



Welcome to the March 2024 Newsletter!

Hello there philanthropoids,

I'm writing this at the end of a busy, and unusually jet-setting, month. I have just come back from a trip to Berlin, hot on the heels of a trip to Geneva the week before (more on both of those further on in the newsletter). It was great to get out and meet lots of interesting new people, and I really enjoyed both events.

The only minor downside from my point of view was that right at the end I left my e-reader on the plane when disembarking at Manchester Airport (insert deeply sad-faced emoji). In the unlikely event that anyone reading this happens to be sitting in seat 22D on an Easyjet flight in the near future and finds a Kindle containing a deeply weird mix of fantasy novels and books about philanthropy, please do let me know... (LAST MINUTE EDIT: just had an email to confirm that my Kindle has been found! So all I have to do now is pay £25 "administration fee" and find time for a trip back to the airport...)

Away from my own jaunts, there is plenty to report from the wider philanthro-sphere in terms of news stories, interesting research and odd nuggets you might have missed so I have tried to cram as many of them into this newsletter as possible. There are also the usual updates on what we've been up to at WPM.

As ever, I am going to do my best to keep this all very pithy, but it will almost certainly end up fairly substantial. And since I am off on a hotly-anticipated break for the Easter holidays at the end of this week, and I still have a worryingly long list of things I need to get done first, let's crack on shall we?

Rhodri

PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

State of Donations: UK Giving 2024

This month saw [the launch of the latest edition of CAF's UK Giving report](#). This is one of the main sources of data on trends in UK charitable giving so it would be worth taking note of anyway, but it also holds a special place in my heart as I worked at CAF for over a decade, and whilst I wasn't responsible for producing UK Giving I was usually involved in commenting on it every year. (Occasionally to local radio DJs who seemed weirdly angry about the very idea of charity, which was particularly fun...) [The headlines from this year's report are that donations have risen to £13.9bn](#) (up from £12.7bn last year, and pretty high in the overall historical context of levels of giving in the UK); but that at the same time the number of donors appears to have fallen (58% of people donating or sponsoring in the last 12 months, down from 59% in 2023 and from 65% in 2019). What that means (as experts have been highlighting for a few years now) is that the charity sector as a whole appears to be increasingly reliant on a smaller pool of donors giving larger average amounts. This raises both practical concerns (is this sustainable if the donor pool is dwindling? Will charities have to compete more fiercely with each other?) as well as more fundamental questions about whether there are implications for the legitimacy of the sector if it ends up relying on a small number of donors who may be able to exert an outsized level of control.



It feels like we have been talking about the fact that there seems to be a “hollowing out” of income from individual donations, or a “decline in participation in giving” for a while now. (At least, nerds like me have been talking about it for a while – as evidenced by [this article that I wrote for Third Sector back in 2019 with Dan Fluskey](#) (then of the Chartered Institute for Fundraising)). And it is something that I know people in the US, Canada and various other places are also concerned about, as there are similar apparent trends on display there. I suggested in my predictions for 2024 that this might be the year that we move beyond identifying the phenomenon, and start focussing on what can be done to address it - I know there are various initiatives aiming to do precisely that, but these latest findings do suggest that (in the UK at least) we might need to speed up those efforts if we are to avoid a potential charity funding crisis further down the road.

In addition to the headline findings, this edition of UK Giving also highlighted some interesting geographic and socioeconomic trends in terms of patterns of charitable giving – in particular, it replicated the finding from other previous research that areas of lower economic prosperity appear to be more generous, in the sense that people on average give more as a percentage of income than they do in wealthier areas (even if those wealthier areas still often give a lot in headline

terms). This will undoubtedly reinforce the view of many that there is still plenty of potential to get wealthy people in the UK to be more philanthropic - although there will probably be more a divergence of opinion when it comes to whether that is best done using carrots or sticks!

(If you fancy some historical perspective on why we have never been very good at measuring levels of giving and why this is a problem, [check out this WPM article for a few years ago](#)).

