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Impact Tracking Guide



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The Impact Planning Guide and Worksheet is a public resource produced by Fathm with the Solutions Journalism Network.

Consult [SJV's website](#) if you have outcomes to share from using this guide or questions.

Introduction

The purpose of the Audience Impact Tracking Guide is to help your newsroom articulate and track the impact you intend to generate among audiences and communities with solutions journalism stories.

As an actionable tool, it will lead you and your team through a process of formulating impact hypotheses and includes recommendations for measuring the potential impact of your journalism. Laying out a hypothesis will help craft an impact tracking strategy and set goals for the kinds of information you need to collect to assess impact.

Once you've conducted your impact measurement activities, you can refer back to your plan to assess whether you've collected enough data to confirm or invalidate your impact hypotheses. The Audience Impact Tracking Worksheet template invites you to develop a mindset and practice of experimentation. A key to success is recognizing that the impact framework and workflows to track information you use may evolve with time.

The impact knowledge gathered can help shape your editorial priorities, strategize to better engage and serve communities, and build relationships with stakeholders.

Demonstrating impact is also valuable to cultivate new or continued interest and support from your audience and community members, as well as financial backers.

This guide should be of use to anyone in a news organization who values knowing the effects of its journalism. Regardless of size, the principles of collecting impact information remain the same. Smaller operations may have to rely on simpler tools and workflows managed by a reporter, whereas larger ones will have more complex processes with responsibilities overseen and distributed at various levels of the organization. For newsrooms already tracking impact, this guide may suggest additional ways of measuring impact that can be easily added to your existing processes.

There are multiple potential uses for this guide. The primary purpose is to gauge the effect of your work on audiences already engaged with it. However, the guide can also help you connect with and listen to communities that you aspire to engage with more directly, but that may not yet be within your audience.

If you do find ways to apply this guide to learn about your impact, do let us know!

This guide was intentionally kept simple and task-focused. Readers eager to engage more broadly with the topic of impact should review the resources listed in the final section.

How To Manage Impact Tracking

Introducing impact tracking into your newsroom will mean taking on some additional tasks, from setup to management, as well as analyzing and communicating the results. Impact tracking can be done around a specific editorial project, ongoing reporting on a beat, or even the work of a newsroom as a whole. Here's some general advice on how best to ensure efficiency and success.

Getting started

- 1. Consult your team:** Bring together an initial group of stakeholders from across your organization (including leadership) to discuss the outlines of an impact tracking strategy you'd like to pursue. When considering who should be involved or briefed, assess who could contribute to this work, who will benefit from the information produced and also, from a pragmatic standpoint, whose buy-in you'll need to ensure success.
- 2. Discuss and define "success":** What impact intelligence matters to your organization? Think about other audience and community outreach or measurement work you've done previously. How many responses to an impact survey or members of a focus group would you be happy with? What information matters most to you? And what do you plan to use it for? Perhaps you are most interested in responses from certain demographics, or in the content of responses rather than the volume.
- 3. Key metrics:** From reporters to community members, audiences and funders and advertisers, varied stakeholders may have different interests. Decide on a set of key metrics for measuring success, goals for how much data you want to collect and the rationale for doing so. See the impact goals section below for examples.
- 4. Responsibilities:** The ideal people to do and/or oversee impact tracking will be closest to the solutions journalism reporting and to those whom the information is meant to serve. Reporters, editors and audience/community engagement team members are usually best placed. But it's important that responsibility for this work be explicit — and that whoever's in charge has enough time to take on the work. Assessing your own organization's impact comes with ethical considerations around the impartiality of your judgment. While creating an impact editor role might be a stretch, determine who will fact-check the information.

5. Tools and workflow: Determine what tools will help you gather and categorize the information you are after and, importantly, what workflows need to be set up to operate and maintain those tools. Before looking elsewhere, consider what tools and processes you already have in place, which might be the simplest and most efficient to use. Also, think about what your team will need in order to make sense of and use the data you're collecting. Make sure everyone involved in this work has the right access, and assess whether any training is needed.

