

Creativity & Free Expression

We believe art, film, and journalism help us understand our world, find purpose, and create meaningful connections. Yet the stories we hear or see the most still disproportionately represent a select few, often reinforcing stereotypes and discriminatory beliefs. We work to disrupt narratives that perpetuate inequality and lift up underrepresented voices across race, gender, and ability, so the perspectives and experiences of these communities shape a more inclusive world.

Portfolio Snapshot

Budget
\$26 million

BUILD Budget
\$35 million

Number of Grantees
250

Number of BUILD Grantees
29

The Challenge

Inequality in the creative and cultural spheres shapes inequality in society. The gatekeepers who decide which creative works get funded and whose voices and perspectives are amplified define, in many ways, who is valued by society—and who is invisible or seen as “other.”

In America’s largest museums, the [majority of artists represented are white and male](#). In the US media, [less than 10 percent of funding serves minority communities](#) and [women are underrepresented](#) in every part of the industry. And while more people of color are entering into the arena of documentary filmmaking, these filmmakers [are less likely to earn enough to sustain a career](#) without more support.

Without equality in the creative sectors—and deeper investments in untold stories and unheard storytellers—dominant cultural narratives will continue to affirm racial, gender, and other hierarchies and stereotypes.

The Opportunity

As demographics shift and America moves toward being majority people of color by 2045, there is greater demand for art, journalism and films that are truly representative of the nation. At the same time, some of the most exciting and powerful examples of storytelling are being created by individuals who have been long marginalized by culture and society.

Sound artist Christine Sun Kim is expanding the landscape of beauty and ideas about ableism; Maria Hinojosa, an award-winning journalist, is exploring the diversity of the American experience from the perspectives of communities of color; or James LeBrecht, a disabled filmmaker, is earning rave reviews for his documentary *Crip Camp* from critics and audiences alike.

When a mix of storytellers has an opportunity to expand the landscape of ideas and imagery, their creativity can help drive long-lasting social change and disrupt inequality while introducing fresh, groundbreaking ideas and storytelling forms to new audiences to expand society’s definition of excellence.

Our Aim and Approach

Ford's Creativity and Free Expression program unites our efforts to harness the power of the arts, media, and documentary filmmaking to shape perceptions, values, and belief systems and deepen society's understanding of the world around us. Our work explores how cultural narratives influence contemporary reality and how these expressive forms can contribute to more accurate, inclusive representations of society.

We help creatives who have been marginalized by both society and the world of arts and culture thrive to create meaningful, widely recognized work. Because we believe that these artists, storytellers, and filmmakers must have the resources to tell their stories from their perspective and experience, we strengthen organizations, leaders, and networks that support and value them. We focus on:

- **The Arts.** We support national arts and cultural organizations and networks to advance art and stories created by, told by, and grounded in communities of color and disability.
- **Journalism.** We fund media organizations by and for underrepresented groups including people of color, indigenous communities, rural white Americans, and people with disabilities, as well as thought leadership on media equity and sustainability.
- **Documentary filmmaking.** Our global initiative, JustFilms, supports filmmakers, organizations, and networks that amplify voices and illuminate perspectives often ignored, overlooked, or silenced by culture, including people of color in the United States and those from the Global South.

Our Impact

We have spent the past 80 years funding creativity and free expression, from helping to create arts institutions such as the Dance Theatre of Harlem, to supporting individual artists such as James Baldwin, Katherine Anne Porter, and Saul Bellow, to investing in major documentary productions such as *Eyes on the Prize*, an award-winning series on the American civil rights movement from the 1950s to 1980s.

Today, we are building on this legacy to achieve four critical outcomes:

- **More inclusive arts, media, and film.** There will be an increase in the production and visibility of art, film, and journalism created by underrepresented artists and storytellers and focused on the matters they deem most important and representative of their communities. These works will expand traditional definitions of excellence and spur audiences to consider multiple points of view and experiences.
- **Strong, diverse networks and organizations.** Arts, film, and media networks led by—and working on behalf of—people of color, women, and disabled people are well-resourced and have the operational support and capacity to train and mentor emerging storytellers.
- **An increase in funding.** A broadened base of support for more inclusive narratives will lead to greater funding for diverse storytelling in arts, film, and journalism.
- **A wide range of creators will attract new audiences.** By spotlighting a mix of artists and storytellers, their work will reach broader audiences and shape the public discourse around issues that affect their communities.

Grantee Snapshot

Strengthening journalism by supporting media of color

In the era of COVID-19 it is clearer than ever that American communities of color are disproportionately affected by inequality. That inequality extends to how these communities are covered in the news and how journalists of color struggle to get these stories told. Ford co-founded the Racial Equity in Journalism Fund at Borealis Philanthropy to bridge the gap in funding and institutional support for journalism of color. With \$6.1 million raised and counting, the fund supports organizations such as Buffalo's Fire, which serves indigenous communities of the Northern Great Plains, [La Noticia](#), a Spanish-language newspaper in North Carolina, and MLK50, an award-winning, black-led newsroom whose [investigation of how hospitals profit on patient debts](#) with ProPublica led to \$11 million of debt forgiven.