Features
Can We Measure Media Impact?
Surveying the Field
By Anya Schiffrin & Ethan Zuckerman

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CAN WE MEASURE MEDIA IMPACT?

MORE AND MORE DONORS regard investments in journalism as a vehicle to further social change. And more and more news outlets rely on philanthropic funding to support their operations. With such funding come new expectations— and new questions—about the effect that media content has on citizens and policymakers. Traditional media metrics, most observers agree, are insufficient. But whether alternative metrics can meet the needs of both media funders and media professionals is an open issue.
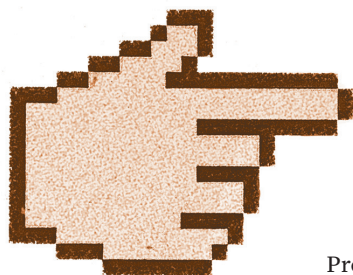
Illustration by CURT MERLO

SURVEYING THE FIELD

Two scholars analyze an array of current approaches to gauging whether and how news organizations make a difference in the world.
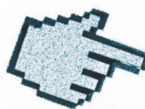
BY ANYA SCHIFFRIN & ETHAN ZUCKERMAN

In October 2014, the nonprofit news organization ProPublica released "Deadly Force, in Black and White," a study of police killings of civilians in the United States. By examining data collected by the US Federal Bureau of Investigation between 2010 and 2012, ProPublica found that young black men were 21 times more likely to be killed by police than were young white men. In most cases, white policemen were responsible for the killings. The average age of the black victims was 30. Police reports typically cited "resisting arrest" or "fleeing arrest" as the reason for such shootings. Often, however, the police didn't provide a reason and instead described the circumstances of a given shooting as "undetermined."[1]

Complete with graphics and links to official documents, "Deadly Force, in Black and White" is a great piece of original journalism. Media outlets quoted it, and civil rights organizations cited it in support of police reform. But in November, just a month after ProPublica released the report, an event occurred that highlighted the limited ability of media coverage to affect facts on the ground: A grand jury in Ferguson, Mo., declined to indict police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting of an unarmed black man named Michael Brown. When it comes to changing the world, it seems, powerful forces such as systemic racism often matter more than careful reporting and hard data.

ProPublica, like a growing number of other media organizations today, relies extensively on donor funding to support its work. As a consequence, these media outlets face increasing pressure to demonstrate that journalism can make a difference in the world. Donors are seeking ways to measure the impact of the media projects that they fund, and media organizations in turn are working to track the real-world effects of what they publish—partly in the hope that proving their worth will help enable their survival.

The days when media companies could survive by relying solely on advertising and subscription revenues are over. Disruptive technologies, among other factors, have steadily eroded the business models that traditionally supported US news organizations. One alternative source of funding, of course, is the public sector. But Americans have always been uneasy with government support for media. The United States—unlike Germany and the United Kingdom, for example—has never developed robust taxpayer-supported public media institutions.

In the absence of both commercial and public sources of revenue, more and more media organizations are willing to accept novel funding arrangements from the philanthropic sector.

Private philanthropy, along with government agencies, has long supported struggling newspapers and community radio stations in developing countries. Donors in this category include the Ford Foundation, the Open Society Foundations, the US Agency for International Development (USAID), and a host of European governments and international aid organizations. USAID, for example, has funded community radio stations in Mali, and the Open Society Foundations has supported media initiatives led by Burmese exiles.

But we are now adjusting to a reality in which major US and European news organizations depend on philanthropy. *The Guardian* newspaper receives funding from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation for its Global Development Web page, and NPR gets support from that foundation for its coverage of topics such as education. In addition, as traditional media outlets cut their investigative budgets, donor-supported organizations like the Center for Public Integrity, the Global Investigative Journalism Network, ProPublica, and SCOOP have emerged to fill that gap. Philanthropic organizations, in fact, have fueled an explosion of independent investigative reporting in recent years. The Omidyar Network, for instance, has funded a Web-based outlet called Sahara Reporters, which focuses on exposing corruption in Nigeria.

Some of the most influential new donors on the scene today—including the founders of the Gates and Omidyar philanthropies—come not from a journalism background but from a business tradition in which management by metrics is commonplace. Partly under their influence, a movement has emerged to find ways to track the effects of donor-supported journalism. All around the world, media outlets are learning that some funders are uncomfortable with supporting journalism merely as a "public good." They want to see proof of impact.

