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Journos just want to have funds: research into the impact of donor funding on the content produced

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Abstract

This research considers how the funded health journalism produced by Bhekisisa Centre for Health Journalism impacts on the news agenda at the *Mail & Guardian.* In doing so, it aims to contribute to understandings of how donor-funded journalism impacts on its editorial choices. Bhekisisa – currently funded by Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation – was established in 2013 and serves as the primary vehicle for health journalism content at the *Mail & Guardian.* Although the research is based on a single case study, Bhekisisa offers an important opportunity to clearly consider how *Mail & Guardian*'s health coverage may have changed after receiving donor funds. The research was conducted through a content analysis of the paper's health pages before and after Bhekisisa was established, and by interviewing key people involved in the formation of Bhekisisa and present editorial decision-makers at Bhekisisa and *Mail & Guardian.* The findings of this study argue that donors do have an impact on the health issues Bhekisisa reports on; this should be considered as subtle editorial influence that comes in the form of soft power. The findings support arguments made elsewhere that donors influence news content and media organisations are subtly persuaded into aligning themselves with their donors' agendas and values. However, in the context of health journalism – which is both time-consuming and expensive to produce – donor funding plays a pivotal and positive role. Because newsrooms do not produce their ideal publications, donors enable this. Furthermore, in the case of health journalism, there is a skewed sense of newsworthiness in South African media, which means that it can be lower on the newsworthiness scale. There are some indications that donor-funded health news may challenge this preconception.