April 27, 2017

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Nonprofit Investigative Journalism:
A Snapshot of Content and Reach

An Exploratory Research Report sponsored by
The Jonathan Logan Family Foundation

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Executive Summary

This exploratory study is entitled "*Nonprofit Investigative Journalism: A Snapshot of Content and Reach*." It examines the types of news stories and investigations in a single year (2016) produced by three distinct types of nonprofit investigative journalism organizations (national, state/local and academic centered). In addition, the study explores the reach of this work beyond the specific organizations by examining what types of stories are most often "picked" up by other media outlets. Finally, the report provides some indications of how these organizations currently conceptualize measuring "impact" and suggests areas where additional research and funding on impact measures might prove most helpful.

Content Analysis Sample

A total of 2,309 stories produced in 2016 were extracted from the online archives of 9 separate nonprofit news organizations[1] representing 3 national, 3 state/local and 3 academic centered organizations. Trained coders examined each story on several variables including:

- Primary story topic (e.g. crime, environment, presidential election),
- Level of focus (local, state, national, international),
- Type of story (e.g. news reporting, investigative journalism, "explainer" stories, data journalism)
- Delivery format (e.g. traditional written story, blog, podcast)

In addition, coders examined whether the stories mentioned that they were part of an ongoing series and whether or not the story mentioned a partnering organization.

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[1] The nine organizations include 3 nationally focused organization (ProPublica, Center for Investigative Reporting & the Center for Public Integrity); 3 state/local organizations (Arizona Center for Investigative reporting NJ Spotlight and inewsource.org) and three academic organizations (The Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University, The Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism and the Investigative Reporting Program at UC Berkeley)

Primary Story Topics

The most common story topic was government/non-elections stories, which center on the actions of government agencies and legislators. These stories accounted for just under one out of five stories (17.5%). The next most common story topic were those focusing on the 2016 Presidential election (10.7%) and stories about Health or Health care (10.7%). Stories about Housing (2.4%) National Security (2.2%) International News (1.9%) and Natural Disasters/Catastrophes (2.4%) were the least common story topics.

Types of Stories

The most common type of story were "explainer" stories. These stories provide consumers with a more thorough explanation of a particular topic compared to a "straight news story" but do not reach the level of depth an "investigative journalism" piece would. Overall, explainer stories accounted for 41.4% of all stories. Straight news reporting was the second most common story type (27.6%), followed by traditional in-depth investigative reporting pieces (18.8%). While explainer stories were the most common in the entire sample, straight news reporting stories were actually the most common among the 3 national outlets (37.9%) and the 3 academic outlets (44.5%). Stories focused on the presentation of data or data journalism and op-ed/interview centered stories each accounted for about 4.5% of the total.

Topic and Type of Stories

When comparing the story topics with types of stories a slightly different pattern emerged. Non-election stories about government remained the most common topic across explainer, straight news and investigative type stories. However, among stories coded as data journalism, the presidential election was actually the most common topic, accounting for 27.9% of these stories. Interestingly, among the op-ed/interview category, the most common story topic was crime, which accounted for 15.6% of all of these stories.

The coders looked for explicit references concerning media organization partnerships in each story. A total of 99 different news organizations were explicitly mentioned as partnering with the 9 nonprofit organization in the sample. However, just 13 of these organizations (TIME, Huffington Post, Washington Post, Virginian Pilot, Texas Tribune, NBC News, NPR, WNYC, Al Jazeera America, New York Times, Mother Jones, New York Daily News, and PRI) accounted for 52.3% of all explicit partnership mentions. The remaining 47.3% of the partnership mentions were split across the other 86 organizations.

Reach and Impact Analysis

After drawing a 10% random sample from the total stories, coders conducted a Lexus-Nexus database search using the name of the organization and the title of each story as primary search terms. Coders then examined the types of stories that seemed to be "picked up" the most by other news organizations. While the small sample size makes definitive characterizations premature, they do point to a few interesting findings when we compare stories that were externally picked up with stories that were not picked up by other news organizations.

Partnerships Matter:

Stories written with a partner news organization appear to be more likely to be picked up by "other" or non-partner news organizations. For example, a partnership between a nonprofit news source and a national newspaper would be more likely to be picked by a local newspaper than a story without the partnership. Among all of the sampled stories 15.9% mentioned a partnership, however those stories accounted for 30.8% of all the stories picked up by other media organizations.