Scott Free: Mackenzie Scott's Open Call Pays Out Big

It was reported this month that Mackenzie Scott's "open call" for applications to her Yield Giving fund (which [we covered in the newsletter in March 2023](#)) has [resulted in her giving more than double what she originally anticipated](#). The open call was originally intended to anticipated to be worth “up to \$250m”, but in the end it was announced that \$640 million is being given to 361 small nonprofits that applied.



I thought it was fascinating at the time the open call was originally announced last year to see that Scott was augmenting her original strategy of not inviting any grant applications at all with some space for doing so. The thinking behind this seems to have been that if you rely solely on existing relationships and your own due diligence, the danger is that you are subject to your own limitations and blind spots. It is testament (in my mind) to Scott's own level of self-awareness as a philanthropist (and that of the team she has around her) that this approach was taken, and it seems to have paid off handsomely judging by the number of orgs she now plans to support as a result of the open call. The interesting thing to watch (or at least one more interesting thing, among the many already interesting things about Scott's philanthropy!) is whether she integrates this sort of open call into her approach from now on, and combines the proactive identification of grant recipients with opportunities for applications from organisations outside of her current sphere of awareness.

Musk We Keep Doing This?

It's hard to know how to approach Elon Musk from a philanthropy point of view. On the one hand I do slightly worry that every time someone mentions him a fairy dies, and that getting annoyed at his chaotic disregard for the norms of philanthropy and basic human decency is just playing into his hands (because, as we are often told, you shouldn't Feed The Troll...) But on the other hand he is one of the richest people in the world and exerts an enormous amount of cultural influence for better or worse (by which I mean definitely worse), so we do need to scrutinise what he does and says about philanthropy. Although we should keep in mind that nothing about him is necessarily applicable to philanthropy more widely, and also ensure that we don't allow ourselves to get too distracted by his clown car antics that we lose sight of more important systemic and structural issues.



[Image by Daniel Moberhaus, CC BY 2.0 DEED](#)

So why is Musk back in the newsletter this month then? Well, there are a couple of reasons. The first, and probably most important, is that the [New York Times published a big investigative report into his philanthropic activities](#) which suggested that he hasn't given very much in proportion to his wealth, and that what he has given has been sporadic and haphazard, and in a number of cases seems to be to organisations or initiatives that he or his family directly benefit from – so it is questionable whether it really counts as philanthropy at all.

The second reason Musk makes it into the newsletter this month is because he appears to have decided that [the best way to address his own clear deficiencies when it comes to philanthropy is to aim at Mackenzie Scott](#), which he did in the form of an tweet (that's right, a "tweet", not an "X" or whatever stupid nonsense we're supposed to call it now), in which he posited that "super rich ex-wives who hate their former spouse should be listed among 'Reasons that Western Civilization died'." Which, apart from just not being at all funny (like most things Musk writes), is also just unpleasantly misogynistic.

I have to admit that I'm not particularly surprised to hear that Musk is bad at philanthropy and also prone to lowering the tone of discourse about it, since that was the central gist of one of the first articles I

published on WPM ([which you can read here](#)). Although that doesn't mean it isn't depressing.

The other reason I was going to include Musk in the newsletter this month goes slightly against the grain of him just being a gigantic tool (or at least, it does on the face of it...) This was the news that [he is suing OpenAI, accusing the company and its CEO Sam Altman of putting "profit before purpose"](#). [As we have covered on WPM before](#), the meltdown at OpenAI last year has been interpreted as a battle between AI "boomers", who want to rush faster to develop the technology, and AI "doomers" who emphasise the need to be aware of the potential existential risk it poses to humanity. Musk donated a significant amount towards the creation of OpenAI and was a founding board member, and seems to be firmly in the "doomer" camp when it comes to AI. He is arguing that OpenAI has lost sight of the original purpose it was founded for, and which is still supposed to govern the nonprofit entity that has overall control of the organisation, but increasingly does not appear to.

This is a bit of a tricky one. I am inclined to side with Musk on this, but at the same time I have some pretty deep reservations (as you might have guessed) about the idea of him positioning himself as 'the great defender of profit over purpose'. Granted, he does genuinely seem to believe that all of his commercial enterprises are a form of philanthropy, but that's not an interpretation everyone would share by any means. One might also suggest, if one was being just the tiniest bit sceptical, that the fact that Microsoft are now benefitting from OpenAI's head start in the AI race might be a key factor in Musk's sudden desire to take on this crusade. A suspicion that might be backed up by this line in the lawsuit: "OpenAI Inc has been transformed into a closed-source, de facto subsidiary of the largest technology company in the world: Microsoft. Under its new board, it is not just developing but is actually refining an AGI to maximise profits for Microsoft, rather than for the benefit of humanity."