- A useful template for impact tracking is the [Resolve Philly framework](#), which comes with a customizable Airtable template for impact tracking in your newsroom.
- Impact Architects are working on a new version of their Impact Tracker. Check out their [website for updates on tools, resources and services](#).
- As an example, SJN also has a solutions journalism-focused [Impact Tracker form](#) that sends submitters an email copy of their information, in addition to logging it in Salesforce.

6. Set a timeline: Once you've decided on your tools and workflows, agree on a horizon and sequencing to carry out the impact tracking work, do progress checks, analyze the results and package them for sharing with internal and/or external stakeholders. Block out time in advance, and allow some extra for unforeseen delays.

Ongoing

1. **Check in:** Look regularly at the data collected, particularly if you are running an audience survey or sign-ups to an event/focus group. Is it what you expected in terms of response? Do you need to increase promotion or distribution?
2. **Save your work:** Save copies of your surveys, audience research plans and other tracking methods. You'll be able to use them as examples or templates for future tracking work.
3. **Update the newsroom:** Especially if this is the first time you are undertaking such an effort, it's worth briefing the newsroom and your organization's leadership on how the impact tracking is progressing to increase interest, involvement and support.
4. **Share the results internally:** Once you are done with an impact tracking process, present the results of your measurement to your colleagues and discuss them together. Newsrooms will gain audience insights beneficial to their work, and you can lead a conversation about how audience research and impact tracking could be implemented in other ways.
5. **Close the loop with your audience/community:** Let participants and audiences know what has happened with their responses and the solutions project, and what comes next. This will build support for future audience participation.

EXAMPLE

The Beacon, a nonprofit regional news network serving Kansas and Missouri, has put impact at the heart of what it does:

- It has an impact document — with a clear definition of impact and how it's measured — that is included as part of employee onboarding.
- It maintains a Slack channel that's a dedicated space for its team to share and celebrate impact.
- It incorporates impact as an agenda item in staff meetings.
- It has an ongoing impact tracking Airtable database with an accompanying workflow to ensure it's up to date and visible across the team.

All of this helps build an organizational culture that lets the full team contribute to and benefit from seeing the many impacts of The Beacon's journalism — which are all pulled into an **annual impact report** that is shared publicly.

(See more examples of impact reports below.)

STORIES WITH IMPACT



Wyandotte County, Kansas, health officials made **pop-up COVID testing sites and times more consistent in communities of color** after our reporting revealed inconsistencies in health service access.



From The Beacon's 2020-21 Impact Report

Audience-centric Impact Goals and Measurements

Below is a non-exhaustive list of potential impact goals for your solutions stories. You're likely to have more than one, so select three or four that resonate most, and feel free to add others to the list if they better align with your reporting.

While you are likely not in a position to predetermine the impact of your reporting, assessing the potential outcome and knowing what you'll be looking for will help you collect evidence.

Inform

Audiences have new information about a topic or solution.

Suggested measures and strategies:

- Pre- and/or post-reporting surveys (e.g., *agree/disagree with the statement "I learned something new from this report"*)
- Reach measures (e.g., page views, social media impressions)
- Scroll depth or completion rate

Educate and build awareness

Your reporting gives greater visibility to an issue or topic, and your audiences are better able to understand the causes of, and solutions to, a challenge highlighted in a story.

Suggested measures and strategies:

- Pre- and/or post-reporting surveys (e.g., *agree/disagree with the statement "After reading this report, I have a better understanding of <TOPIC>"; agree/disagree with the statement "After reading this story, I feel better able to discuss <TOPIC>" / "I'm likely to share this report with my friends and family"*)
- External referrals (i.e., external sources that link to your site)
- Social shares
- Quality of feedback

Increase community connection

Audience and community members feel less isolated and have a greater sense of belonging and shared experience.

