Take my advice...

How philanthropy advisors are reshaping the stewardship of donors' giving relationships

Philosophy of fundraising/relationship fundraising

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This essay by Cherian Koshy, vice-president at Kindsight and a member of Rogare's Critical Fundraising Network, supplements Rogare's typology of disintermediation in the nonprofit sector by arguing for the inclusion of philanthropy advisors as a significant form of disintermediation. Koshy argues that act as donor-side providers whose services can overlap with, supplement, or sometimes substitute for fundraising organised and run by a charity's fundraising function. In doing so, they can shift stewardship of donor relationships and the process of co-creating meaning away from the charity. Based on the insights and arguments presented by Cherian in this paper, Rogare has included philanthropy advisors as a full category in our typology of disintermediation in the nonprofit sector (see p7).

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In their *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing* paper outlining a new typology of disintermediation, the Rogare team of Ian MacQuillin, Rita Kottasz, Juniper Locilento and Neil Gallaiford (p7)* define a type of disintermediation that occurs when "another organisation (usually, but not always, a commercial provider) sets itself up as an alternative to fundraising organised and run by a charity's fundraising function".

Within the typology, this is known at Type Bii (see p7). While they primarily discuss Type Bii as typically happening through online platforms and digital apps, the role of philanthropic advisors fits squarely within this definition, albeit in a more personalized and high-touch manner.

Philanthropic advisors are expert consultants who support individuals, families, and foundations in developing and implementing effective philanthropic strategies to maximise their charitable impact. Crucially, these advisors work on behalf of the donor, not the charity, thus positioning themselves as an alternative to traditional fundraising functions.

This is a crucial difference with other forms of Type B disintermediation, as the demand for it is driven by donors, rather than new platforms and technologies being pushed from the supply-side. These donor-driven factors include increased wealth complexity, desire for control and intentionality, and distrust or scepticism of institutional claims.

Advisors thus emerge as a response to donor demand, not as a competing channel seeking market share, and the growth of philanthropic advising as a profession has been significant in recent years, driven by several other factors such as:

1. Increasing complexity and scale of philanthropic efforts globally

2. Growing need for expert guidance among high net worth individuals (HNWIs) and ultra-high net worth individuals (UHNWIs)

3. Expansion of services offered by advisors

4. Growing recognition of the importance of philanthropic advisors

5. Development of specialised training and certifications for advisors

6. Increased collaboration between advisors and other professionals like wealth managers and lawyers.

However, there's a key difference with other types of disintermediation. Many of those other forms displace and replace a function of a charity with something that is different to what the charity had to offer – microloans are not donations; charity checkouts are different to making a donation through a charity's website – and the reason they are different is because they are competing for market share.

Philanthropic advising should not, however, be understood only as the commercial replication of fundraising. Advisors may meet a legitimate donor-side need that no individual charity can fully satisfy, particularly when high net worth or ultra high net worth donors are making decisions across multiple causes, organisations, legal vehicles, family members, and forms of social investment.

The disintermediating effect arises not from the existence of this broader service alone, but from the extent to which it transfers interpretive and relational authority away from charities without equivalent mechanisms for transparency, accountability, and professional oversight.

Philanthropic advisors perform a number of functions that overlap with those undertaken by sophisticated fundraising teams, but do so within a parallel, donor-side system operating outside any single charity.

* MacQuillin, I., Kottasz, R., Locilento, J., and Gallaiford, N. (2023). A typology of disintermediated giving and asking in the non-profit sector. *Journal of Philanthropy and Marketing*, 29(1), e1820. https://doi.org/10.1002/nvsm.1820

This creates a structural shift:

- stewardship moves from being organisation-centric to donor-centric
- charities become inputs into a broader advisory process rather than the locus of engagement.

This form of disintermediation is not evenly distributed. It is highly concentrated among ultra-high net worth donors and institutional philanthropy (family offices, foundations etc.).

This creates a bifurcation where mass donors remain in traditional systems, but high-value donors are increasingly intermediated elsewhere.

So, even though the intention might not have been to compete commercially with charities (as other types of disintermediation have done),* the philanthropic advising industry has effectively created a new market for donor services that previously fell within the purview of charity fundraising teams. It does not simply overlap with functions that some fundraisers have performed; it also reallocates authority among donors, advisors, charities, and other participants in the philanthropic process.

In this new market segment, advisors are becoming the primary interpreters of need, impact, and legitimacy on behalf of donors. In that sense, the disintermediation is not just relational, it is epistemic. Charities' accounts of their work are increasingly interpreted alongside independent research, comparative analysis, donor priorities, and advisors' assessments.

