



Welcome to the April 2026 newsletter

Hi there philanthropoids,

I hope all is well? April has felt like a slightly less frantic month than many have been recently (apart from the whole Iran war/global food shortages situation of course...) That may be partly down to the fact that I was away for a week over the Easter holidays (family trip to Paris plus some bouldering in Fontainebleau, since you didn't ask), but I do also think that there has been objectively less philanthropy-related news this month. Which I'm choosing to take as a good sign, and does mean that I might manage to keep this newsletter under 5,000 words for once!

For me, this has been a bit of a month of trying to tie up loose ends ahead of starting my new part-time role as Director of Philanthropy Knowledge for *Alliance* next month. I'm not sure how successfully all of those loose ends have been dealt with, but I think I'm in decent shape for getting stuck into my new job. I definitely hope to see some of you around with my new *Alliance* hat on - In particular, if you are going to be at the Philea Forum in Copenhagen, do feel free to say hello!

But for now, let's newsletter.

PHILANTHROPY IN THE NEWS

Place Value: A UK govt roadmap for more philanthropy

This month saw [the publication of the UK Government's long-awaited place-based philanthropy strategy](#). This was first promised back in the early days of Keir Starmer's government in 2024 but has taken a while to come to fruition; so many people in the charity sector and the wider world of philanthropy were eager to see what it contained.

I have to admit that a slight warning bell went off for me quite early on when I saw that this new document is billed as a “roadmap” rather than a “strategy”, as to my (admittedly slightly jaded) mind that always suggests an effort to downgrade expectations slightly. A strategy sounds like a tangible plan for what you are actually going to do now; whereas a roadmap feels like it can be a more vibe-based set of thoughts about what you - or, indeed, somebody else - *could* do. (At some point. Depending on weather conditions. And the car passing its MOT).

The fact that the centrepiece of the government’s announcement was news of £1m of funding over 3 years to support a new community of practice for Place Based Giving initiatives also produced a slight sense of anti-climax. Don’t get me wrong – money is money, and it is all welcome; especially right now, when the funding challenges facing many parts of the charity sector are significant. I also know from talking to a bunch of place-based charities over the last few months that they can do incredible things with pretty small amounts of funding. However, in the context of government spending, £1m over 3 years really isn’t very much. And in terms of messaging, it doesn’t really scream “this is a policy priority for us”.

When it comes to philanthropy, I’ve found over the years that government tends to make a lot of its ‘convening power’. In part this is might be because they can’t (or don’t want to) stump up any cash. This was certainly true during the time that I was actively working in a policy role, which coincided with an era of austerity politics in which it was made very clear on a regular basis that policy ideas for boosting philanthropy which involved financial commitments on the part of government stood very little chance of success. But there is also a more charitable reading here; which is that convening is actually precisely what the government *should* be doing when it comes to philanthropy. It is not necessarily government’s role to make people give, or to tell them what to give to, but it can play an important role in providing information, signposting, and bringing people together so that *they* can make things happen. So I am entirely on board with the bit of the new roadmap that is about bringing together groups of existing and potential place-focussed philanthropists around the UK, as I think that could be really valuable.

At the same time, it was a bit disappointing to see that the government had rejected calls from the sector for the Financial Conduct Authority to make it a requirement that wealth advisors have training in giving philanthropy advice, on the grounds that this would “increase costs and administrative burdens for providers.” I’m not in all honesty totally sure that making philanthropy advice a regulatory requirement is the answer, but it does feel like *something* needs to happen in this area given that every discussion and policy report about developing philanthropy in the UK over the last 20 years has drawn some version of the conclusion that “advisers have a key role to play”. (Indeed, fun fact that in the very first policy report I ever wrote on philanthropy, back in 2007, one of the recommendations was for the introduction of a new philanthropy accreditation for wealth advisors and IFAs. God, I’m old).

Overall, despite my slightly grumpy reservations, I think this report is a welcome step. Anything that keeps at least some government focus on philanthropy is helpful. And if this genuinely is a roadmap, which marks the start of a journey that sees the government engage even more and take a rounded approach that involves tangible support for philanthropy, then great. If, however, it ends up being seen as a destination, or if there is any sense that the government has now “done its bit on philanthropy”, then that will be a real cause for frustration for many. To avoid that happening, the philanthropy sector will need to take it upon itself to push forward on some of the opportunities presented by this report and make sure they come to fruition.

