

IMPACT ASSESSMENT

for Nonprofit News Projects & Their Funders



A 2-in-1 Guide

DEVELOPING IMPACT METRICS FOR NONPROFIT JOURNALISM PROJECTS is no simple matter. Over the past several years, foundations, researchers and nationally recognized investigative newsrooms have all waded into the fray, offering competing models and arguments for and against. In the end, impact assessment comes down to a dialogue—about goals; how news informs, connects and engages communities; and how best to maintain journalistic integrity in the process.

That's why we've created this guide, which features both conceptual perspectives for foundations and nuts-and-bolts advice for nonprofit news organizations. We hope you'll begin by reading the side that's most relevant to you, and then be drawn into the conversation by reading the other side. We also hope it sparks dialogue about your own projects—among staff, and between foundations and newsrooms.

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MEDIA IMPACT FUNDERS

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INTRODUCTION

JOURNALISM'S OLD BUSINESS MODELS—ONCE DEPENDENT ON LONG-STANDING relationships with advertisers, subscribers and politicians—are being reimaged. Emerging news outlets, many of them digital-first, are more about participatory journalism; they're more opinionated, more engaged and identified with users, and more reliant on topic-specific support. Nonprofit organizations are also reorienting themselves to produce news and information on subjects that would otherwise go uncovered.

Determining the impact of these next-generation nonprofit journalism projects is a journey that funders, editors and development staff are navigating together. This guide is intended to draw from the best current thinking on how to define and track the impact of these news outlets, and to provide foundations and newsrooms with guideposts to answer complex impact questions.

Why Fund News Now?

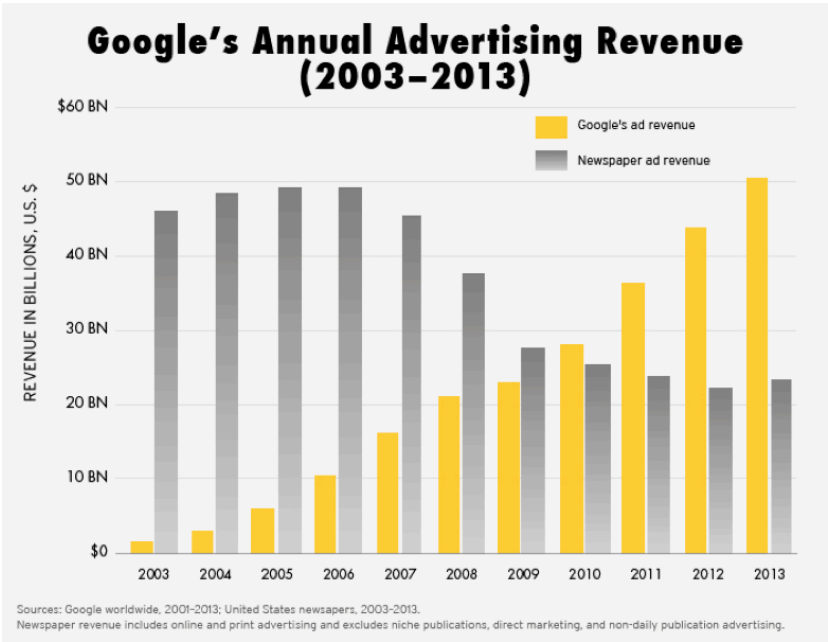
Over the past decade, foundation support of journalism has been growing. Many factors have driven this shift—economic disruptions in the newspaper economy, polarized political discourse, and a realization that social and mobile platforms allow for the creation of exciting new forms of civic information and dialogue.

If recent trends continue, foundations may have an even greater role in ensuring that citizens are informed, and community information needs are met. “Without the revenues to support them, newsrooms all over the country have been decimated,” writes former *Washington Post* managing editor Robert G. Kaiser in an essay titled *The Bad News About the News*.