THE MEDIA METRICS QUANDARY

The task of "proving impact" doesn't come naturally to most journalists. They reject a utilitarian view of their worth, preferring to believe that news is a public good that merits support for its own sake. They view themselves not as campaigners for a cause but as fair and impartial observers. At the same time, they like to think that they can change the world simply by "getting the story out." Aron Pilhofer, executive editor of digital at *The Guardian*, summarized the prevailing view in a much-quoted blog post: "The metrics newsrooms have traditionally used tended to be fairly imprecise: Did a law change? Did the bad guy go to jail? Were dangers revealed? Were lives saved? Or least significant of all, did it win an award?"[2] In any event, journalists tend to be wary of adopting universal metrics. They know that each media organization has a different audience that it wants to reach and different ideas about what constitutes "impact."

There is skepticism on the donor side, too. Some donors have taken the stance that media impact is impossible to gauge: There

are too many variables to measure, and the time scale for evaluation is too short, they argue. "Media organizations need to make the case that their work could lead to change, but I am very skeptical about what I see as a growing impact-industrial complex," says one grantmaker from a prominent US foundation. The debate about whether and how to ask grantees to measure impact has created a fault line in the world of donors. In some ways, this dispute echoes the ongoing debate over strategic philanthropy. Here, too, critics argue that basing donor decisions on outcome-related evidence forces grantees to focus on conducting evaluations to prove the worth of their work—at the expense of actually doing that work.[3]

Journalists and donors both note that the media is only one part of a larger ecosystem. The multitude of variables that affect any process of social change makes it hard to isolate—let alone measure—the impact of journalistic efforts. People sometimes credit the media with helping to cement opposition to the Vietnam War, or with inspiring the protests that led to the Arab Spring, for example. But was it reporting on the Vietnam War that undermined public support for it, or was it the fact that middle-class college students didn't want to fight in that conflict? Was the Arab Spring a "Facebook revolution," or was it a predictable response to deteriorating economic conditions and widespread youth unemployment?

For years, economists and political scientists have studied the effects that media coverage has on areas such as government accountability, public corruption, and voting behavior.[4] Their research shows that news coverage does affect a wide range of outcomes, including government spending decisions and governmental responses to natural disasters. At the same time, scholars warn that it's hard to trace a direct connection between, say, a single newspaper story and an identifiable real-world effect. "If we were to monitor the effect of 100 news stories on people's behavior and noticed no difference, we could conclude that there is no media impact. But then story 101 may cause people to take to the streets in protest. Perhaps that one story hit a nerve, or perhaps stories 99, 100, and 101 packed into a snowball that spurred the mobilization," says Paul F. Lagunes, assistant professor of international and public affairs at Columbia University, who studies the effectiveness of anti-corruption programs. "Then there's the question of unobserved change. A news story may modify the way we view the world without spurring us to take immediate action."

What's more, the metrics that media organizations typically use were not designed to measure social impact. Most of these metrics originated in the advertising industry. They estimate the size of an audience for broadcast and print outlets, or they count the number of visitors to a website. But knowing that an article reached millions of readers is only one part of answering the larger question of whether the article had an effect on voters and policymakers. After all, conveying information to a large number of people is not always the best way to promote social change. Minky Worden, director of global initiatives at Human Rights Watch, notes that efforts based on mass action often have limited efficacy. "Boycotts are kind of old-fashioned now," she says. "Targeted sanctions, reaching policymakers at a key moment, or creative campaigns to change specific laws and policies can be more effective."

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MEASURE FOR MEASURE

Despite these concerns and caveats, several organizations are taking steps to develop usable standards for measuring media effects. Among those groups are the Gates Foundation, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, the Nieman Journalism Lab at Harvard University, the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, the Pew Research Center, and the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. In looking at the approaches that these groups are adopting, we distinguish broadly between *reach* (how many people engage with a given body of media content), *influence* (how that content affects public dialogue), and *impact* (how the content helps drive policy change or movement building).

Reach | There's no guarantee that a story read by millions of people will have more impact than one that reaches only a few hundred readers. But it's easier to posit impact when a story finds a substantial audience. Numerous metrics exist to help news organizations gauge the audience for their content. In addition to the metrics commonly used by Web advertisers—page views, unique visitors, and so on—some outlets consider "attention minutes," a variable that measures the amount of time that readers spend with an article or view. The leaders of Upworthy, a website that develops and markets articles that it deems "meaningful," label attention minutes as their "primary metric." More specifically, they look at two variables: "total attention on site" and "total attention per piece."[5] Many organizations also track the "social sharing" of a story by noting how often people cite it on Facebook, Twitter, and other social networks. Sharing of this kind expands the reach of a story beyond the base of a site's regular readers.

One problem with focusing on reach is that it tends to favor offbeat or feel-good stories over more substantial reporting and analysis. Another problem is that reach-oriented metrics are ones that people can easily manipulate. If the number of clicks on a given article is the measure of its reach (and if advertising revenue derives from reach data), then those who manage websites will devise ways to increase that number. Hence the emergence of "clickbait" stories that carry attention-grabbing headlines and of "bots" that click on stories automatically.

