

For a documentary filmmaker working on a **large, multi-year project**—especially one involving archival rights, international travel, staff, legal review, impact campaigns, and potentially multiple funding rounds—the choice between **Model A, Model B, and Model C fiscal sponsorship** can shape your control, liability, fundraising flexibility, and administrative burden.

Here's how the three models typically compare:

Model A — Comprehensive / Direct Project Sponsorship

Under Model A, your film project becomes a program of the fiscal sponsor. The sponsor is legally responsible for the project, often handling payroll, contracts, insurance, accounting, and compliance. ([National Network of Fiscal Sponsors](#))

Advantages for a large, long-term documentary

1. Administrative infrastructure

For a project lasting 3–10 years, this can be a major advantage:

- Payroll for producers, editors, and researchers
- Insurance coverage
- Grant accounting
- Vendor payments
- Tax reporting
- Contract administration

You can focus more on filmmaking than nonprofit compliance.

2. Stronger grant credibility

Large foundations may feel more comfortable funding through an established nonprofit with a proven compliance system.

This can matter if you're applying to organizations such as the Ford Foundation or the National Endowment for the Humanities.

3. Employment structure

If your project hires staff over the years, Model A can simplify employment classification, benefits, and payroll compliance.

4. Liability protection

The sponsor usually carries primary legal responsibility and often insurance coverage for project operations.

Disadvantages

1. Reduced autonomy

The sponsor may have approval authority over:

- Major expenditures
- Contracts
- Hiring
- Grant proposals
- Certain public-facing activities

That can feel restrictive if your documentary evolves creatively over time.

2. Possible ownership/IP complications

You need to negotiate carefully:

- footage ownership
- archive rights
- distribution rights
- educational licensing

Some sponsors are hands-off; others require contractual rights or controls.

3. Higher fees

Because they do more work, Model A often costs more than Model C.

4. Institutional delays

A sponsor's internal accounting or legal department may slow:

- urgent travel payments
- equipment rentals
- rights clearances

This can frustrate filmmakers working in rapidly changing field conditions.

Model B — Independent Contractor Project

Model B is less common in arts/media. The sponsor owns the charitable project, but contracts with you (or your company) as an independent contractor to execute it. ([Nonprofit Partners](#))

Advantages

1. More operational independence than Model A

You may run day-to-day production with fewer internal approvals.

2. Clear compensation structure

If you already operate through an LLC or production company, this can create a straightforward contractor relationship.

3. Useful for experienced producers

If you already have:

- accounting systems
- production management
- legal counsel

then Model B can feel lighter than Model A.

Disadvantages

1. Complex legal ambiguity

For a long documentary, Model B can create tension over:

- Who owns footage?
- Who owns deliverables?
- Who controls unfinished materials?

2. Contractor classification risks

Long-term exclusive work relationships may raise contractor-versus-employee questions.

3. Less common among film sponsors

Many film-focused sponsors prefer Model A or C, so fewer organizations offer Model B.

4. Potential mission drift conflicts

Since the sponsor technically owns the project, creative disagreements may become contractual disputes.

Model C — Pre-Approved Grant Relationship

This is the most common model in documentary filmmaking. The sponsor receives charitable donations and grants, then re-grants funds to your separate project entity or individual under an agreement. Organizations like the International Documentary Association commonly use this model. ([International Documentary Association](#))

Advantages

1. Maximum creative control

You usually retain:

- editorial control
- hiring decisions
- production strategy
- distribution negotiations

This is often attractive for an auteur filmmaker, one whose personal influence and artistic control over a movie are so great that the filmmaker is regarded as the author of the movie.

2. Intellectual property control

You typically keep ownership of:

- footage
- edits
- soundtrack licenses
- distribution rights

(Subject to your agreement.)

3. Flexibility for hybrid financing

Model C works well if your film uses:

- grants
- donor campaigns
- private equity
- co-production deals
- broadcaster advances

Because not all revenue must necessarily flow through the sponsor. ([National Network of Fiscal Sponsors](#))

4. Easier transition into commercial exploitation

If your documentary later becomes:

- a theatrical release
- a streaming acquisition
- a TV series adaptation

Model C often creates fewer complications.

Disadvantages

1. You carry the operational burden

You're usually responsible for:

- bookkeeping
- contractor agreements
- insurance
- payroll decisions
- tax/accounting coordination

2. Liability remains largely yours

If something goes wrong during production:

- defamation claims
- location accidents
- music licensing disputes

you may bear more direct risk.

3. More infrastructure required

For a 5+ year project with staff and large budgets, you may need:

- LLC or nonprofit entity
- production accountant
- entertainment attorney

4. Reporting requirements

You still must submit expenditure reports and grant updates to the sponsor.

My strategic view for a long-form documentary

For a filmmaker producing a **large-scale documentary over many years**:

Model A is strongest if:

- You expect a staff of multiple employees
- You need institutional grants
- You want administrative support
- Risk management matters more than independence

Model B is strongest if:

- You already run a professional production company
- You want moderate autonomy
- The sponsor specifically offers a strong Model B structure

(But many filmmakers skip this model.)

Model C is strongest if:

- Creative independence is critical
- You want to retain IP and distribution flexibility
- You already have production/legal infrastructure

This is why many documentary organizations default to Model C. ([International Documentary Association](#))

For a **large, long-term documentary that may later become commercially valuable**, many experienced filmmakers begin with **Model C**, then only move toward a more comprehensive structure if staffing, liability, or grant complexity becomes overwhelming.

If your documentary may involve **trauma subjects, minors, litigation risk, controversial public figures, international filming, or multiple funders**, the answer can change significantly.

Exposure Labs appears to use **Model C fiscal sponsorship** with Denver Film.

Here's how that can be determined:

Denver Film explicitly states on its filmmaker support page that it “**employs Model C of fiscal sponsorship**,” describing it as a **pre-approved grantor/grantee relationship** in which Denver Film receives tax-deductible donations on behalf of approved film projects. ([Denver Film](#))

On Exposure Labs' donation page through Denver Film, the legal language matches classic Model C language:

“The intended grantee is vetted and pre-approved by the fiscal sponsor...”

It also notes that Denver Film retains **variance power** but ordinarily re-grants funds to the project—another hallmark of Model C fiscal sponsorship. ([Denver Film](#))

So the relationship between Exposure Labs and Denver Film is **Model C (Pre-Approved Grant Relationship)**.

For a documentary team like Exposure Labs, that usually means:

- Exposure Labs retains significant control over creative direction and IP
- Denver Film processes charitable donations and provides 501(c)(3) fundraising infrastructure
- Denver Film exercises compliance oversight but does not run day-to-day production operations ([Denver Film](#))

Given your earlier question about large, long-term documentaries: Exposure Labs' choice of Model C is consistent with teams that want to preserve **ownership, distribution flexibility, and editorial independence** while still accessing nonprofit funding channels.