

## Why we all have a stake in the Freedom of the Press Foundation

This new nonprofit to protect WikiLeaks and other whistleblowers from payment systems blocking deserves our support

Dan Gillmor, [guardian.co.uk](http://guardian.co.uk), Monday 17 December 2012

Two years ago, credit card companies Mastercard and Visa blocked donations using their services to WikiLeaks, allegedly after US government pressure. Photograph: Bobby Yip/Reuters

Two years ago this month, the major online payment systems – Visa, Mastercard, PayPal and more – cut off one of the world's most famous journalism organizations from the public. They stopped taking payments on behalf of WikiLeaks and, in the process, highlighted one of the most dangerous threats to modern journalism: the ability of centralized third parties to make trouble for anyone and any organization they didn't like, for whatever reason.

With a few exceptions, the traditional journalism industry has been all but indifferent to what happened – a payment boycott done almost certainly under pressure from the American government, which was and remains infuriated by WikiLeaks' methods and results. No other journalism-related organization has been treated this way, as far as I know. But given the rise of independent media organizations and the utter lack of accountability the payment systems have faced for their outrageous actions, the threat is greater than ever.

The journalists' silence was unfortunate but, sad to say, a reflection of most media companies' coziness with the rich and powerful in America and around the world. It's fair to assume, though, that had any one of those companies been shut out of modern payment systems, the entire industry would have: a) created a huge outcry; and b) found ways to go around the centralized systems that had taken such pernicious actions.

So I'm glad to see the emergence of a new not-for-profit group whose mission is to "promote and fund aggressive, public-interest journalism focused on exposing mismanagement, corruption, and law-breaking in government". It's called the Freedom of the Press Foundation. Its method is "crowd-funding" – pulling together donations from people like you and me – and it could be a game-changer.

The foundation is based in San Francisco, with a board of directors that includes Daniel Ellsberg (of Pentagon Papers fame), John Perry Barlow (co-founder of the Electronic Frontier Foundation), Xeni Jardin (from BoingBoing), the Guardian's Glenn Greenwald and several others in the civil liberties and media arenas. (Disclosure: I am friends with several board members, and have offered advice to the founders.)

What's novel are the tactics: the foundation will be accepting donations from individuals and then forwarding them along, according to the donors' specific direction, to organizations designed by foundation. The list of organizations will evolve over time; the first group

includes WikiLeaks, MuckRock, the National Security Archive and the UpTake, all of which are worthy of support.

The foundation has come up with clear and useful criteria for its selections:

1. Record of engaging in transparency journalism or supporting it in a material way, including support for whistleblowers.
2. Public interest agenda.
3. Organizations or individuals under attack for engaging in transparency journalism.
4. Need for support: the foundation's goal is to prioritize support for organizations and individuals who are in need of funding or who face obstacles to gaining support on their own.

The system the foundation has devised is simple and smart. Donors can designate as many or few of the organizations as he or she chooses, with online "sliders" that make it easy to raise or lower the percentage going to each of the chosen groups. The foundation also accepts donations, and it takes an 8% cut of the proceeds for operational costs. I'm donating immediately, and will designate that my gift goes to all four organizations, with the bulk to WikiLeaks, given its especially endangered status.

The crowdfunding method takes a page from the "HumbleBundle" operation, which has been offering software, books and games this way – asking people to donate whatever they wish, and choosing which providers and/or organizations will get what percentage of their donations. Then, the donors can download the items.

Donations range widely. I've participated several times. The best part is that everyone involved gets value from the system.

The obvious question raised by the Freedom of the Press Foundation initiative is whether the payment systems will shut this off, too. If they do, they'll be punishing not just WikiLeaks, but the entire journalism ecosystem – and ultimately, your right to get the information you want and need. Will they extend the bad faith they showed two years ago?

That I even have to ask this question is evidence of the power of these centralized mega-corporations. They have far too much power, like too many other telecommunications companies and a number of others in the information and communications industries on which we rely more and more for our daily activities.

The Freedom of the Press Foundation can be a first step away from the edge of a cliff. But it needs to be recognized and used by as many people as possible, as fast as possible. And journalists, in particular, need to offer their support in every way. This is ultimately about their future, whether they recognize it or not. But it's more fundamentally about all of us.

I encourage you to support the foundation and the organizations it is trying to help. This is about your future, too.

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Info : Book "Wikileaks. Inside J A's War on Secrecy"

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