“Newspapers employed 59,000 journalists in 1989 and 36,000 in 2012 (and fewer since then),” he writes “... One immediate effect of all these changes and cutbacks is that there’s no paper in America today that can offer the same coverage of its

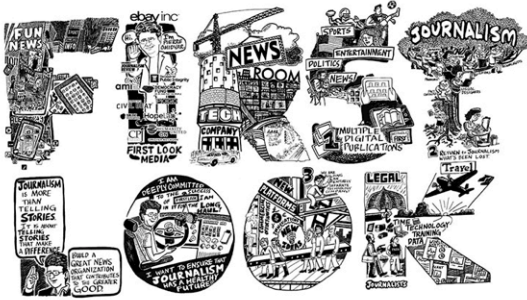
city, suburbs, and state that it provided 20 or even 10 years ago, and scores of city halls and state legislatures get virtually no coverage by any substantive news organizations.”¹

In other words, fewer reporters on the ground means there’s less oversight and investigation. And, in turn, it means that citizens are less informed to participate in our democracy.



This matters not only to funders who want to support media, but those program officers focused on supporting work in other areas, such as education, science or criminal justice. As Michele McLellan and Eric Newton write in the 2011 guide, *Journalism and Media Grant Making*, “This is everyone’s issue...No matter what you are trying to do in your community, you probably can’t get it done without a healthy flow of news and information.”²

Local and regional foundations are increasingly supporting projects and outlets designed to fill these gaps in accountability reporting. National and international foundations are investing in cross-platform investigative and data journalism projects that provide capacity lost in the shuttering of major broadcast organizations. Funders focused on a particular topic such as the arts, the environment or education are underwriting related beats.



Venture capitalists and individual investors are also jumping into the fray, often supporting highly visible digital-first platforms that have a public interest focus, such as First Look Media,³ supported by philanthropist and investor Pierre Omidyar.

Across the board, philanthropic and VC investment accounts for a small but significant new force in the journalism field, totaling an estimated one percent of all financial support for news. According to the Pew Research Center’s *State of the News 2014* report, “These newer investments—many of which are ‘unearned revenue’—do not yet represent a sea change in the business model. But they do signify a pivot in the news world. More than the sum of dollars and cents, this funding patchwork serves as a series of signposts pointing toward the ways journalism may be paid for in the years to come.”⁴

Of course, noncommercial news is not entirely new. Foundations have supported the journalism produced by public broadcasting stations and networks for many years. However, more recent experiments such as digital-first local news sites and hubs for syndicated investigative reporting venture into territory that used to be dominated by ad-supported commercial outlets. These projects must justify themselves to their boards and donors to get support, rather than relying simply on distribution and engagement metrics to attract sponsors.

Whatever reason individual funders have for supporting the myriad forms of nonprofit news, their support is disrupting old assumptions about how newsrooms articulate their mission and track their outcomes.



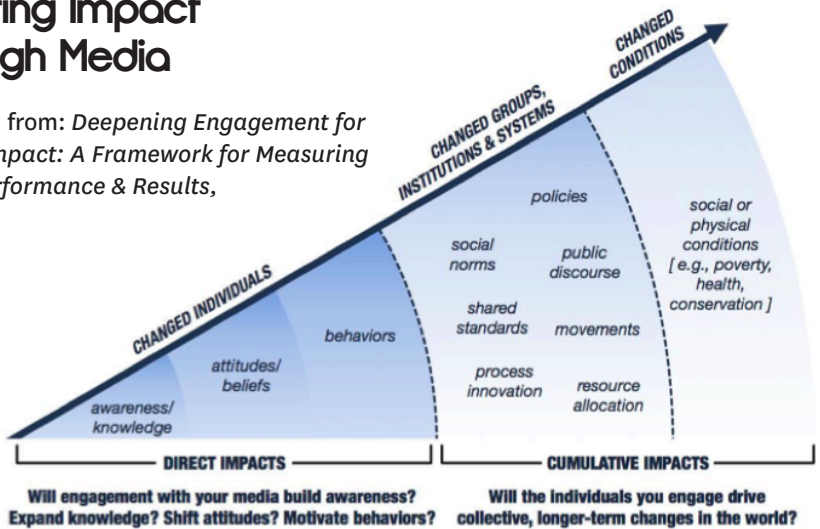
HOW DO YOU DEFINE “IMPACT”?