Running up a Massive Tab: a major gift for Cambridge University

There was news this month of [an eye-catchingly large donation of £190 million to Cambridge University](#), which is the largest single gift to a UK university ever made. Interestingly the gift has come from an alumnus of Cambridge’s traditional Varsity rivals, Oxford – the British hedge fund billionaire Chris Rokos. (Yes, when I first scanned the headline to this story, I also thought it was about the comedian Chris Rock making a massive donation to Cambridge, which in hindsight definitely seems less probable).



(Once again, for the avoidance of doubt, Chris Rock has definitely not - I repeat NOT - given £190m to Cambridge). Image credit: [Andy Witchger](#), [CC BY 2.0](#)

The donation is being used to establish a new school of government, to rival Oxford's Blavatnik school, which will bear Rokos's name. This feels like something of a departure for Cambridge, as traditionally it has been Oxford that is seen as the training ground for future politicians (or at least, that was always the received wisdom), but this new funding will

definitely put Cambridge in a strong position to tempt future world leaders and politicians to choose East Anglia over Oxfordshire for their studies. The donation itself is split into two parts – an initial £130m grant, and an additional £60m of funding that is contingent on Cambridge being able to match it. Which, based on the recent scale and frequency of massive gifts in the UK, may not be quite the challenge it might once have seemed!

Rokos himself is a somewhat mysterious character – as people with that level of wealth can often choose to be. There are very few photos of him in circulation, and not an enormous amount of public information, apart from some [outline details of how he made his money \(hedge funds\) and reporting of a recent spat Rokos has had with the local council in Wiltshire over his plans to develop Tottenham House](#), the Grade-I listed stately home he owns (and the former home of Lord Cardigan). On a personal note, one thing I can say is that Rokos is yet more evidence (if any were needed) that in studying Maths at Oxford yet somehow failing to become a billionaire hedge fund manager, I definitely seem to have missed a trick somewhere...

For an interesting discussion of the pros and cons of accepting Rokos's donation, I would recommend [an article in the Cambridge student newspaper Varsity by two of its current students](#). Both authors make a good case for their side of the argument, but both point of view are also fairly nuanced and acknowledge the risks and caveats that come with taking either course of action. Well worth reading.

Keep the Channel On: NPR gets a transformative gift

[The US public broadcasting organisation NPR announced this month that it has received two of the largest donations in its history](#) – an \$80m gift from Connie Ballmer (wife of former Microsoft CEO Steve Ballmer, and a philanthropist of long standing) and a \$33m gift from a donor who wishes to stay anonymous.



Image Credit: [Hey Paul Studios, CC BY 2.0](#)

These are undoubtedly big gifts, although in the context of US philanthropy probably not big enough to stand out particularly. What makes them more interesting is that they come in the wake of a decision by Congress last year - under pressure from Donald Trump - to end federal funding for public interest media. (And to claw back money that had already been promised). This posed a huge threat to NPR, which the donations from Ballmer and her unnamed counterpart have now stemmed for the foreseeable future. The cause area of public interest journalism is also interesting, as this is increasingly highlighted as a focus area for philanthropy in the context of concerns about democratic backsliding and the challenges posed by populism. Whilst neither donation seems to have been positioned as an overtly political act, they will of course be interpreted in that way by some people, given this wider context.

Tech Bro Slap Fight: Musk vs Altman

There was a major development this month in the ongoing saga of OpenAI's nonprofit status, as [the long-standing lawsuit filed by Elon](#)

[Musk against the company and its CEO, Sam Altman, heads to trial.](#)



Image credits: [Gage Skidmore, CC BY-SA 3.0](#) and [TechCrunch, CC BY 2.0](#)

A jury will now decide whether Musk is justified in his claim that Altman and OpenAI President Greg Brockman deceived him into funding the organisation in its early days startup with claims that it would continue to operate as a nonprofit for the benefit of humanity, and if so, what form any recourse should take. At the opening of the trial, when asked to explain what his case was all about, Musk tried to pitch it as a matter of principle about the very notion of philanthropy, arguing that: "[It's actually very simple...It's not okay to steal a charity... If it's okay to loot a charity, the entire foundation of charitable giving will be destroyed.](#)" This is part of a wider effort by Musk and his team to paint him as a selfless altruist whose only interest is in ensuring that technology benefits humanity.