Efforts to enable advanced approaches to measuring reach are now under way. A leading example is NewsLynx, a project hosted at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism. NewsLynx aims to help news organizations and their funders map how stories spread across the Web. "We found that people were getting a bunch of notifications from Google Alert and then manually entering them into a spreadsheet. We are trying to make the drudge work of being

an impact analyst easier," says Brian Abelson, who helped launch NewsLynx. (For more information on that initiative, see "Reading Between the Lines" on page 52.)

Influence | How do media stories affect readers' attitudes? How do they shape the public dialogue as a whole? We know that in some cases media coverage can change how people and organizations approach a given issue. Josh Greenberg, an associate professor of communication at Carleton University in Ottawa, Ontario, studied the way that coverage of labor conditions in the shoe factories that supply Nike led to a change in how people think about solutions to the sweatshop problem. He showed that media outlets such as *The Washington Post* shifted their coverage away from the conditions in those factories and toward the role of individual buying choices. As a result, the discussion of how to solve the problem began to focus less on improving or enforcing regulations than on, say, encouraging consumers to buy fair labor footwear.[6]

In the past, news organizations had to rely on focus groups and survey research to understand how audiences absorbed their content. But with the rise of the Web, the toolkit for measuring influence has expanded dramatically. Hyperlinks, the glue of the Web, provide a clear proxy for influence. Media professionals sometimes claim that a link isn't an endorsement. But there are clear indications that when an author links to a story, she signals that the story did influence her (positively or negatively) and that it therefore has helped shape the broader discussion of a given topic. Consider a study led by Yochai Benkler, a professor at Harvard Law School. Benkler and his colleagues used links to trace how Wikipedia contributors, grassroots activists, and technology bloggers influenced the debate over the Stop Online Piracy Act (also known as SOPA-PIPA), a bill in the US Congress that proposed significant changes to the laws that protect copyright holders on the Internet.[7]

Media Cloud, a joint project of the MIT Center for Civic Media and the Berkman Center for Internet & Society at Harvard University, offers a new way to discern patterns of influence. (One of us, Ethan Zuckerman, is a principal investigator for Media Cloud. So is Yochai Benkler.) It is an open source tool that monitors 50,000 social and journalistic channels, and it allows researchers to study two important media-based processes: agenda setting and framing. By measuring the volume of stories on a given topic, as compared with the coverage of other topics, Media Cloud can show how effective politicians, activists, and other parties are at putting an issue "on the agenda" for public debate. And by tracking the language that people use to talk about a topic, Media Cloud can highlight the various "frames" that get attached to a news event. A frame, in short, is a way of interpreting an event that supports one social or political agenda over another. A story about the killing of Michael Brown, for instance, might lead to discussions of topics such as urban poverty, racial bias, and militarized policing. By tracking published stories and clustering those that use similar language, Media Cloud helps identify which frames appear in reporting and which news outlets have introduced new frames into the public debate.

A difficult challenge in this research involves evaluating the role that media-based efforts play in setting an agenda or framing an issue. The #blacklivesmatter movement is a case in point. The killing of Brown, along with other episodes in which young black men died at the hands of police, led people to use that hashtag on Twitter in order to frame these tragedies as part of a larger narrative about police treatment of people of color. But violent protests against those deaths led to a reframing of the entire story as one that ended in "rioting." Both events on the ground and people's interpretation of those events, in other words, can help set the agenda for an issue.

Impact | Just because journalists have exposed people to information doesn't mean that people will take action or demand policy changes in response to that information. Jonathan Stray, a fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, calls this challenge—that of translating media coverage into social impact—"the last mile problem."[8] In certain cases, however, it's possible to link a specific journalistic project to a discernible policy outcome. Even an article that doesn't gain wide circulation can cause change if those who do read it are willing and able to act on what they read. (The late Robert L. Bartley, who was editor of the *Wall Street Journal* opinion page for many years, once said, "It takes 75 editorials to pass a law."[9]) Here are some examples of journalism that resulted in real-world social impact.