In any case, there is plenty to keep an eye on, on a number of fronts. I am, however, going to stop talking about Elon Musk now if that is OK.

Right of Refusal: New Guidance on Tainted Donations

The [Charity Commission for England and Wales](#) this month published [updated guidance for charities on “accepting, refusing and returning donations”](#). As we reported in the [WPM newsletter back in November](#), recent pronouncements from the Chair of the Commission, Orlando Fraser KC, had suggested a shift in mood music on the issue of tainted donations, with the emphasis being put firmly back on the idea that charities should accept all donations as a default and that the bar for justifying not doing so should be seen as a high one. Having read the guidance, however I am somewhat reassured (as charities will hopefully be too), since the guidance is very clear that it is still possible to refuse (and even return) donations in some instances - it is just that the steps involved in taking that decision need to be carefully considered and documented. And that seems right to me, as these decisions are almost always complicated and involve a lot of variables (certainly the charities I know that have refused donations have put a great deal of thought into it before doing so).



The potential challenge, of course, is that evidencing the risk of financial loss is easy (if you turn down the money, you don't have it anymore), but evidencing potential reputational risk or the risk of damaging future relationships with supporters is far harder to nail down, so there is something of an imbalance here. It is hard to see how this imbalance can be easily overcome; although having more examples available of how organisations have successfully navigated and justified decisions to refuse or return donations would probably help.

Clear the Lobby: public views on charity campaigning

A [new report from nfp Research and the Sheila McKechnie Foundation](#) published this month highlighted the ongoing challenges for charities when it comes to engaging with politics. The report found that [43 per cent of people they surveyed during their research thought expressed negative views towards the idea of charities spending money on campaigning](#).



Interestingly, however, the report also found that when activities were described using language that was seen as less clearly linked to party politics (e.g. "taking a stand" rather than "lobbying"), people were significantly more likely to view them favourably, suggesting that *how*

charities explain their campaigning and advocacy work to supporters is often just as important as what they are doing. In a year when elections loom, and the question of charities' involvement in the political sphere will undoubtedly draw criticism again from the expected quarters, insights like this may well prove extremely valuable for many organisations.

(If you want more on the historical context for how we think about charities and politics, [check out this WPM article from 2022](#). And if you want more on the way in which culture war narratives are affecting philanthropy and charities, check out [this other WPM article from 2021](#)).

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

Here's a little update on what we have been up to at WPM over the last month.

Philanthropy & The Quest for Eternal Life

A lot of what I have written recently feels very grounded, so it was nice to find the time to fit in something a bit wilder and more speculative this month, in the shape of a new WPM article about the apparent obsession of tech elites with the idea of life extension and anti-ageing, and how this relates to philanthropy.



[Read the article](#)

Geneva AI & Philanthropy Conference

I had two great trips to Europe this month. The first was to Geneva for [a conference on AI and philanthropy organised by the Centre on Philanthropy at the University of Geneva](#), which combined a couple of days of closed sessions for invited attendees with a public lecture by the renowned philosopher and AI expert Professor Luciano Floridi. I really enjoyed meeting lots of great people and getting the chance to talk to them about a whole range of issues around the impact of AI on philanthropy, and the role that philanthropy can (and should) play in shaping the development of AI. There were fascinating discussions about the good and bad of open source approaches, the geopolitical context for digital philanthropy in China, and how to foster collective approaches to AI among philanthropic funders.



I also had a nice (and very unexpected!) surprise just before the public lecture, when I found out that a paper I wrote [was in the running for a prize](#). I didn't win, but having heard about Dr Bertram Lang's work on platform philanthropy in China I am thoroughly convinced that he was a more deserving winner anyway. You should be able to read both papers (along with many others) later this year when they appear as chapters in the forthcoming [Routledge Handbook on Philanthropy and AI](#).