Advisors do not merely manage relationships. They can influence how donors define impact, what evidence they consider persuasive, and which organisations enter the field of consideration.

This shifts charities from being partners in meaning-making to being options in a curated portfolio. Another key difference is that while other forms of disintermediation may make money when donors use their services, this is simply the cost of using the process (for example, a proportion of a donation used to pay for the running of the crowdfunding platform), donors are willingly and consciously paying for the services of the philanthropic advisors separate to any donation they might subsequently make.

Donors are therefore the clients of philanthropic advisors in the way they are *not* clients of fundraisers. The impact of this form of disintermediation on traditional fundraising practices is significant. There are several challenges that fundraisers face due to the rise of philanthropic advisors including:

1. **Increased emphasis on strategic giving** – Advisors help donors develop strategic giving plans, which may lead to a shift in donor behaviour towards more targeted and impactful giving. Fundraisers need to adapt their strategies to align with these evolving preferences.
2. **Competition for donor attention** – As donors seek expert advice from philanthropic advisors, fundraisers face increased competition for donor attention and resources.
3. **Collaboration with advisors** – Fundraisers must navigate new dynamics to effectively engage with donors who have received advice from philanthropic advisors.
4. **Navigating donor expectations** – Advisors help donors set clear goals and expectations for their giving. Fundraisers need to align their efforts with these expectations and demonstrate how their organisations can fulfil donors' strategic philanthropic objectives.
5. **Adapting to donor preferences** – Donors working with advisors may have specific preferences and criteria for selecting organisations to support. Fundraisers need to tailor their messaging, impact reporting, and engagement strategies accordingly.
6. **Professionalization of giving** – The professional guidance provided by advisors may lead to a more structured approach to giving among donors. Fundraisers need to demonstrate their organisations' professionalism, impact, and alignment with donors' strategic goals.
7. **Focus on impact and evaluation** – Advisors emphasise the importance of measuring impact and evaluating outcomes. Fundraisers need to enhance their impact reporting and evaluation practices to meet increasing demands for transparency and accountability.

The services provided by philanthropic advisors closely mirror many of the functions traditionally performed by charity fundraisers. These functions might include:

1. Exploring beliefs and values – Advisors help clients reflect on their core beliefs and values, which serve as the foundation for their charitable giving. In some sophisticated major-gift relationships, this process has been facilitated by skilled fundraisers. It is now also being offered independently by donor-side advisors..

2. Identifying populations and areas of interest – Advisors assist clients in determining specific populations or areas of interest they are passionate about supporting. This service overlaps with the role fundraisers may play in helping donors connect their interests with an organisation's mission.

3. Defining geographic reach – Clients are guided in deciding whether to focus on a specific geographic area. This service can potentially redirect donations away from local charities that might have cultivated relationships with donors based on geographic proximity.

4. Specifying desired impact – Philanthropic advisors help clients envision specific outcomes they wish to achieve through their giving. This function traditionally fell to fundraisers who would work with programme staff to articulate potential impacts to donors.

5. Crafting a purpose statement – Advisors support clients in creating a clear and concise purpose statement to guide their charitable giving. This strategic work may occur in collaboration with charities, but donors are increasingly able to undertake it independently with an advisor before particular organisations are considered.

6. Developing a giving strategy – Advisors create comprehensive strategies for philanthropy, addressing the why, what, when, and how of giving. This strategic planning role overlaps with and may reduce the charity's role in with the work of charity leadership and major gift teams.

7. Facilitating family discussions – For family philanthropy, advisors provide tools to examine individual family members' interests and define roles. This service was sometimes been provided by family foundations or community foundations but is now being offered by independent advisors.

8. Identifying giving opportunities and partnerships – Advisors introduce clients to gift opportunities and organisations tackling important issues. This function can disintermediate or reposition one of the core roles of fundraisers – connecting donors with giving opportunities within their organisation.

9. Advancing knowledge and community – Advisors curate philanthropic knowledge, research, and practical resources, and connect clients with peer networks and inspiring leaders. This educational and networking function was often provided by charities and sector associations but is now being offered by independent advisors.

Philanthropy advisors as disintermediators of charities

Philanthropy advisors can displace charities from serving as the primary interpreters and stewards of donor intent, inserting themselves as the central locus of decision-making, relationship management, and impact evaluation.