Suggested measures and strategies:

- Post-reporting surveys (e.g., *agree/disagree with the statement “<PUBLISHER>’s reporting on <TOPIC> has helped me feel an increased sense of connection with my community”*)
- Sign-ups to referenced community groups
- Subscriptions to related newsletters or membership programs
- Focus groups

¿Te ayudó esta historia a tomar acción?

kipp@wildilk.com (not shared) [Switch account](#)

La misión de AZ Luminaria es ser una recurso de noticias locales para los arizonenses que quieren tomar acción en sus comunidades. Este tipo de reportaje contextual detallado requiere una gran inversión de recursos. Saber cómo te ha ayudado podría servirnos para guiar futuros reportajes que hagan que nuestras historias sean aún más valiosas. ¿Qué acción, si es que hay alguna, tomarías después de leer este reportaje?

Your answer

[Submit](#) [Clear form](#)

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

This form was created inside of AZ Luminaria. [Report Abuse](#)

Google Forms

Nonprofit publication AZ Luminaria seeks to reach Spanish-speaking communities in Arizona. This one-question survey asking “Did this story help you take action?” is part of its [audience engagement efforts](#) garnering feedback related to its reporting.

Empower and foster civic engagement

Audiences feel increased agency and ability to advocate for themselves, which inspires and prompts a change in behavior or discourse, leading to civic action or mobilization in support of others.

Suggested measures and strategies:

- Post-reporting survey (e.g., *list potential actions that readers say they may take after reading the report and leave an open-ended response; agree/disagree with the statement “Policies related to this issue will influence how I vote in elections”, “If you don’t plan to take any action, why not?” “What are the barriers to taking action?”*)
- Social shares
- Click-through rate
- Alerts mentioning a topic in other local news outlets, community meetings and local government agendas and notices. Drawing a direct line from your reporting to growth in this area will be difficult, but try to establish a baseline for discourse on your chosen topic by looking for existing public data and mentions of the topic in public forums.

What does this story mean to you?

Montana Free Press and the Solutions Journalism Network invested significant resources to produce this series of stories. Knowing how it may have influenced you can help steer future reporting that provides value to readers.

[Sign in to Google](#) to save your progress. [Learn more](#)

What actions, if any, might you take after reading this story? Please select all that apply.

- ☐ Read more about food production systems and techniques
- ☐ Buy food directly from local farmers and ranchers
- ☐ Grow your own food
- ☐ Book an agritourism trip
- ☐ Consider changes to your own farm operations
- ☐ All of the above
- ☐ Nothing I can think of

Submit

Clear form

Montana Free Press included surveys such as the one above in a series of articles on regenerative farming, receiving hundreds of responses that helped the newsroom both to validate that there was an audience interested in the reporting, and to raise money to commission more reporting on the topic.

Engagement and trust

Audience and community members feel more connected to your newsroom.

Suggested measures and strategies:

- Post-reporting survey (e.g., *agree/disagree with the statement "This story makes me want to read more content from this newsroom" / "After reading this report, I trust this newsroom to report on <RELATED TOPIC>"*)
- Calculate your baseline or typical value for quantitative engagement measures (dwell time, pages visited on site, social media shares) and compare it with data on other, non-solutions stories of similar length and topic.
- You could also add questions about trust in your brand in an annual audience survey.
- Financial support is another potential marker of increased loyalty. Once people have signed up, try to capture their motivation for supporting your work.

Other Impact Goals and Measurements

Your solutions journalism work is likely to create impact in other areas that your newsroom can track. The following outcomes, some of which are easier to track than others, could also be seen as indicators of impact. Impacts on your organization, such as changes to your editorial team or growing revenue from a range of financial stakeholders, are not listed here.

Accountability and/or Institutional Change

Solutions coverage contributes to a change in policy, law or practice.

Suggested measures and strategies:

- Ask or gauge whether officials and legislators were influenced by your solutions reporting.
- Look out for a reference to your work in reports, legislation or discussions among decision-makers.

Example of impact:

The Current influenced policy in Lafayette, Louisiana, with a [solutions journalism article](#) showing how other jurisdictions in the state were allocating part of their CARES Act relief money to housing assistance, which Lafayette Parish refused to do. The story was republished by two other publications in the state, adding scrutiny to the parish's initial decision and emboldening council members, local housing activists and organizations to pressure decision-makers. Ultimately, the parish's leaders agreed to redirect **\$200,000** of its housing funds to help vulnerable people pay for rent, housing and utility costs during the pandemic.