To reinforce this notion, Musk has backed away from his original demand that Open AI pay him back the money he gave them; instead he is now suggesting that OpenAI should return to its original nonprofit status and that any money wrongfully obtained along the way should be returned to its nonprofit arm (rather than to him). This seems like quite a canny move on Musk's part, as it certainly makes his claims look less obviously self-interested. But critics (including OpenAI themselves) point out that he still stands to gain enormous benefit from hobbling OpenAI's

commercial abilities, given that he is trying to promote his own AI tool (GrokAI) and it would clearly be to his advantage for OpenAI's capacity to compete to be limited.

Many commentators have also suggested that as well as being about thinly-veiled commercial interests, this trial [is also about good old fashioned petty personal vendettas](#). There is clearly no love lost at this point between Musk and Altman – two of the tech world's biggest figures – and neither seems afraid of letting their super-sized playground squabble play out in a highly public way. I won't lie, I find this as grimly compelling as the next person, but I wouldn't describe it as edifying.

As I argued [back when the Open AI saga first kicked off in 2023](#), at the heart of this story are some quite fundamental questions about the limits of trying to combine profit and purpose in a single organisational entity, and what we are willing to define as “philanthropy”. I'm not sure how much we are going to learn about either of those things directly from either Musk or Altman during this court case - given that their main aims so far seem to be to childish name calling and [boring the jury into submission by giving long-winded, only vaguely relevant answers to questions](#). However, I am quite sure that there will be plenty of food for thought to be had from reading between the lines, so I definitely think this story is one to watch with a keen eye as it is likely to offer some important lessons about the current and future state of elite philanthropy in the tech world.

WHAT WE'VE BEEN UP TO

This is the section where I provide a bit of an update on what WPM has been up to over the last month or so.

Philanthropisms Podcast

This month on the Philanthropisms podcast we had the 13th in our partnership series with ERNOP, this time featuring mini interviews with Lauren Dula, Laurie Paarlberg, Marius van Dijke and Oto Potluka. We also featured a great conversation with Dr Xanthe Scharff from Freedom Fund, about their work combatting modern slavery and what it is like to receive not one, but two, massive gifts from MacKenzie Scott.



Philanthropisms

ERNOP: Connecting Philanthropy
Academia & Practice #13



Philnthropisms

Dr Xanthe Scharff: Mackenzie Scott
gifts, collaborative funding &
combatting modern slavery



[Listen to the ERNOP episode](#)

[Listen to the episode with
Xanthe](#)

Kinetic Fundraising AI event

I took part this month in a panel on AI and philanthropy as part of Kinetic Fundraising's 2026 Philanthropy Summit, following a really interesting keynote from Nathan Chappell. You can find out more and watch the recording using the links below.

[Read about the event](#)



Devex AI article

Sticking on AI, [I was quoted this month in an article for Devex about how AI is changing grantmaking in the context of international development.](#) (I think this is paywalled, so you might not be able to read it – if so, just trust me that everything I said was really intelligent and good-looking...)

[Read the article \(£\)](#)

Connected Voice AGM

I travelled up to Newcastle-upon-Tyne this month to give some thoughts as part of a keynote for Connected Voice's AGM on the ways in which technology is affecting our notions of trust and authenticity, and the impact this is having on the work of charities and how we form communities. No recording for this one, but here's a nice picture, and I plan to write my thoughts up as blog at some point.