These challenges clearly demonstrate how philanthropic advisors are disintermediating traditional fundraising functions, aligning closely with the concept of Type Bii disintermediation. However, it's important to note that this form of disintermediation also introduces new risks and ethical considerations. There are several potential concerns:

1. **Lack of standardisation** – The profession lacks standardised practices, training, and certification.
2. **Conflicts of interest** – Advisors may face conflicts, particularly if employed by financial institutions.
3. **Power dynamics** – The advisor-client relationship can be influenced by power imbalances.
4. **Ethical dilemmas** – Advisors may encounter challenges in navigating clients' conflicting values or sensitive information.
5. **Transparency and accountability** – The profession requires greater transparency, particularly regarding fees, methods, and potential biases.
6. **Regulation and oversight** – The lack of regulation raises concerns about potential unscrupulous practices.
7. **Balancing client interests with broader social impact** – Advisors must navigate the complex task of balancing client wishes with optimal societal outcomes.
8. **Diversity, equity, and inclusion** – The profession may struggle with representation and understanding of diverse philanthropic perspectives.
9. **Staying current** – The rapidly evolving landscape of philanthropy requires constant updating of knowledge and practices.

These risks and ethical considerations further underscore the disruptive nature of philanthropic advising as a form of Type B disintermediation. They highlight the need for careful consideration of how this emerging industry is reshaping the philanthropic landscape and potentially altering the balance of power between donors, advisors, and charities.

In conclusion, philanthropic advisors can represent a form of Type B disintermediation when their donor-side role overlaps with, substitutes for, or repositions functions previously undertaken through charity-led fundraising:

Philanthropy advisors can displace charities from serving as the primary interpreters and stewards of donor intent, inserting themselves as the central locus of decision-making, relationship management, and impact evaluation.

By offering comprehensive services that mirror and often replicate traditional fundraising functions, these advisors are establishing a donor-side professional function that may complement charity-led fundraising but can also substitute for significant elements of it.

This disintermediation is reshaping donor behaviours, challenging traditional fundraising practices, and introducing new complexities into the philanthropic ecosystem. As this trend continues to evolve, it will be crucial for the sector to address the associated challenges and ethical considerations to ensure that philanthropy continues to serve its fundamental purpose of creating positive social impact. ❻

The typology of nonprofit disintermediation

Type A – Donor-to-recipient giving; charity displaced from giving processes

Type Ai – Other entities displace charities in the traditional charity model
- Ai-a) Microlending
- Ai-b) Loose network giving circles
- Ai-c) Influencer-inspired philanthropy

Type Aii – Direct support to specific individuals
- Aii-a) Crowdfunding
- Aii-b) Social media
- Aii-c) Remittances
- Aii-d) Grants to individuals to perform acts of kindness

Type B – Bypassing professional charity fundraising

Type Bi – 'Citizen' fundraisers/fundraising
- Bi-a) Crowdfunding
- Bi-b) Community fundraising

Type Bii – Commercial organisations/entities displace charity fundraisers
- Bii-a) Crowdfunding platforms
- Bii-b) Charity checkouts/point of sale donations
- Bii-c) Personal giving apps
- Bii-d) Shopping websites
- Bii-e) Charity voucher schemes
- Bii-f) Community chests and united funds
- Bii-g) Workplace giving
- Bii-h) In-memory giving and tribute funds
- Bii-j)* Solicitors and charitable bequests

Type Biii – Philanthropy advisors (this paper)

Type Biv – Donor advised funds

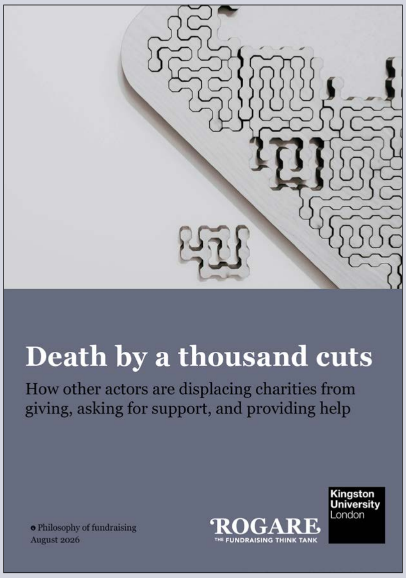
Type Bv – Giving circles

Type C – Alternative ways of providing aid to people in need

Type Ci – Companies
- Ci-a) Social enterprises
- Ci-b) Company charitable foundations
- Ci-c) For-profit service delivery
- Ci-d) For-profit company marketing-as-service delivery
- Ci-e) Corporate social responsibility
- Ci-f) Companies ask for donations to fund their commercial activity

Type Cii – State provision of services

Type Ciii – Alternative voluntary civic action
- Ciii-a) Citizen aid
- Ciii-b) Mutual aid
- Ciii-c) Actionism



The full typology is set out in the Rogare paper Death by a Thousand Cuts, available on the Rogare website

https://www.rogare.net/disintermediation

* There's no Bii-i to avoid confusion with Type Biii.

Get in touch

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