Berlin Event

My second European trip this month was to Berlin, for an event held at the British Embassy based around my 2023 book "What is Philanthropy For?" organised jointly by Wider Sense and Maecenata Stiftung. Again, it was a really enjoyable event, with some great discussion, and I had the chance to chat to lots of really interesting (and nice!) German fellow philanthropoids afterwards, which was great.

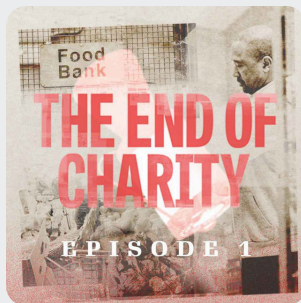


If you happen to be one of those said German philanthropoids and would like another chance to hang out with me in Deutschland, then I should flag up that I will be in Frankfurt on 5th and 6th for a “[grants managing lab](#)” organised by [Vertrauen Macht Wirkung](#) (alongside Gemma Bull and Tom Steinberg, the authors of “Modern Grantmaking”, which I am very much looking forward to!)

Third Sector 'End of Charity' series

This month saw the launch of a new 6-part podcast documentary series from *Third Sector*, which features liberal dollops throughout of me offering my thoughts on various aspects of philanthropy and the work of charities. Episode 1 looks at the rise of food banks, as a focus for exploring the question of whether charities should address immediate needs or put their efforts more towards trying to address the underlying causes of societal problems. Episode 2 looks at the phenomenon of MrBeast and what his rise might tell us about the future of charity (a topic that regular readers will know that we love here at WPM, and if you haven't already checked out our article about MrBeast you can do that [here](#)).

The production on this new third sector series sounds great, and they have managed to get interviews with some really interesting people (I am obviously not including myself in that statement!) so I would definitely recommend checking it out. There are also some natty video trailers that include shots of me walking and standing meaningfully on Oxford Street in London whilst carrying a very over-full rucksack, so enjoy those too.



Third Sector - The End of Charity

Ep 1: The food bank era



Third Sector - The End of Charity

Ep 2: Can MrBeast save humanity?



What Donors Want podcast guest appearance

It turns out that podcast guest appearances are a bit like buses, in that they all come at once, so this month also saw the release of an episode of *What Donors Want*, the podcast hosted by Rachel Stephenson Sheff and Emily Collins-Ellis from IG Advisors, in which I joined them alongside Nicole Sykes from Pro Bono Economic and Charles Keidan from Alliance magazine to discuss whether there is a case for the introduction of mandatory foundation payouts in the UK. It is an issue that is quite technical but also manages to excite surprisingly strong reactions, so it was good to have a chance to talk about it in more depth. Hopefully there is plenty of food for thought in the conversation for curious



I.G. Advisors

Should UK Foundations Have A
Minimum Grant Payout?

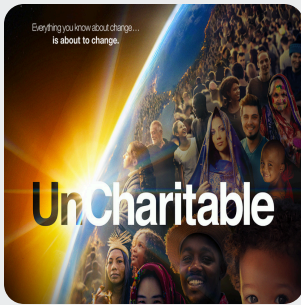


On the Philanthropisms podcast

We also had a busy month on our very own Philanthropisms podcast. First up we had a special episode in which we took a look at the 2023 documentary film *UnCharitable*- including some thoughts from me, an interview with the film's director Stephen Gyllenhaal (yes, he is related to Jake and Maggie- he is their dad), and some vox pops with attendees at a recent screening of the film I hosted in London. A few people have been in touch with me since to say that they found the episode interesting, but it didn't make them want to see the film particularly. Which is fair enough: the aim of the episode was to capture both the good things about the film and some of the potential criticisms, and – as I said in the episode – at the end of the day people should see it and make up their own minds. But if they don't want to, that is also fine!

The other episode of the podcast out this month featured a conversation with Australian philanthropy expert Krystian Seibert about his work with the Productivity Commission on their big public inquiry into philanthropy. We discussed the findings of the report and some of

the interesting recommendations it makes for how to boost the culture of philanthropy in Australia.