● In 2012, *Bloomberg Businessweek* published an article that built on research by New Zealand scholars who had documented the forced labor of Indonesian workers on Korean-owned vessels. These vessels were fishing for catch to be exported by New Zealand companies.[10] The article caused so much outrage that the New Zealand government quickly enacted legislation that made it a crime, punishable by imprisonment, to exploit migrant workers. The government also passed a law that will require all vessels that fish in New Zealand waters to abide by the country's labor, health, and safety regulations. After the article came out, moreover, retailers such as Safeway, Wal-Mart, and Whole Foods launched investigations into their supply chains. Some US buyers canceled contracts with New Zealand fish suppliers.[11]

● In 2010, ProPublica published a series of articles that tracked which US doctors had received payments from pharmaceutical companies. Over a two-year period, according to the series, those companies made payments to roughly 17,000 physicians, and these payments totaled more than $2.5 billion. ProPublica provided an app that people could use to find out whether drug companies had given money to their doctors.[12] More than 180 outlets picked up the story. "This scrutiny," according to ProPublica, "has prompted tightening of disclosure rules."[13] The University of Colorado, Denver overhauled the conflict-of-interest policies that apply to its teaching hospitals, for example, and Stanford University took disciplinary action against five of its faculty members.

● In 2014, the Center for Public Integrity published a series on how Luxembourg had enabled major companies such as Coach, Disney, FedEx, Ikea, Koch Industries, and Pepsi to evade taxes by registering in that country so that they could take advantage of loopholes in various treaties.[14] The story splashed across front pages throughout Europe. Within days, there were calls for Jean-Claude Juncker—a former prime minister of Luxembourg, who had just been chosen to head the European Commission—to resign from his new post. The European Union, meanwhile, moved to pass a law that would ban these kinds of sweetheart deals.[15]

Some investigative reporting teams have developed systems to track the real-world impact of their work. They use these systems to monitor editorials that cite their investigations or policy changes

that come in the wake of their reporting. Each year, ProPublica publishes updates on the status of issues that it has covered in its major reporting projects. And Participant Media, an entertainment company that produces films with social and political themes, has launched the Participant Index, an attempt to capture outcomes that go beyond policy change. The company conducts surveys to determine whether people who have seen specific Participant films have then taken related actions—signing a petition, making a donation, or joining an organization, for example. Participant has invited newsrooms and advocacy organizations to use its method as well.[16]
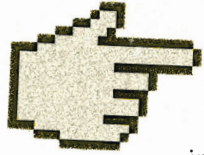
THE IMPACT OF MEASUREMENT

Nonprofit newsrooms and the organizations that fund them will continue to hone their use of new and existing metrics. Tools that can measure not just "reach" but also "influence" and "impact" are in their infancy. Yet they are becoming ever more sophisticated, and our ability to apply them has advanced dramatically.

Today, we know a lot more than we did previously about news consumption habits and about the way that ideas spread, and this knowledge can help us understand how social change occurs. Research shows that change usually takes place over the span of decades and that media coverage has an impact only when other social forces are also at work. Take the case of female foot-binding in China. For hundreds of years, the philosopher Anthony Appiah notes, Chinese writers had called attention to the dangers of that practice. But only when young members of the country's elite became ashamed of foot-binding did Chinese authorities begin to issue decrees against it.[17]

Some kinds of impact are easy to measure—the passage of a law, the ousting of a corrupt politician. Other forms of social change (like the demise of foot-binding in China) involve a transformation of cultural norms. Almost inevitably, that kind of change is a long and complex process. Even episodes of seemingly rapid change, such as the shift in Americans' attitudes toward gay and lesbian marriage rights, typically follow an extended period of political activism and cultural ferment.

In that context, consider again the ProPublica report titled "Deadly Force, in Black and White." It's probably unrealistic to expect that such a report would lead to an indictment of the police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown. But that measure of impact is not the only one that matters. By bringing attention to the disproportionate use of force against black men, the ProPublica investigation may help shift public attitudes about that subject, and it may open a dialogue both about police practice and about the persistence of racial bias in the United States.

As media organizations become ever more dependent on funding that doesn't come from advertising or subscriptions—funding that comes with pressure to demonstrate real-world impact—they and their supporters should heed the risks that this trend involves. Funders, for their part, must avoid the trap of supporting only groups that are able to deploy the latest technology. A small journalism NGO in Africa, for example, is unlikely to have the staff, skills, or resources to use sophisticated impact measurement tools. Would we want a world in which that kind of group cannot get funding? After all, until a journalist actually covers a story, we can't know whether the story will make a difference.

Media organizations, meanwhile, must watch out for threats to newsroom independence. The increasing focus on measurable impact may become an excuse to decide that only some kinds of coverage are worth supporting. If newsrooms limit their reporting to stories that can have immediate effects or quantifiable results, they might be unwilling to cover large, persistent—yet vitally important—social problems. Ultimately, the impact that journalists can have on society will erode if they must serve the whims of funders. That is true whether the funders in question are government officials, advertisers, corporate owners, or well-intentioned philanthropists. ▪

NOTES

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READING BETWEEN THE LINES

Leaders at one nonprofit media outlet are advancing a conversation about how best to develop meaningful metrics for journalistic work.

