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3 - Nonprofit Investigative Journalism Conversations about Impact and Reach

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MEASURING IMPACT AND REACH

Recently many nonprofit news organizations, as well as the philanthropies that fund them, have shown a growing interest in how to measure the impact and reach of the stories they tell. The Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California, the Democracy Fund and the Knight Foundation and of course the Jonathan Logan Family Foundation have launched initiatives to explore the impact that news and investigative journalism has on the public policy discourse.

Measuring impact initially seems a straightforward process, simply measure how often the stories produced by nonprofit news organizations appear in “mainstream” media. However, this measure of “reach” or “amplification”, while important, may not actually capture the “impact” that a specific story has on policy makers or on the overall policy discourse. For example, a single story that “fails” to generate significant mainstream media attention may grab the attention of a state legislator with the capacity to author legislation concerning the issue. Another “failed” story may capture the attention of an individual who then makes significant changes in their business practices or daily life or even starts a nonprofit organization designed to address the issue first raised by a nonprofit investigative news source.

Exploring and actually measuring these disparate forms of impact is beyond the scope of this study. Instead, we have attempted to do two things, both are of which are designed to spark a conversation within the nonprofit investigative news world on what the industry ought to be doing when it comes to measuring impact.

The first is to provide an admittedly brief look at the types of stories that may be most successful in garnering additional news coverage. The second is to explore how the organizations in the study measure and perhaps more to the point, “think” about impact.

Measuring Reach

As Dr. Lindsay Green-Barber, formerly of the Center for Investigative Reporting and a leading scholar on impact measurement explained, “*measuring reach is the easy part, you can pay companies to track your reach.*” Many private clipping services can systematically track the reach of media stories. However, as pointed out by some of the participants in our study they are often quite expensive and beyond the budget of many nonprofit news outlets.

In an ideal world, we would have liked to measure the reach of all 2,309 stories in our story universe. This was not feasible for the same reasons most nonprofit news organizations do not do it, namely time and money. Instead, we drew a random sample of about 230 stories (10%) from our total story universe. A random sample is created using a random number generator that picks the unique Story Identification number assigned to all of the stories in the story universe. After ensuring that the sample approximated the universe of stories on all of the major variables and characteristics, two graduate students used the Lexus-Nexus search

engine to examine the reach of these stories. Lexus-Nexus is a subscription base database that collects stories from thousands of media sources and allows user to search for them in a wide variety of ways. Information about Lexus-Nexus is available at <https://www.lexisnexis.com/en-us/gateway.page>.

Coders conducted the Lexus-Nexus search by using the name of the organization that produced the story and the story headline as primary search terms. We then compared the frequencies of the stories that seemed to be “picked up” by other news organizations with the stories that did not get additional news coverage. While the small sample size makes definitive characterizations tentative, the results suggest a few interesting findings that can help start additional discussions of impact. Descriptions of these findings follow below.

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 up by a local newspaper. Among all of the sampled stories 15.9% mentioned a partnership, however stories that mentioned a partner accounted for 30.8% of all the stories picked up by other media organizations. This suggests that partnering has benefits to nonprofit news organizations beyond sharing the effort to produce stories. It suggests that by collaborating with other media outlets may increase the reach of a specific news story. This is an interesting area for future research.

Data Visualizations:

Data centric stories, including data visualization and interactive databases (e.g., maps) seemed to appeal to other news organizations. These other 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. This suggests that nonprofit news organizations may have an advantage in the growing data journalism field over traditional print media outlets who may not have sufficient web site platforms to provide a “home” for these type of interactive data sets. It also suggests that data may play an important role in encouraging consumer engagement with a specific nonprofit investigative news site.

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 the accounted for 19.2% of the stories that were picked up by other outlets. This finding is somewhat conflated with the previous finding as many of the stories

picked up by other news organizations were data-centric stories about the 2016 presidential race. Even so, the results suggest that at least in a years with the presidential race, nonprofit news sites are becoming an integrated part of the overall media ecosystem.

Perhaps more than anything however, our admittedly small experiment in measuring impact highlights an important practical detail. To use existing search engines even with clearly defined search parameters is a time consuming activity. It took our coders approximately ½ the time to search and capture 230 stories for impact as it took the coders to code 2,300 stories for content. This is partly because we did it from scratch and did not pay a service to search for story pick-ups. Even so it clearly suggests that reach measurement can be quite time consuming.

Conversations with Nonprofit News Organizations on Impact:

In addition to our exploratory attempt at measuring reach, we also engaged in an informal series of “conversations” with the nonprofit news organizations in this study about how they look at impact. These conversations were unstructured, informal and designed to hear direct responses from the organizations on this issue. In addition, the research team searched the outlet web pages and where they were available, the annual reports of the organizations for examples of statements about impact and reach measurements.

In the following section, we provide an overview of these discussions; it focuses on key themes extracted from these conversations. As we had these conversations, we collected notes and comments from them and wrote a draft narrative about each organization based on these conversations and on the archival research on annual reports. All of the participating organizations were given with an early draft of these overviews and asked to correct and edit them as they saw fit.

In Appendix One, we provide a “second draft” narrative for each organization. These “second draft” overviews are available to all participants so that additional editing and corrections can be made in the future. The goal is to continue to refine and develop even more complete “conversations” concerning how nonprofit news organizations think about measuring impact. These will be updated as needed.

Impact Conversations: Overview

We have extracted a number of reoccurring themes that become apparent in our various e-mail and phone conversations with participants. These are listed below.

- Overall, the organizations universally recognize that measuring impact was of “growing” importance to funders. However, the organizations are somewhat less clear on how impact measurement is (independently from funders) important to their organization and its mission. This suggests a tension between funders and the investigative organizations that is perhaps unaddressed.
- 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 a primary measure 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 engagement and impact on individuals because of the stories they produce. However, most lack a systematic method or process for capturing and measuring 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 are measures of impact. In addition, some outlets report that this monitoring is less than regular or systematic.

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 type of stories they produce and the impact of those stories on public discourse. The results suggest a number of potential lines of discussion and avenues for future research. These include:

Learning by Doing

Nonprofit media organizations are developing and designing new measures of impact every day. While this report only provides a small snapshot of what nine organizations are currently doing, it suggests that practitioners and journalists are coming up with creative ideas for measuring impact. **A more systematic and comprehensive survey of what nonprofit 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.**

Explore direct measures of legislative impact

Similarly, there appears to be an opportunity to create more effective methods for measuring 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.**