Data Visualizations:

Data focused stories, including data visualizations, interactive databases and maps seemed to appeal to other news organizations. These organizations would often

write a story about the data and then point to the originating site where the dataset resides. Overall, these types of stories comprised just 3.9% of all sampled stories but they accounted for 15.4% of all the stories picked up by other news organizations.

Presidential Race Pick-Ups:

Stories about the 2016 presidential race were more likely to get picked up by outside organizations. Overall stories about the presidential race accounted for 8.2% of the stories in the sampled universe, but they accounted for 19.2% of the stories picked up by other outlets.

"Conversations" with Nonprofit News Journalists and Staff

In addition to the quantitative analysis, the research team examined all nine of the participants' web sites and, when available, their annual reports for mentions or descriptions of how they measure the impact of the stories. The research team also conducted a series of informal e-mail and phone conversations with staff of the participating organizations about how they conceptualize measuring impact. The key findings from these informal conversations and archival research are as follows:

- Overall, the organizations recognize that measuring impact was of "growing" importance to funders. However, they are somewhat less clear on how impact measurement is (independently from funders) important to their organization and its mission.
- The conversations suggest that many organizations found measuring impact to be time consuming and many expressed their belief that it was difficult to do accurately.
- Instituting impact measures into the newsroom often entails a cultural shift for reporters. This is especially true of reporters who started in traditional newspaper organizations.

- Almost all of the participants either listed industry awards or mentioned them prominently as measures of impact.

- The organizations generally do not report having a systematic way of measuring specific public policy or legislative changes made because of the stories they produced. However, many organizations can point to specific anecdotal examples of this type of impact.

- The organizations also generally report anecdotal examples of direct consumer engagement or the impact stories have on individuals. However, most lack a systematic method or process for capturing and measuring this direct engagement and impact on individuals.

- Many organizations track social media engagements by monitoring the number of "likes" and "shares" that stories get. This is clearly a measure of engagement but it remains unclear whether or not these measures of "individual reach" are truly identify "individual impact". In addition, the organizations do not seem to have a systematic process for measuring this type of engagement.

Conclusions and future directions

This study aims to spark a conversation within the nonprofit investigative news community and its financial supporters about what (if anything) is needed to better assess the impact of nonprofit news and investigative stories on the public discourse. The results suggest a number of potential lines of discussion and avenues for future research. These include:

Learning by Doing

While this report only provides a small snapshot of what 9 organizations are currently doing, it suggests that practioners and journalists are regularly coming up with new and creative ideas for measuring impact. **A more systematic and comprehensive survey of what nonprofit investigative news organizations are**

actually doing related to impact measurement would help serve as a benchmark for measuring improvement over time.

Create new and systematic methods for measuring consumer engagement

While automated systems may help with measuring reach and amplification, significant additional attention should be paid to measuring engagement and interaction with the consumers of nonprofit investigative news. Systems for measuring consumer engagement are not apparent in most of these organizations. The process of capturing and measuring customer engagement may be aided by technology (e.g. video capturing of events, automatic or randomly distributed consumer surveys, creating web space for consumer testimonials). However, technology alone is unlikely to be able to capture and measure true consumer engagement with news as easily as it might help with measurement of reach or amplification**. The lack of consumer-engagement measurement methods presents a significant need in the nonprofit news world. Filling this gap requires a significant commitment of time and resources to develop effective processes for encouraging and capturing consumer engagement with nonprofit news organization. Support for this work represents a significant opportunity for funders to make a true difference in shaping the future of nonprofit news organizations.**

Exploring for direct measures of legislative impact

Similarly, there appears to be an opportunity to create more effective methods for measuring direct legislative impacts resulting from media stories. Many organizations point to anecdotal evidence of legislative impact, but systematic measurement of legislative impact is still not widely available. **One possibility is a process of "backward mapping" of legislation to specific media stories. Once**

again, however, this process is time consuming and while technology may decrease these costs, funders have an opportunity to significantly shape the nonprofit news world by supporting this development process.

Machine Learning, Natural Language Processing and Sentiment Analysis

The development of impact measures using machine learning, natural language processing and sentiment analysis may be an area that funders and nonprofit investigative news organizations should begin to explore. Some will clearly view having a computer algorithm measuring impact as threatening. **However, some automation of the process for measuring the reach and amplification of stories throughout the media ecosystem may free nonprofit news organizations from the significant time requirements necessary to manually track this type of impact.**