FUNDERS ARE GRAPPLING WITH THE QUESTION OF HOW TO BEST GAUGE THEIR journalism grants and have commissioned a number of reports on the topic. One useful point of reference is *Deepening Engagement for Lasting Impact: A Framework for Measuring Media Performance & Results*, a report commissioned in 2013 by the Knight and Gates Foundations.⁵

This guide provides a thoughtful snapshot of how funders and public interest outlets have been working through the process of setting meaningful goals, identifying key audiences, measuring engagement and demonstrating impact. It also offers a model (below) that gets to the crux of the debate about evaluating journalism.

Creating Impact Through Media

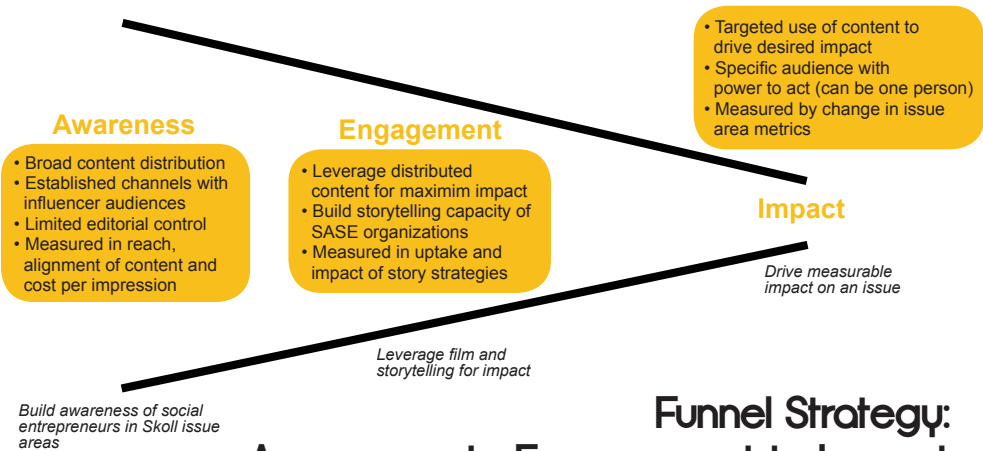
Reprinted from: *Deepening Engagement for Lasting Impact: A Framework for Measuring Media Performance & Results*, 2013



Oriented around the concept of “impact” as “change,” this funnel-shaped model traces effects of a story or media project first on individuals, then on institutions and systems and then real-world social or physical conditions—creating what we could call an “impact continuum.”

In this way it resembles a number of models that have been developed over the past several years. For example:

- The Center for Investigative Reporting’s media impact analyst, Lindsay Green-Barber, developed a journalism impact model divided into three levels derived from social science research: “micro” or individual-level outcomes, “meso” or discourse-level outcomes, and “macro” or structural change outcomes. This model posits that these levels are “interrelated in complex, fluid ways, rather than one leading to the next,” Barber says.⁶
- The Skoll Foundation has developed a funnel model (below) to represent the role that storytelling plays in the foundation’s support for driving adoption of social entrepreneurs’ innovations. It positions “exposure to a narrative” at the broad end and narrows down through different levels of engagement to stories and productions that reach key influencers and prompt deeper action.⁷



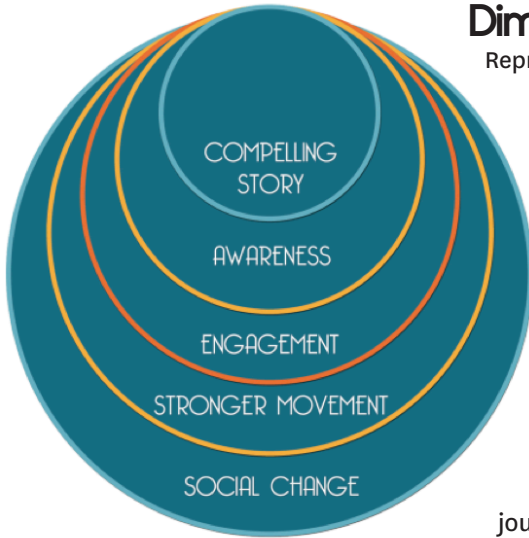
Reprinted from The Skoll Foundation, 2015

(Correction: a previous version attributed this funnel model to a partnership between Skoll and Sundance, which is not the case.)