Example of impact:

A four-part series by the USA Today Network, which exposed a “predator pipeline” in which athletes suspended or expelled for sexual assault at one college were accepted at other institutions, led to policy change. Two colleges immediately pledged to change how they vet athletes who seek transfers and adopted policies similar to those featured in **the solutions story in the series**, and members of Congress issued a bipartisan call for an independent study of NCAA policies. **Under pressure, the NCAA announced it would review its policies.** Reporter Kenny Jacoby, who studied solutions journalism at the University of Oregon, said the series wouldn’t have had the impact he wanted unless he showed readers a possible path forward. “And here we’re seeing some direct evidence that the solutions component has helped bring that about,” he said.

Cross-Pollination

Through solutions journalism, a community learns about something happening elsewhere, which sparks significant discussion and/or action.

Suggested measures and strategies:

- Ask or gauge whether officials, legislators and local community leaders were influenced by your solutions reporting.
- Look out for a reference to your work in reports, legislation or discussions among decision-makers and community groups.

Example of impact:

With schools around the world trying to figure out how to bring children back during COVID-19, The Local, an English-language digital news publisher in Europe, **reported on a successful strategy in Denmark** — keeping children outdoors much of the day. (This story was a part of a series entitled “Confronting Coronavirus.”) **After reading that piece, teachers in Piedmont, Italy, the region with the second-highest number of coronavirus cases in that nation, tried out many of the same measures.** The Local reported on this development in **“Can Outdoor Teaching Enable Italy to Safely Reopen Schools?”** Piedmont’s results were good, and additional schools in Italy reopened after seeing the results.

Audience Impact Tracking Worksheet

To begin with, create a copy of the Audience Impact Tracking Worksheet [here](#). Then, complete the impact hypothesis statement below. Depending on your project, stories and capacity, it may be appropriate to create multiple impact hypotheses (i.e., for different audience segments, or different stories), bearing in mind your impact tracking objectives and capacity.

The sections above provide a suggested process for developing your impact hypotheses and managing impact tracking with your team. They also include details about audience-centric and other types of impact, along with examples and measurement ideas.

The hypotheses you produce will form the outline of your impact plan.

Our reporting on <TOPIC> will <DESIRED OR POTENTIAL IMPACT> for <AUDIENCE SEGMENT X>. We will measure this impact through <MEASUREMENT or METRIC>.

Example 1

Our reporting on public transport accessibility will increase a sense of empowerment to advocate for change for underserved members of the community. We will measure this impact through baseline and post-reporting audience surveys.

Example 2

Our reporting on workplace equality will build awareness for employers in North Carolina. We will measure this impact through post-reporting surveys.