Philanthropisms

UnCharitable Special (feat. Stephen Gyllenhaal)



Philanthropisms

Krystian Seibert: Developing philanthropy in Australia



OTHER GOOD STUFF

This is the section where I share with you other interesting bits and bobs about philanthropy that I have come across recently. And this month there is a bumper haul, so let's get on with it!

Wealth Shared on TV:

The Liverpool-based Wealth Shared project, in which local donor David Clarke enlisted a panel of 12 randomly-selected local residents to decide how to give away £100K (and which some of you will remember from past editions of the newsletter) was featured on the BBC's flagship magazine TV programme *The One Show* this month. It is great to see David's work getting this kind of profile, and hopefully it will increase the chances of someone replicating his approach elsewhere! (And if you

want to hear a more detailed, philanthro-nerdy discussion of Wealth Shared, do check out the episode of the Philanthropisms podcast all about the project and featuring an in-depth conversation with David).

[Watch the One Show episode](#)



Philanthropisms

David Clarke: Wealth Shared



Money Giving Expert?

In other “people doing philanthropy who seem like good eggs” news, there was an interesting blog this month from MoneySavingExpert founder and consumer rights champion Martin Lewis, explaining in detail what had come of his 2012 pledge to give £10m to charity (which he made after his website was bought up by the MoneySupermarket Group). The short version is that he has so far given substantially more than he initially pledged (over £20m at this point, but what is really interesting about the blog is the level of transparency he provides about the vehicles he has chosen to use for his giving and where the money has so far gone. It definitely sets an admirably high benchmark in terms of philanthropic transparency for others to live up to!

[Read the blog](#)

Mining & Mutual Aid:

There was a fascinating story this month of mutual aid & solidarity repaid across a big gap of time and space: a group of Welsh miners have travelled to Ukraine to offer support, in part due to memories of the

support Ukrainian miners offered them during the miners' strikes of the 1980s.

(This brought to mind for me the story about [Irish people donating to help people from the Cherokee and Choctaw nations during the COVID pandemic](#), in memory of the donations they had given the other way during the Great Famine).



[Read the article](#)

Checkout Charity

There was a good piece in NPR this month exploring the impact of point-of-sale donation initiatives in the US (you know, the sort of thing where you get asked at the till if you want to round up to the nearest pound/dollar and donate the extra to charity). Apparently the totals raised through these kinds of initiatives have more than doubled since 2012 (from £389 million to \$749 million) and it seems to be one of the fastest-growing forms of fundraising around. There are all kinds of interesting questions about what happens when you lower the friction of giving (is it good because it makes giving easier, or is there a danger that it makes it *so easy* that it almost becomes meaningless), but in purely practical terms, at a time when income for the nonprofit sector is increasingly hard to come by, the fact that there are tools like this that might be able to offer new sources of revenue seems like a cause for optimism.

[Read the article](#)

What's in a Name?

There was a really interesting piece in Stanford Social Innovation Review this month exploring the issues around naming rights for major donors from the perspective of philosophical ethics. The article looked at what various different theories of ethics might have to say about the implications of allowing donors to have buildings and institutions named after them, and also suggested some recommendations for minimising the risks.



[Read the article](#)

DAF reform on the horizon?

If you are interested in the various critical debates about Donor Advised Funds (DAFs) that have been rumbling along in the US for the past few years now, I recommend checking out the piece in *The Conversation* this month by the ever-excellent nonprofit accounting expert Brian Mittendorf. He suggests that proposed new federal regulations which seek to clarify the acceptable uses of DAFs might signal the beginning of wider efforts by lawmakers and policymakers to get to grips with some of the concerns that have been raised by the huge growth in these vehicles. It will certainly be worth watching to see if this is the case!

[Read the article](#)

Philanthropic pledges and conservation

The environmental news website *Mongabay* put out an interesting podcast episode this month, looking at the role of big money philanthropic pledges in conservation worldwide. The conversation explores various aspects of this issue, including whether there is a gap

between these kinds of pledges and actual impact on the ground, and whether there is sometimes a tension between philanthropic enthusiasm for conservation and concerns for the economic and human rights of indigenous communities. Well worth a listen.



Mongabay Newscast

Show us the money: Are giant pledges by major conservation funders effective?