BY CHIP GILLER & KATHARINE WROTH
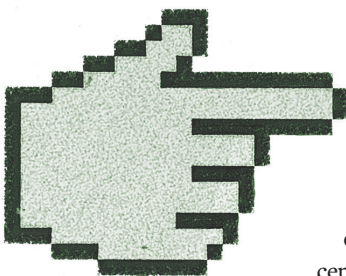
By 2013, according to a study by the Pew Research Center, more than 170 US-based nonprofit news outlets had established a presence online. These organizations cover everything from hyper-local issues to matters of global concern. Significantly, more than 70 percent of them came into being in or after 2008.[1] This boom represents a new path for media, and it raises a new set of questions for those who seek to understand the impact of these outlets. Whether one is an editor who needs to gauge the real-world ripples of an investigative journalism project or a funder who needs to evaluate the case for supporting such work, access to accurate and meaningful metrics is critical to navigating this nascent industry.

It's an industry that has risen from the ashes of traditional newspaper publishing. An initial crop of a dozen or so nonprofit outlets—including our organization, Grist—sprang up in the late 1990s, joining well-established predecessors such as National Public Radio and the Center for Investigative Reporting. Just a few years later, the post-millennial implosion of the newspaper business and the explosion of social media led to a sea change in how journalists create and disseminate their work.

Philanthropic support has played a critical role in this transformation. Among outlets that took part in the Pew survey, 74 percent reported that they had secured grant funds to launch or maintain their operations. And the scale of such funding has accelerated. Between 2009 and 2011, foundation support for media grew by 21 percent, compared with a 5.8 percent increase in overall domestic grantmaking, according to a report by the Foundation Center.[2] During that period, more than 1,000 foundations made a total of $1.86 billion in media-related grants.

The rapid growth of foundation-supported media makes the question of impact keenly relevant to journalists and philanthropists alike. How can those who operate and fund these organizations measure the full impact of journalistic work? What are the best methods for determining the connection between published content and real-world change? What, fundamentally, is the role of a journalist in the 21st century? Across the United States, efforts are under way to address these questions—efforts that range from newsroom experiments to ambitious research projects. The result is a conversation that can be staggeringly complex and vaguely navel-gazing, and so far it has revealed exactly one truth: There is no easy answer.
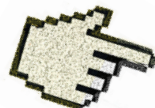
QUESTIONS, QUESTIONS

For nonprofit media, the act of measuring impact is not nearly as straightforward as it is for other nonprofit organizations: There are no trees planted, no cans of soup distributed, no lawsuits won. Existing resources for nonprofits have little to say about media. The IRIS catalog, for example—a project of the Global Impact Investors Network that offers a bevy of options for evaluating work in areas such as banking, health care, and conservation—doesn't include a media category. What's more, the numbers held in high esteem by old media—circulation figures and advertising dollars, in particular—have minimal relevance in this new world. Operating somewhere between the mission-driven world of traditional nonprofits and the profit-driven realm of traditional media companies, nonprofit media are a fence-straddling lot.

Many observers have noted a misalignment between traditional metrics and new-media needs. In 2013, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation issued a report that offered this assessment: "The near-universal perception is that standard metrics ... used by nonprofit news organizations are simplistic and often misleading."[3] The view inside those organizations isn't much different. "The large majority of [nonprofit media outlets surveyed by Knight] feel completely lost when it comes to measuring their impact," says Jonathan Sotsky, director of strategy and assessment at the foundation.

So what's a news outlet to do? As a starting point, many of them rely on the same metrics that other Web-based organizations use. These metrics include page views (which count, as the name suggests, the number of times that visitors request a single Web page), unique visitors (a tally of each device that accesses a site over a given time period), and time on site (the length of time that visitors keep a particular site open on their browsers). Data of this kind are relatively easy to access, thanks to widely available tools like Google Analytics. They are wonderfully tangible. But they are flawed. Time on site is especially problematic; a better term for it might be "time on site while intending to read an article but wandering away to put the kettle on, then taking a phone call from Aunt Midge, then—wait, what was I doing?"

Standard metrics tell only part of the story. Yes, it's vital to know how many people a news outlet is reaching and which links those people are clicking. But other questions are equally important, if not more so: Are people actually reading or watching the content that they access? Are they sharing or commenting on it? Does their engagement with the content spur offline conversation and action? Does that engagement ultimately lead to shifts in public opinion or policy? The answers to those questions are much harder to determine, but they are essential to understanding the impact of a media organization.
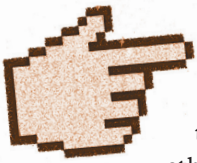
TRIAL AND ERROR

Our experience at Grist offers an instructive example of what it has meant to be a nonprofit news outlet in this brave new millennium. Initially, in the absence of other options, we relied on the existing online metrics to chart our progress. We were thrilled to be able to point to hard numbers: We've grown from an audience of 100 unique visitors to an audience of 10,000! 100,000! 250,000! (Today our total monthly audience, including unique visitors and those who interact with us via social media, is close to 2.5 million.)