Example 3

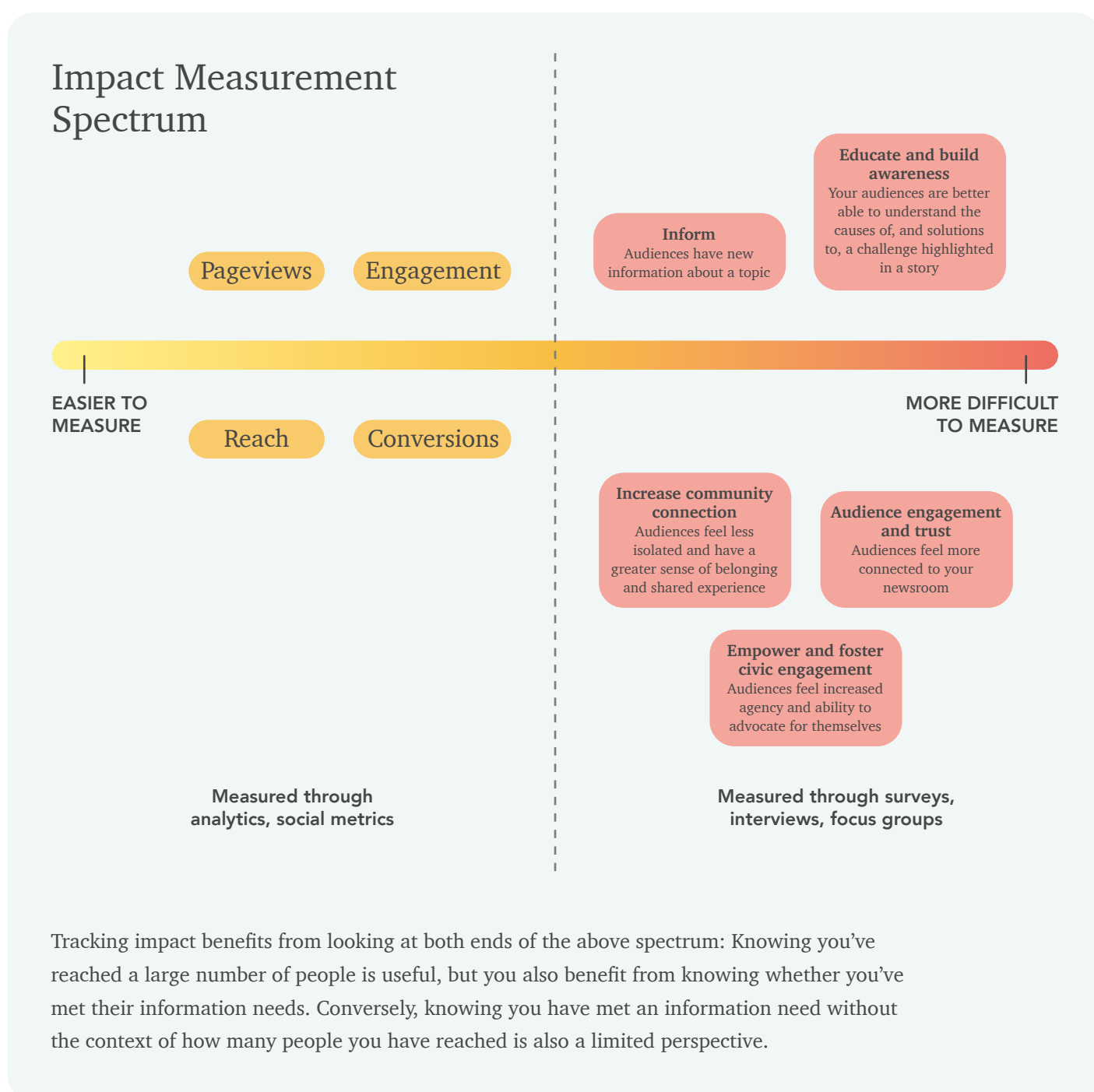
Our reporting on newly legislated rights for domestic workers will move domestic workers and their families to action. We will measure this impact through post-reporting surveys and engagement tracking with community organizations.

Example 4

Our reporting on North and Central Ohio will increase trust in our organization among local residents. We will measure this impact through annual audience surveys.

Sourcing Impact Information

This section outlines some of the ways you can measure the impact of your solutions journalism reporting. Additional qualitative and quantitative measurements that you may also wish to include to support the tracking and evaluation of your progress toward your impact hypotheses are laid out in this section. Let's start with an overview of some of these measures, how to track them and any limitations you might encounter.



Collecting Impact Data With Surveys


Surveys are useful tools for collecting data on impact. They can help you gather structured data on respondents and your audience, along with more organic qualitative feedback generated around the impact of your reporting.

Our specific guide [Measuring the Impact of Solutions Journalism Through Surveys](#) already provides in-depth advice. As a general rule, surveys with fewer questions are likely to generate more responses, but using a one-question survey with a high response rate may give you a lower level of insight than a longer survey with a lower response rate. Digital survey tools make collecting and analyzing data very straightforward; if your audience is largely print, consider using a QR code to direct respondents to an online form. If you're hosting an in-person event, pen and paper surveys can also work well, though they will require more time for processing and analyzing results. Here are some additional tips for making survey-driven audience research work part of your day-to-day routine:

- Draft or discuss questions with the reporter(s) working on the stories.
- Think about questions that can work pre- and post-reporting to aid your analysis of what has changed.
- Leave enough time to collect responses before reporting/publication.
- Show your audience or otherwise communicate how the results have been used.
- Make sure everyone who needs access has viewing rights to the survey responses, but keep a master copy with editing locked.

for feedback and suggestions.