- In their work with documentary filmmakers, The Fledgling Fund has developed a “Dimensions of Impact” model (next page) that moves in ripples out from the story, through awareness and engagement, into movement-building and finally to social change.⁸

Dimensions of Impact

Reprinted from The Fledgling Fund, 2010



These models can't capture the full range of factors that influence individuals and stakeholders, but they are clarifying for those who practice journalism that accepts social change as part of their mission.

These might include investigative journalists seeking to rally support to right a wrong, accountability journalists who want to mobilize public support against corruption, or advocacy journalists focused on reporting stories that bolster the case of a particular movement or group. Each of these forms has played a long and storied role in journalism's history, as journalist Finley Peter Dunne famously said, working "to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." Josh Stearns, the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation's Director of Journalism and Sustainability, notes in a post on the foundation's Local News Lab that this historical impulse is resurfacing in a raft of online journalism startups.

"Today, I'd argue that journalism is still grappling to identify its theory of change," he writes, "but we are beginning to see more experimentation around setting goals and measuring impact. And, just as there is no one business model for news, there is likely no one answer to this question of journalism's role in making change. Newsrooms and communities have to navigate these questions about engagement together, and define the right focus for their goals."⁹



THINKING OUTSIDE THE FUNNEL

THESE IMPACT MODELS MAY MAKE LESS SENSE FOR OUTLETS THAT DEFINE THEIR mission differently: to report rather than advocate, provide platforms for users to tell their own stories, act as spaces to increase dialogue instead of narrowing audience members' focus down to a single perspective. Their “theories of change” do not focus on changing minds, but instead on changing the ways audiences acquire a more complex understanding of civic issues.

Models focused narrowly on social change are also unsatisfying for funders who may have yet another engagement goal: reimagining the relationship between news outlets and consumers.

For example, The Knight Foundation has been analyzing how newspapers previously met their “community information needs”¹⁰ and how their collapse has hindered citizens’ abilities to participate in democracy. Central to this, the Foundation is investing in developing

innovative journalism forms using new platforms that can fill the gap. Launched in 2006, the Knight News Challenge is an open contest designed to “accelerate media innovation by funding breakthrough ideas in news and innovation.”



When they evaluated the Knight News Challenge four years later, they came up with very different standards of success than those outlined in the previous models. The first lesson? “Measure success based on how funding improves the field, not just on the adoption or impact of individual projects.” For example, the platform developed by 2011 winner Waldo Jaquith for the website The State Decoded (statedecoded.com) has been adapted in several states and municipalities in order to make state laws more accessible. They noted that other markers of success for news innovation projects include developing user-friendly interfaces, successfully navigating pushback from incumbent media businesses, and finding ways to deftly balance paid and volunteer staff.¹¹

These journalism grants position audiences not as subjects to be influenced or educated, but as active participants in finding, sharing and even generating news—potential adopters of and ambassadors for emerging digital and mobile information tools.



Similarly, NPR’s Analytics Dashboard¹² focused on helping editors and producers better understand online audience behavior as well as shifting the culture of the newsroom

to be more responsive and nimble in the process.

“A change in culture is equally as important as building a useful tool,” writes Melody Joy Kramer, who co-created the dashboard. “You can build the most useful tool in the world, but if you can’t change people’s behaviors so that they use the tool and understand the value of the tool, then what’s the point? Culture—and changing existing habits—is key to introducing a new product in a newsroom.”

Kramer wrote that the dashboard had begun to influence newsroom behavior, looping social media analytics into the decision making around editorial and outreach, allowing audience choices to serve as a guidepost.¹³



DRAWING CLEAR LINES

EVEN IF IMPACT EVALUATION IS NOT FOCUSED ON ADVOCACY GOALS, REDRAWING the boundaries among audiences, the reporters and community organizations may feel too porous for newsrooms that still operate with a closed editorial model that centers on the tenets of objectivity, fact-checking and journalistic independence.