As our readership mushroomed, we began to focus on another factor that signaled progress toward our goal of shaping the national environmental conversation: influence. We started tracking indicators such as media mentions, awards, testimonials, public-speaking invitations, and interactions with notable decision makers. During our first decade, this suite of metrics offered strong evidence—to our team, to our board, and to our financial supporters—that Grist was having an impact. We were reaching a growing number of people, they were clicking on our links, and influencers were discussing and acting on the ideas and stories that we put into the world.

Given the social mission that underlay our journalism, however, we yearned for more information about how our work was resonating with readers and translating into real change. The occasional anecdote made its way to us—a Grist-inspired debate that took place behind closed doors at the US Environmental Protection Agency, a shift in the farming practices of a Native-American tribe, a clean energy referendum in a US city—and we treasured these bits of qualitative data. In many ways, they told us more about our impact than hard numbers could ever do. But we needed more reliable ways to evaluate how readers were engaging with our content, both online and offline.

We created a metric that we called—tongue firmly in cheek—the Very Special Index of Goodness. This complex amalgam, designed to improve our understanding of reader engagement, combined external and internal data to yield a single number that we could track over time. The intentions behind this tool were as earnest as its name was wry, and we weren't the only ones who were thinking along such lines: In 2010, the online arm of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* released a reader engagement formula of its own: $\Sigma (C_i + D_i + R_i + L_i + B_i + I_i + P_i)$. That formula took into account several factors—clicks, duration, "recency," loyalty, brand, interaction, and participation—and, like the one that we had concocted, resulted in a single number.[4]

For us, the limits of this single-number approach quickly became apparent. It reminded us of the assertion in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*—the cult novel by Douglas Adams—that the "Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything" is 42. So we shifted course and focused anew on qualitative methods for measuring engagement. We now conduct online surveys and carefully track the flow of social media, and what we've found has pleased staff members and financial supporters alike: In surveys, up to 70 percent of readers say that they recently took action on the basis of Grist content. We aren't an advocacy organization, but our storytelling has clearly inspired change on the ground.

After more than a decade of trial and error, we arrived at a set

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of metrics that work for us. For these metrics, we use terms now familiar to most people who work in nonprofit media. We measure *reach*, which covers the size of our audience—the number of people who access our content either at our site or elsewhere online. We measure *impact* and *engagement*, which involve reader activity both online (in the form of likes, shares, and comments) and offline (in the form of behavior change). And we measure *influence*, which encompasses media citations, policy changes, and other elements that make up the environmental conversation.

The meaning of these terms, like the field of nonprofit media as a whole, is fluid. As yet, people are not using them consistently. In their work on this topic, for example, Anya Schiffrin and Ethan Zuckerman define "influence" in a way that resembles our use of the term "impact"—and vice versa. (See "Surveying the Field" on page 48.) But the core idea is the same in each case: How users respond to your content is distinct from how your content affects the larger media or policy environment, and both of those variables are distinct from how many people simply read or view your content.

Although we sometimes felt alone in our explorations, other players in this field were also experimenting with ways to evaluate the connection between content and social impact. Over the past several years, a national conversation on this topic has started to develop—one that includes practitioners in nonprofit media, funders who support them, and a growing cadre of researchers. Recently, we spoke with several influential figures who are contributing to that conversation.

THE SEARCH FOR SOLUTIONS

Jessica Clark has been thinking about how to chart media impact since 2004. She first ventured into the fray in a moment of journalistic upheaval: "In the wake of the [2000 US presidential] election and the Iraq War, there was a wave of new media projects that expanded the possibilities for different kinds of journalism," says Clark, who is now the research director at Media Impact Funders, a network of more than 50 funding institutions. Amid those developments, she notes, journalists were being asked to leave objectivity behind and to express opinions about the news. Over the next several years, Clark explored that trend while serving as editor of *In These Times*, a progressive magazine, and as director of the Future of Public Media Project at the Center for Social Media at American University. She then co-authored a book, *Beyond the Echo Chamber: How a Networked Progressive Media Can Reshape American Politics* (2010).