We've prepared a short survey asking a few basic questions about you, your experience with the series so far and what story ideas or other thoughts you might have for us to explore. If you haven't read all, or any, of the stories yet, that's OK! The internet is more or less forever, so there's still time if you'd like to. But even if you don't and you have ideas about ways to solve these problems, please fill out our survey.

It only takes a few minutes and will help us in our coverage, both as part of this project and in the future. To take the survey, use the QR Code below. 



Gambit, a locally owned weekly newspaper in New Orleans, wrote about its [labor-focused reporting series](#) in its print publication. It asked readers to take a survey they could reach via this QR code.

Post-reporting surveys

These surveys are used to get insights into how individuals in your audience felt about your reporting and whether they took action as a result. **In combination with pre-reporting surveys, they can be used to show changes in opinion over time.** (This requires either surveying the same people pre- and post-, or reaching a large sample size.)

- Keep the survey open for several weeks post-publication — or longer if you are returning to this topic. Check the traffic to the article(s); if the story is still getting attention, keep the survey open.
- Make sure everyone who needs access has viewing rights to the survey responses, but keep a master copy with editing locked.
- Include an opt-in for respondents to share their contacts. This is a great way to source post-reporting audience interviewees.

"I am prepared to actively listen to people express views that are different from my own, even on topics where I have a strong opinion" *

Using the scale below, please tell us to what extent you agree with the above statement.

- ☐ Strongly disagree
- ☐ Tend to disagree
- ☐ Neither agree nor disagree
- ☐ Tend to agree
- ☐ Strongly agree
- ☐ Don't know

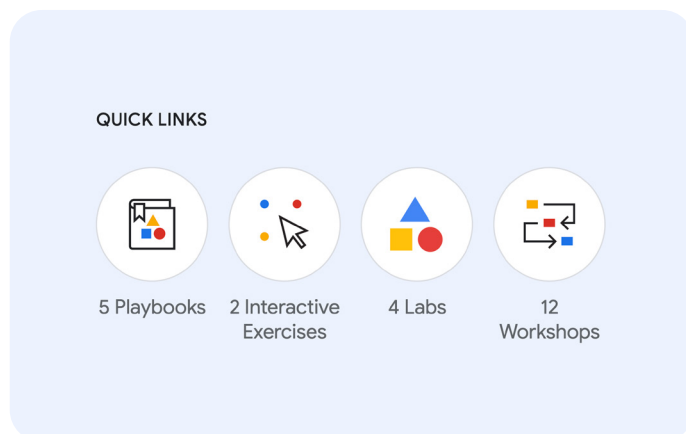
Example from a pre- and post-reporting survey run by The Current in Louisiana. The audience was asked the same question before and after the reporting. Survey results showed there was a 42% increase in people saying they “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement following the reporting.

Another guide by SJN and Fathm focusing on listening workshops and focus groups will be released in 2023. These audience engagement approaches provide an opportunity to dig into specific areas of impact and collect more in-depth, qualitative impact data from a narrower sample of your audience. Keep an eye on [SJN's impact page](#).