This debate is not new. It may seem that the rush of participatory digital platforms has forced us to rethink top-down reporting methods; the conversation about the public’s role in news production has been raging for decades. In 2002 Bob Steele laid out the different positions that news outlets might play: as independent reporter, detached observer, advocate, supporter, opinion leader, agenda setter, builder or activist.¹⁴

He identified a tendency to draw a vertical line in ethical debates: “Over on the one side is independence and detached reporting, and on the other side is participation, advocacy, activism. We see one side as right and good, the other side as wrong and bad.”

Instead, Steele suggests, it might be more useful for reporters to conceptualize horizontal lines (as illustrated in the graphic to the right), representing a continuum of participation, guided by independent judgment and the needs of their communities. Each role journalists may play (independent reporter, detached observer, advocate, etc.) in this new model suggests a slightly different theory of change, with corresponding differences in benchmarks, goals and performance indicators.

Independent Reporter..... Messenger

Detached Observer..... Interpreter

Advocate..... Watch Dog

Supporter..... Promoter

Opinion Leader..... Intermediary

Agenda Setter..... Convenor

Builder..... Participant

Activist..... Thinker

All of this depends, however, on journalists maintaining audience trust—a commodity currently in short supply. With a sharp rise in partisan media, questions of news bias have come to the forefront. Participatory and citizen media are providing new sources of information, but also raising questions about sourcing and fact-checking. The influence of advertisers on content has long been an issue for editors, but now foundation funding is raising new concerns about journalistic independence.

As the Nelson Poynter Scholar for Journalism Values for more than a decade, Steele has trained media leaders and news organizations on reporting ethics.

“There’s so much emphasis on transparency in this era, and I’m a big believer in (it),” he said. “But transparency without accountability is hollow, and accountability is built on having quality control, built on skill, built on journalistic purpose and commitment. Too often in this era that all goes by the wayside. The pressures on editors and journalists is phenomenal—to produce more, much more quickly. And if we lose that checks-and-balances process or there’s no quality control in place, then you lose the accountability. You can be transparent all you want, but it doesn’t solve the problem.”¹⁵

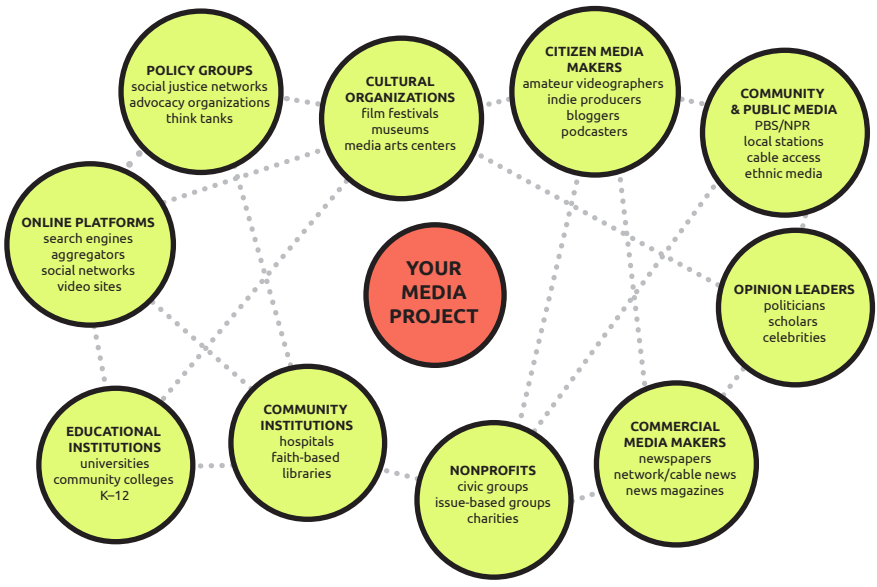
Supporting newsrooms in maintaining such quality control is one way that funders can help to ensure impact without calling a newsroom’s integrity into question.

Tom Rosenstiel, the executive director of the American Press Institute and co-editor of *The New Ethics of Journalism: Principles for the 21st Century*, offers three guidelines for the effective journalistic transparency that funders and newsrooms should keep in mind:

- 1** Show how the reporting is done and why people should believe it.
- 2** Acknowledge your intentions, and be honest about how that might impact what you report and how.
- 3** Engage community as an end rather than a means.

“Journalism must be accurate, transparent,” he writes, “and should serve citizens, not simply leverage them for commercial reasons.”¹⁶

WHO ARE YOUR PARTNERS?