When the book came out, Clark and her co-author, Tracy Van Slyke, opted out of a conventional book tour. Instead, they organized a series of "impact summits" that took place in seven US cities. Drawing on insights gathered at these events, Clark and Van Slyke developed a report titled "Investing in Impact." The report included strong advice for funders, journalists, and other stakeholders: "Shifts in technology and user habits mean that old assumptions about what constitutes impact must be reconsidered. Simply reporting on an issue or community is no longer the final outcome in an era of multi-platform, participatory communication."[5]

It isn't just technology that has changed, Clark argues. By partnering with foundations, nonprofit news outlets have carved out a new business model. And funders, having entered what Clark calls "uncharted territory," are raising questions about the industry in which they are investing. They are eager for insights on "how to understand the impact dynamics of emerging platforms, how to build rigorous case studies that track the movement of coverage across platforms and contexts, and how the increased ability of users to participate in production shifts the impact equation," she explains. More to the point, funders are also investing in serious efforts to address these questions.

Major players such as the Knight Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Ford Foundation have directed significant funding to this area. In 2013, Gates and Knight created the Media Impact Project (MIP), a $3.25 million initiative that is housed at the Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism at the University of Southern California. (The project now also receives funding from the Open Society Foundations.) MIP bills itself as nothing less than a "hub for best practices, innovation and thought leadership in media metrics."[6]

NEW CHALLENGES, NEW TOOLS

Dana Chinn, who runs MIP, is a media analytics strategist who serves as a lecturer at the USC Annenberg School. Previously, she worked at organizations such as the Gannett newspaper chain and the *Los Angeles Times*. According to Chinn, the nonprofit media industry could learn a lot from industries such as e-commerce and technology. "Analytics are essential to any business, and they are integrated into the operations and management philosophy of most companies," she says. "If the very survival of the news industry is at stake here, shouldn't we be taking the same approach?"

MIP is now collaborating with nonprofit and for-profit news organizations that include *The Seattle Times*, Southern California Public Radio (KPCC), and a trailblazing outlet called The Texas Tribune. Together, these partners are testing ways to improve their capacity to gather and analyze impact data. Among other projects, MIP served as a consultant to Participant Media (an entertainment company founded and led by philanthropist Jeff Skoll) on the creation of the Participant Index, a tool that measures the effectiveness of films, TV shows, and online videos that feature social causes.[7] "We're not going to get the 100 percent answer" to the impact question, says Chinn. "But we can get one level above where we've been in the past, which is throwing up our hands and saying, 'It can't be done.'" A signature project of MIP is the Media Impact Project Measurement System, a data repository that will combine public and proprietary sources of information. The system will likely be operational by the fall of 2015. As the repository grows, Chinn says, MIP and its partners will be able to analyze impact over time and across different media types.

A similar effort is in progress on the other side of the country. Researchers at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, with funding from the Tow Foundation and the Knight Foundation, have created a tool called NewsLynx. The tool collects quantitative and qualitative data in one central place. It aggregates data from sources such as Facebook, Google Analytics, and Twitter; it offers a way to track anecdotal evidence; and it provides a system for monitoring links and discussion threads related to news content. By using keywords and alerts that apply to a specific organization, topic, or piece of coverage, users can create a custom dashboard that offers a full-spectrum report on the impact of their work.

Over the past year, about a dozen US news organizations—from small-city newspapers to national outlets—have participated in a pilot test of the NewsLynx tool. (Those beta testers include organizations that work with MIP, and the head of the Tow Center sits on the MIP advisory board. It is, as Chinn notes, "a small news-metrics world.") "People had never been able to get easy access to things like share counts of an article over time," says Brian Abelson, co-creator of NewsLynx. (Abelson, a former fellow at the Tow Center, now works at Enigma, a data analytics company.) This tool provides a fix for that problem, he explains: "Now anyone can keep track, with very little effort, of how many times an article has been shared, when it was shared most [widely], and how that information lines up with how many people visited the article over time." Abelson and Michael Keller, a data journalist at Al Jazeera America who helped create NewsLynx, recently produced a research paper on the project. They concluded that the increasing flow of open source data will provide newsrooms with an unprecedented amount of information about media impact.[8]

But the prospect of navigating a mighty river of data is a mixed blessing. In 2014, Grist undertook an experiment—funded, like NewsLynx, by the Knight Foundation—in which we developed a prototype open-source tool that measures "attention minutes." Pioneered by for-profit media sites such as Medium and Upworthy, this metric tracks how far users actually make it into an article or a video. Our use of this metric has yielded data that give us new insight into how readers engage with our content. In the past, we might have assumed that two articles with the same number of page views had performed equally well. Now, by looking at how long each article held readers' attention, we can see that one piece may have gripped readers more deeply than the other. We can then apply that information on what makes an article "sticky" to other items of content. It's a promising tool, but there's a catch: It delivers more data than we can feasibly store and regularly digest. As a next step, we are working to partner with an organization that can help us manage and analyze this rich lode of data. In the meantime, we have news to cover and a site to produce.

