greater progress on any given outcome or set of outcomes?
- What do documentaries uniquely contribute to Ford Foundation's mission and vision? How are they different from what else is produced through the other teams within Creativity and Free Expression? Are there opportunities for JustFilms' and the Foundation's objectives to be further aligned?
- What is the importance of ongoing funding to social justice documentaries in a landscape that is seeing more resources devoted to other forms of nonfiction and fiction filmmaking?



360 22nd Street, Suite 730
Oakland, CA 94612
510.665.6100

info@informingchange.com

informingchange.com