OTHER GOOD STUFF

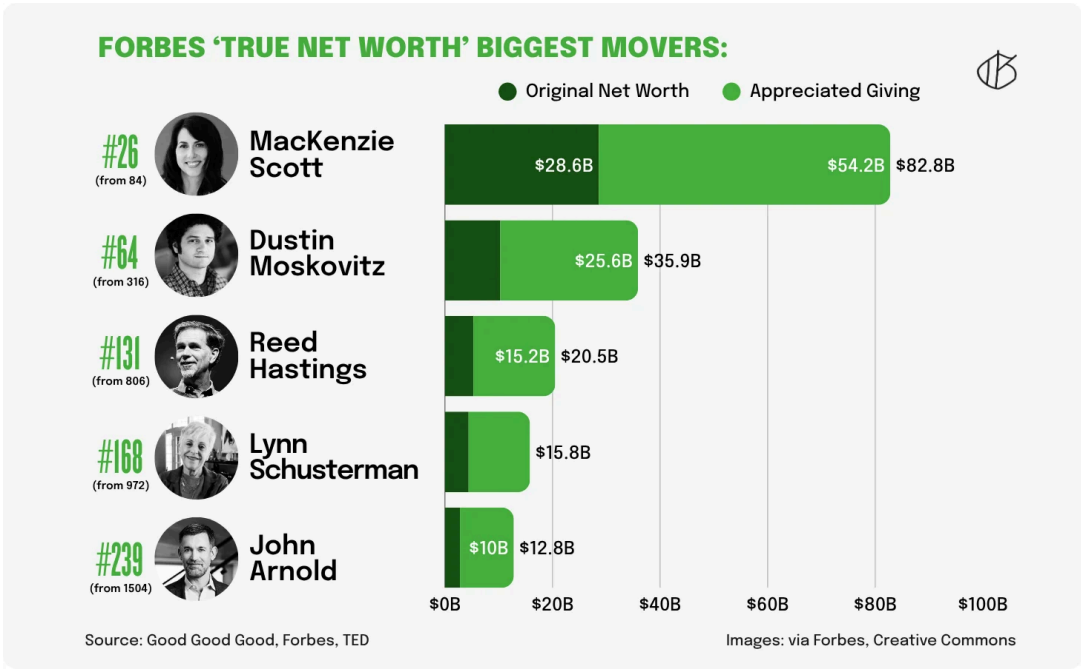
This is the bit where I share other philanthropy-related things I have come across that might not quite count as news but are definitely worth checking out.

Forbes “True Net Worth” ranking:

Forbes has long been known for its rankings of the world’s wealthiest people, as well as for ranking of “most generous billionaires” in various places around the world. [This month, however, they announced a new initiative to bring these different metrics together under the notion of “true new worth”.](#) As *Forbes* Editor-in Chief Randall Lane explains, [“True Net Worth is your regular net worth, combined with the money you’ve donated, that we appreciate like you still own it”.](#) The idea here is to compensate for the fact that traditional rankings of wealth have the

slightly perverse effect of punishing people for giving their money away. (Assuming, of course, that you think dropping down a list of rich people is a punishment - which I know for a fact is not a view that all wealthy individuals would share!)

The True Net Worth list itself is interesting: Bill Gates and Warren Buffett rocket back up the leaderboard thanks to their many years of philanthropic giving, but Elon Musk remains very much out in the lead - which is a reminder of the sheer scale of his wealth (even compared to other very rich people), as he certainly isn't there by virtue of his donations... But perhaps even more interesting is the "biggest movers" table that *Forbes* has also produced, showing which wealthy people move furthest up the rankings thanks to their giving, as this gives a better sense of who is the most generous in proportion to how much money they have. (And, unsurprisingly, this is where MacKenzie Scott comes into the picture - along with other donors like Dustin Moskovitz and Reed Hastings who have also given away more at this point than their original net worth).



[Read the article](#)

Billionaire Giving on the up in the US:

David Callahan had an interesting comment piece in *Inside Philanthropy* this month, arguing that “[no, billionaires aren't retreating from philanthropy](#)”. In the piece, Callahan pushes back slightly on recent stories suggesting that big money giving is in decline in the US (primarily off the back of the slowdown in Giving Pledge sign ups), and says that IP's own reporting suggests to them that there is more billionaire giving than ever going on – albeit perhaps in places that most people aren't looking and taking forms that they might not be aware of. Also, as Callahan makes clear, there are plenty of examples of billionaires who appear to have shifted along the political spectrum, and the focus of their giving has shifted accordingly – so they may well be giving as much as before (or even more), but to causes and organisations that you or I may no longer like.



Read the article

Philanthropy must choose courage over caution:

One of the wealthy people who has very much been continuing to give in recent years, in addition to campaigning for wealth taxation, is Abigail Disney, and this month she co-authored a noteworthy call to arms for other philanthropists in *Time* magazine, arguing that "[philanthropy must choose courage over caution](#)." In light of the scale and nature of the

challenges facing the world right now, the piece argues, philanthropists and foundations should increase their levels of giving and give in an unrestricted way. They must also be willing, Disney argues, to fund work that protects democracy against authoritarian overreach, even if this potentially puts them in the firing line of attacks from politicians.



Image credit: [US Institute of Peace](#), [CC BY 2.0](#)

[Read the article](#)

Jeffrey Epstein and philanthropic power:

Just to make sure we're maintaining balance on the spectrum of "philanthropy is actually quite good" to "no, it's all terrible", there was also a really interesting piece in NPR this month that was very much in the latter mode, outlining [how Jeffrey Epstein used his philanthropic funding of scientific research to cultivate and wield power](#). I wouldn't say it makes for fun reading, but like everything about Epstein's giving, I think it offers important cautionary lessons about the dark side of philanthropy.