Resource constraints, of course, are a common challenge for nonprofit newsrooms. But another obstacle to the widespread adoption of data-tracking tools is the fact that most news organizations operate in a self-imposed silo. "Everyone is slightly different and interested in slightly different things," Abelson says. "So how do we build something that can accommodate all those needs, while still being coherent and workable and easy to start using?"

A SHARED LANGUAGE

Lindsay Green-Barber arrived at the Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) in 2013. She had recently completed a dissertation on the use of communications for political mobilization in Ecuador. Now, under a fellowship awarded by the American Council of Learned Societies, she took on the newly created role of media impact analyst at CIR. Her first assignment: to define what "impact" actually means to the organization.

Green-Barber spent two months surveying various stakeholders about that question. She then spent a year creating and refining
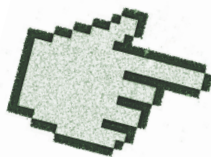
systems that allow CIR journalists and other staff members to track data related to audience feedback, requests for interviews, and social media activity. "Rather than think about analytics and metrics being the end measure of success, we started thinking about them as part of the broader picture," she says. Green-Barber also used her understanding of social movements to help CIR expand its notion of success to encompass more than just a shift in law or policy. "An investigation of a vulnerable community is not going to lead a lawmaker to 'do a 180,'" she says. "If you're looking just at legal change, you'll miss a lot of other important change."

Indeed, the simple act of informing and engaging readers can be among the most important forms of impact that a media outlet can pursue. "The fact that a user not only visits a site but visits it regularly, and engages through sharing or commenting, means that [the user has] an emotional connection to the organization," says Elise Hu, a culture and technology reporter for NPR. (Hu cofounded The Texas Tribune, and serves both as an advisor to the Knight Foundation and as a member of the Grist board.) "That emotional connection will lead to other actions."

The sense that there's more to life than policy change led Green-Barber to identify three types of impact for CIR to track: *macro*, which includes legal and regulatory changes; *meso*, which includes social shifts, such as a change in public opinion; and *micro*, which includes changes at an individual level, such as increased knowledge. Using this framework, she collaborated with MIP, the Tow Center, and other organizations to create a taxonomy of impact. This tool, known as the Offline Impact Indicators Glossary, "is giving people a methodology to look at things they've been thinking of as unmeasurable or unknowable," Green-Barber says. The glossary is broad in scope, encompassing everything from the reversal of a legal decision to an increase in social capital.[9] These aren't the sorts of things that can be measured by Google Analytics, but they are critical to understanding the full impact of journalism.

Abelson, a collaborator on the glossary project, hopes that it will help news organizations develop both a shared language and a habit of sharing data. "This work has to be done on an inter-newsroom level," he says. "More newsrooms have to be willing to share information in a more transparent way."
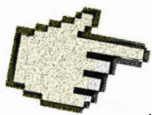
THE CONVERSATION CONTINUES

"If there is one thing that seemingly all media organizations can agree on, it is that impact is not any one thing," Green-Barber wrote last year in a report for CIR.[10]

That's not just a Zen koan. For nonprofit media, metrics pose an especially knotty challenge because they must serve multiple purposes. They must offer meaningful evidence for foundations and other impact-oriented investors. They must make sense to advertisers who still think in terms of CPI (cost per impression) and other traditional standards. (Not all nonprofit media organizations rely on income from advertising as part of their revenue stream, but many do.) They must convey organizational progress to board members and other internal stakeholders. Ideally, moreover, they will offer information that's relevant to journalists and others in the newsroom.

During a period that overlapped with Green-Barber's stint at CIR,

Grist also dedicated a position to studying the question of impact. Our self-dubbed "actionable metrics engineer" was able to track data and unravel mysteries in ways that even the most well-meaning editor would never find time to do. One of his most important conclusions was that the topline numbers that we track—the ones that help make the external case for Grist—didn't always resonate with individual team members. Today, like many other outlets, we are working to resolve that tension between external and internal needs.

But the core problem that nonprofit outlets face may not lend itself to resolution. After all, any metrics that work today might cease to be relevant tomorrow. News organizations must therefore be flexible and innovative when it comes to measuring impact. Philanthropists, meanwhile, must understand that impact metrics in this field might never be as black-and-white as those in other sectors. "The best we can do is find out which organizations are doing interesting things in this area and which practices can be replicated," says Sotsky.

The real solution to this challenge most likely will not arrive in the form of cutting-edge tools or complicated formulas. In fact, it might resemble what journalists already do best. "Impact analysis is like reporting: You have to cover the five Ws [who, what, when, where, and why]," says Clark. "If I were an editor and I were assigning a story on what happened with your site, I would want to know the numbers. They are important to measure, and they make your newsroom smarter. But *measuring* impact is not the only way to think about it. You can also share data, information, or strategic intelligence about a project. What you are doing is *storytelling*." ■

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