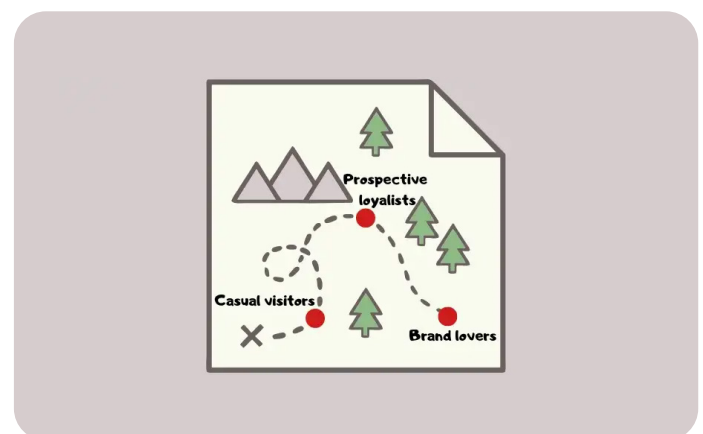
Newsroom Analytics Resources

Many resources exist that can help you decide what analytics data points are most useful in understanding which part of your reporting is attracting attention, driving engagement and generating conversions. Analytics can tell an important story, but it won't be the whole story; combining quantitative measures with some of the qualitative approaches outlined above can give a much more comprehensive picture of why a story (or package of stories) performed well in terms of viewership and engagement, and can give you more information on what people learned from the report and what they did with that knowledge.

[Google News Initiative Audience Development playbook](#)



[Audience Explorer dashboard](#)



[Medill research: Building Habit — Not Page Views — Matters Most For Keeping Subscribers](#)



Photo: Jenna Braunstein

Impact Reporting

Some newsrooms now consolidate findings from impact tracking into documents that present the spectrum of impact their work has had.

As an industry, journalism is increasingly called to demonstrate its value to society. Accounting for the impact of your work is a way to show that your news organization is intentional about the reporting it produces, understanding its outcomes and how to measure them. Applying this kind of scrutiny and transparency can help generate information to engage key stakeholders on different levels.

Communicating about the impact of your journalism is motivating for your team and clarifying for your audience and financial backers.

These materials can be made for the public or used for engaging a more limited scope of stakeholders.

Here are some examples of newsrooms' materials reporting on the impact of their solutions journalism:

[Richland Source's annual report](#)



[The Philadelphia Citizen's sponsorship kit for an annual event](#)



[The Beacon's annual report](#)



[Next City's media kit](#)



[Prism's annual report](#)



Recommended resources on the topic of impact:

Strategies for Tracking Impact:

A Toolkit for Collaborative Journalism, by Solutions Journalism Network's Amy Maestas and Leah Todd Lin



Collaborating for Change:

Approaches to measuring the impact of collaborative journalism, by Lindsay Green-Barber of Impact Architects and Sarah Stonbely, Center for Cooperative Media



Metrics to Match Our Mission:

Measuring City Bureau's Impact, and update piece How City Bureau measures the impact of civic media strategies in Chicago, for Institute for Nonprofit News by City Bureau's Darryl Holliday



Measuring the Impact of Solutions Journalism Through Surveys

by Fathm and SJN



[Impact Tracker tool and resources](#)

From Impact Architects



[7 Tips for Tracking Your Impact](#)

By Anjanette Delgado of the Detroit Free Press



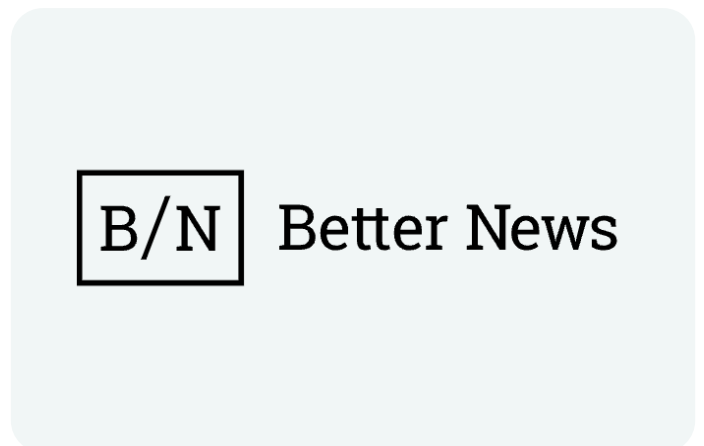
[How is The Oaklandside living up to our values?](#)

Introducing Mission Metrics, our pilot program to keep learning from community, by Tasneem Raja and Cole Goins of The Oaklandside



[How an impact and reach scorecard helps Carolina Public Press gut-check its journalism](#)

For Better News by Angie Newsome of Carolina Public Press



Stop chasing clicks and instead track impact



By Bene Cipolla, formerly of Chalkbeat

Chalkbeat

Measures of Our Reporting's Influence

Document the impact of your reporting.

Start press Enter ↵



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