[Read the article](#)

Shedding light on the OpenAI Foundation:

As a useful companion piece to the coverage of the Musk vs Altman court case highlighted above, *Inside Philanthropy* carried a really interesting article this month looking at [what we know so far about the grantmaking of the OpenAI Foundation](#). This is the nonprofit entity that is the parent of OpenAI, and which is now one of the largest foundations ever created, thanks to a 26% equity stake (valued at \$130bn) it received last year as part of the deal-making over OpenAI's transformation into a Public Benefit Corporation. The good news appears to be that OpenAI is committed to ramping up its giving significantly, to around \$1bn per year, which, if it makes its way into the hands of charities, could do a lot of good. But as several critics cited in the article point out, this is still a very small amount of money in proportion to the assets the Open AI Foundation has at its disposal. And furthermore, because this entity is actually constituted as a public charity rather than a private foundation, it isn't subject to a 5% payout requirement – meaning that the amount it is planning to give out is a lot less than it would be legally required to distribute if it was a genuine foundation. The article also tries to identify what the key cause areas and strategy of the foundation might be, but it feels like these are still somewhat unclear at this point.



[Read the article](#)

How Europe's civil society is fighting back against the far right:

There was an interesting piece in the Guardian this month about European civil society, although I think the headline is perhaps a bit misleading. The article claims to be about “[how Europe’s civil society is fighting back against the far right](#)”, and I was well up for reading some encouraging news about how CSO are fighting the good fight and pushing back the threat of populism. But having read it a couple of times, it seems to me the piece is much more about the various ways civil society is being threatened across the continent and having its freedoms curtailed. Which is important stuff, but definitely makes for a less happy read than I was expecting.



[Read the article](#)

Report on philanthropic funding for local news:

One of the things that is often identified as a key element of how philanthropy can and should respond the threats of populism and political polarisation is funding for journalism, particularly at a local level. So I was really interested to see [a new report this month from Greater Community Media about local news funds](#) – looking at examples from around the world, and how something similar might work in other

There as a really good article in *NPQ* this month, [exploring the power that online platforms increasingly hold as 'gatekeepers'](#) for large amounts of philanthropic giving and some of the risks this poses. [The 'platformisation of giving' is something I've been banging on about for years now](#), so it was really good to see a lot of the issues laid out in a really clear and compelling way.



[Read the article](#)

AND FINALLY: Does Mario Kart explain the role of philanthropy?

This isn't really a standard "and finally" story, because it is also a proper bit of news, but in the course of [announcing a new board for the Mayor's Fund of New York](#), mayor [Zohran Mamdani](#) took the [opportunity to explain his view of the role of philanthropy using an extended metaphor about Mario Kart](#):

"I like to think of it this way. Government is driving the race car, and philanthropy is there to give it that turbo boost to cross the finish line. Or if you are a Mario Kart fan, government is Yoshi, and philanthropy is the golden mushroom, [the] edge we need to beat Bowser on the Rainbow Road. To belabor this metaphor even further, Bowser is corporate greed in this scenario."

This was definitely the weirdest philanthropy-related thing I read this month, so I felt it qualified for the “and finally” segment, but it has also stuck in my mind and kept me thinking. What about the other elements of the Mario Kart universe – what do they represent? Maybe the ghost who squirts mud in your face is the current state of nonprofit data? (i.e. makes it far harder to see clearly what you are supposed to be doing). Or perhaps the lightning strike is restricted funding? (i.e. you can carry on doing what you were doing, but smaller and less effectively).

Not sure what Dry Bones or the green turtle shell represent yet, but I’ll give it some more thought. And if anyone has got any ideas, feel free to share them. (Next month: how the importance of civil society freedom can be explained through the medium of Legend of Zelda).



[Read the speech](#)

Well, there we are for another month. I was going to say that I managed to keep that one shorter, but I just checked the word count and we're still at nearly 5000 words. Getting better though.

Assuming I can manage to balance all of my different work priorities, I'll be back at the end of May with another bunch of news and updates.

Rhodri



Why Philanthropy Matters Haskell
House 152 West End Lane, London
United Kingdom



You received this email because you signed up on our website or made a purchase from us.

[Unsubscribe](#)