Adapted from *Public Media 2.0*, Jessica Clark and Pat Aufderheide, 2009. Visit dotconnectorstudio.com for more strategy tools.

Just as journalists must establish transparency in their relationships with foundations and other supporters, they must also clearly define their relationships with other outlets, community partners and advocates, as illustrated in the diagram above. Funders often see collaboration as an important tool for increasing the impact of their investments. However, at a certain point, collaboration can move beyond simply amplifying coverage or engaging audiences in an issue. Defining appropriate boundaries for partnerships is key.



SHOULD THERE BE A PRENUP FOR NEWSROOMS?

BECAUSE OF THE COMPLEX RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN MISSION, QUALITY, AUDIENCE engagement, independence and social outcomes, many journalists are frustrated when asked to account for the impact of their work. Charles Lewis and Hilary Niles of American University’s Investigative Reporting Workshop sum up this stance nicely in their 2013 report, *Measuring Impact: The Art, Science and Mystery of Nonprofit News*:



[I]t should be noted that veteran reporters and editors, particularly of the investigative ilk, have an inherent, almost visceral dislike of audience measurement and engagement strategies and other metrics-producing data. They perceive themselves, first and foremost, as intrepid hunter-gatherers of information, hearty truth-tellers treading through the often extremely difficult, well-nigh impossible terrain of disingenuous politicians, opaque institutions, potentially litigious, public relations-larded corporations, trying to do original reporting that cannot be reduced to mere data, an inhospitable milieu. ... They also believe, correctly, that sometimes the most significant journalism is the least read, least viewed initially, stories discovered months or even years later, or maybe crucial to public understanding of complex issues but in an undramatic way.¹⁷

The report raises questions for funders of news projects—considering that their own funding may be perceived as undercutting the integrity of that journalistic piece. How funders answer these questions relies on agreements they make with grantees about whether and when journalism can or should aim to make change. These decisions will in turn shape impact assessment.

Some funders may still choose to take journalism’s value to democracy as an article

of faith, providing little more than operational support, and only asking for proof that the project was completed. Others may hone in on a particular area of coverage without specifying reporters’ subjects or conclusions. Still others maintain a dual focus—on both individual grantees and the broader health of the industry.

Working with journalism grantees to carefully define what constitutes impact in each case—and what to track as a result—can take extra time up front. But ultimately, it will head off misunderstandings, allow both funders and grantees to identify appropriate boundaries for interacting with one another, and strengthen the strategies that grantees use to engage audiences and stakeholders.

A useful tool in approaching the question of defining impact, specifically in the realm of documentary film, is a site produced by Active Voice: *The Prenups: What Filmmakers and Funders Should Talk About Before Tying the Knot*¹⁸ (theprenups.org). Based on in-depth interviews and focus groups with both filmmakers and foundations, this framework lays out a set of “archetypes” for both groups that helps them to understand one another’s goals and motivations.



Reprinted from Active Voice

Walking both parties through questions designed to surface roles, expectations, power dynamics and business relationships before “tying the knot,” *The Prenups* has become a standard tool for documentary producers and funders in the US and UK.

We can reframe the questions to consider about evaluation to fit journalism projects:

- What is the purpose of reporting and evaluation on this project?
- What must the grantee report to the funder and when? For example, progress in

production, new project advisors, changes in the budget or updates on subjects?

- What happens if the grantee is delinquent in providing interim reports? Are there sanctions? Can the funder withhold funds?
- After the project or grant period is completed, what is the time frame for evaluation of impact?
- What is covered by short-, medium- and long-term evaluations?
- How will impact be measured and what specific data is the grantee to collect for evaluation?

Answering these questions together can help funders and media outlets nail down what type of evaluation to put into place.



SHARING OUTCOMES OUT LOUD

AS JOURNALISM CONTINUES TO REINVENT ITSELF, TWO OF THE MOST VALUABLE steps that funders can take are to explicitly provide support for evaluation, and to work with journalism projects and researchers to publish what they learn.