A good example of conservation philanthropy?

A feature on CBS's *60 Minutes* this month offers an interesting companion piece to the Mongabay podcast mentioned above. The feature looks at the philanthropy of a man named Greg Carr, a tech entrepreneur who made a fortune in the 1980s but for the last 30 years or more has been funding a wide range of work in Mozambique – most notably supporting the development of Gorongosa National park, but also supporting economic and community development initiatives for people living in or near the park so that they benefit from it too. Worth a watch (especially if you want to have your faith in philanthropy renewed for any reason!)



Novo Nordisk Foundation AI investment:

I've been thinking quite a bit about philanthropy and AI this month, so I was fascinated to see an announcement that a new initiative to build one of the world's most powerful supercomputers, with the aim of finding new solutions to societal challenges, is getting a hefty dose of philanthropic support. The support is coming from the Novo Nordisk foundation – the largest foundation in the world (despite the fact that many people still haven't heard of it!), which is, among other things, the majority shareholder in the pharmaceutical company Novo Nordisk. The foundation was already fabulously wealthy, but the huge success of Novo Nordisk's weight loss drug Ozempic in the last few years has seen the value of its holdings skyrocket so that it now has an endowment of nearly \$120 billion (The Gates Foundation, by comparison, has an endowment of more like \$70 billion). As such it is perhaps one of the few philanthropic funders that has sufficient scale to play a genuinely meaningful role in shaping AI development through its grants and investments, so this will definitely be something to watch.



[Image by News Oresund, CC BY 2.0](#)

[Read the press release](#)

Music Streaming and a new form of altruism?

I stumbled across an interesting article in *Music Business Worldwide*, criticising the new inequality that is emerging in the music business as a result of the way streaming services choose to reward artists, and arguing that those at the top of the pyramid (the artists who get 1 billion-plus streams for their songs) could embrace a new form of philanthropy to help mitigate the problem. The idea (as far as I understand it, and I am definitely not an expert on the economics of streaming!) is that big name artists would get charged for all plays of their tracks above the 1 billion mark, and this money could then be put into a central pot and redistributed to artists lower down the pyramid. Of course, whether this is philanthropy or merely a form of taxation is up for debate – certainly if the donor has no choice about whether to give or not, and no say about where the money goes, then it is quite hard to see it as philanthropy. It is however, an interesting idea about how to adapt philanthropy to new forms of wealth creation, and something I have not heard before, so I found it very thought provoking!



[Read the press release](#)

The History of Fundraising

If you like a bit of historical perspective, then I highly recommend checking out the edition of the *Third Sector* podcast this month featuring Marina Jones, who works at the English National Opera and is also the driving force behind [Rogare's History of Fundraising project](#). Marina has [a blog on which she often shares really interesting nuggets about the weird and wonderful history of fundraising](#), and there is plenty of that in the podcast too.



Third Sector

The Hidden History of Fundraising



AND FINALLY: Is there a poet in the house...?

Perhaps my favourite thing I learned this month is the news that the City Bridge Foundation (one of the oldest surviving charitable funders in the UK, which has existed in some form or another since the 13th century) is looking to appoint a “Poet in Residence” to help celebrate the organisation’s history and its ongoing work supporting initiatives throughout London. It is tempting to see this as slightly ridiculous, but I am a firm believer that we far too often underestimate the power of narrative and art to convey important ideas and engage people with issues, and that there is probably a good argument that a decent chunk of the money spent on boring corporate reports would be far better used in this way, so I heartily approve.

Hell, I might even apply. Let’s see:

“A poetic donor was the first

To demand grant applications in verse,

But no matter how many times,

They tried to find rhymes,

No grantees could open his purse.”

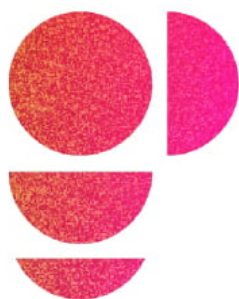
Hmm. Needs work.



[Read the article](#)

Well, that's all for this month. I'll be back at the end of next month with some more dispatches from the philanthro-sphere, but until then adieu.

Rhodri



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Philanthropy
Matters**

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