Richard J. Tofel—president of online investigative newsroom ProPublica, and a former funder at the Rockefeller Foundation—laid out his own impact taxonomy.¹⁹

“Put most simply, different sorts of journalism have different objectives, and therefore will produce—seek to produce—quite different sorts of impact,” he writes. Hard news seeks to inform, feature writing seeks to entertain, and opinion seeks to persuade. However, according to Tofel, ProPublica’s goal is to produce two distinct types of high-impact journalism: “Explanatory journalism” which “seeks primarily to elucidate, while investigative journalism, even if sometimes only implicitly, seeks change. The impact that results is thus also different: the impact of explanatory journalism will be determined by measuring how much readers’ awareness or understanding has increased, while the impact of investigative journalism must be judged by how much things beyond the reader have changed.”

The report goes on to outline several of the complex questions related to journalism and advocacy, and to detail how ProPublica regularly charts impact through a document called the *Tracking Report*.

For each published story, this includes key partnerships, prominent coverage or reprints, official actions influenced by the story, opportunities for change such as related hearings or studies, and “ultimately, change that has resulted. These last entries are the crux of the effort. They are recorded only when ProPublica management believes, usually from the public record, that reasonable people would be satisfied that a clear causal link exists between ProPublica’s reporting and the opportunity for change or impact itself.” These tracking reports are rolled up periodically into an *Impact Report*.

However, Tofel writes, “the final and most important test of ProPublica’s claims of impact comes when public credit is taken. This occurs occasionally on ProPublica’s website (where a subsection of “About Us” is headed *Impact*), but most regularly with ProPublica’s annual report.”²⁰

Despite all of these efforts, Tofel concludes, “true impact—in the real world change sense that we have been discussing it in this paper—is relatively rare.” Like many philanthropic investments, there is a level of difficulty and risk involved in funding journalism for social good. However, many less quantifiable outcomes may result.

Rigorously proving a causal relationship between reporting and social change is very difficult—“there is no one reliable measure of journalism’s impact, no single algorithm that can be devised, no magic formula to load into a spreadsheet or deploy in an app.” Rather, he observes, sometimes words alone can explain how the many different trajectories resulting from a single investigation contribute to a broader shift, sometimes over a very long period.

Tofel’s analysis demonstrates how it might take the very toolset of an investigative reporter to tell the story of a journalism project’s impact—an ability to crunch numbers combined with a skeptical eye for spurious data, the patience and skill to assemble varying accounts from many sources, and the tenacity to follow the twists and turns of a process to its apparent conclusion.



IMPACT IN ACTION

AS IS THE CASE WITH MANY COMMONLY USED NEWSROOM METRICS PACKAGES such as Chartbeat (chartbeat.com) and Parse.ly (www.parsely.com), is your focus on tracking audience reach and engagement? Or do you want a full-fledged evaluation process, complete with audience surveys, influence analysis, content analysis and media analytics? What do the journalists think about that?

Flip this booklet for a nuts-and-bolts guide to how a pair of newsrooms are assessing their work in terms of outputs, outcomes and impact.

And if you're curious to find more case studies of journalism impact, visit the Media Impact Funders' Assessing Impact of Media (AIM) resources:

bit.ly/AIM_journalism



WRAP UP: DO'S & DON'T'S

READY TO GET STARTED ON WORKING WITH NEWS GRANTEES TO ASSESS IMPACT?
Here's a quick cheat sheet:



Do define how the media project you are seeking to fund relates to the goals of your foundation. What is your own theory of change, and how might that translate into concrete activities in the newsroom?



Do have a frank conversation with your grantee about where to draw lines that will protect the project's editorial independence (see questions from The Prenups above as a discussion-starter).



Do prepare to be transparent, and answer hard questions about the outcomes you seek.



Do celebrate both successes and productive failures. The impact evaluation process should be informative and strategic, not punitive.



Don't expect grantees to conduct rigorous evaluation without providing funds and related support for it.



Don't confuse outputs with outcomes—the number of stories published does not equal changed minds, habits and fields.



Don't neglect the long tail of impact—build in checkpoints at various stages of the project rather than a single evaluation at the end.



Don't forget that the outlet may be answering to multiple funders, as well as audiences, board members and stakeholders. Temper your reporting expectations accordingly.



FOOTNOTES

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