

HOW DO WE MEASURE THE IMPACT OF AN INVESTIGATIVE STORY?

IMPACT MEASUREMENT AT WFAA-TV IN DALLAS

Taeler De Haes

Randy Reeves, Project Supervisor

ANALYSIS

For over a decade, media makers have debated the issues surrounding impact measurement – the definition of impact, methodologies and the reality of it being possible to measure at all.

Journalists want to know if his or her reporting made a difference. Here are five guidelines to follow when tracking impact.

One: Identify your mission and define impact

Figure out what your organization's mission is, and then identify what impact means to your organization. There is no single definition of impact. There is no consensus on what impact means for journalists, and that is half the battle.

Lindsay Green-Barber is the director of strategic research at CIR. She started working for CIR in 2013 as the media impact analyst where her first assignment was to define what "impact" meant to the organization.

"While there is no clear definition of impact, it is understood that impact is real world change," she said.

The definition of impact could mean any number of things, depending on the organization and its mission.

President of ProPublica Dick Tofel wrote a paper focused on the experience of ProPublica and how its success is measured by the impact of journalism.

“For ProPublica, it means change. Reform,” Tofel said. “Changes in policies or practices or statutes or whatever, but actual change in the real world.” He said the definition fits ProPublica’s mission: to spur change by journalistic means.

Reach versus Engagement

This is where the great divide comes into play: non-profit measurements versus commercial measurements.

“If you’re running a for-profit news organization, your mission is to make money,” said Dick Tofel. “You may care more about reach rather than engagement.”

A non-profit is more likely to invest time and resources into engagement measurement because its success is based on change. A commercial news room makes money through advertising and advertisers care about ratings – reach. The bigger the reach, the more revenue. Both reach and engagement are components of impact, and can be classified as impact on their own, but depending on what type of organization you work for will dictate what measurement type dominates impact tracking.

According to Jim Glass, the Creative Services Director at WFAA-TV in Dallas, standard metrics are vital for revenue.

“Every morning I probably get eight pieces of media analytics from Nielsen to Rentrak, those are both TV measurements, and ComScore for digital products. I get ShareRocket which is social analytics. We have a lot of different measurement systems. The emphasis is put primarily on Nielsen and I think there’s probably too much, but that’s what our buyers are looking at.”

Again, it all depends on what your organization’s mission is.

“If your goal is reach, then [standard metrics] are the point,” Tofel said. “If you’re saying the idea is to inform the greatest number of people, then that’s what you need to measure.”

For commercial newsrooms, standard metrics measuring reach, such as Nielsen ratings, are critical for advertising and are held in higher regards than engagement. More eyeballs means more revenue, but that does not necessarily translate to the core mission of the station.

“The bottom line is defined by reach but the soul of the station is impact,” said Jason Trahan, WFAA-TV investigative producer.

The purpose of investigative reporting in particular is creating impact, he said, and that mission carries through the newsroom.

“Serving the local public on issues that are relevant to their lives,” said Carolyn Mungo, WFAA-TV news director. “This isn’t written anywhere. Holding people accountable in our local communities. Being the watchdog.”

With commercial newsrooms, legacy newsrooms in particular, there is a disconnect between reporters and marketers, but for good reason according to Mungo.

With commercial newsrooms, legacy newsrooms in particular, there is a disconnect between reporters and marketers, but for good reason according to Mungo. Reporters at WFAA-TV have access to certain metrics, if they choose to be included on an email list serv. These numbers include Nielsen ratings and overnight social media reports from ShareRocket – a monthly subscription detailing engagement per post for Twitter and Facebook. The analytics are broken down by all stations in the market, specific brand, talent and reporters. Reporters at WFAA-TV have access to the overnight reports, which list various ratings reports, yet they do not have direct access to ShareRocket, a platform that could help aid in understanding audience more accurately and more personally than something like a Nielsen rating.

Only the marketing staff and digital teams have access to these detailed reports.

Mungo said looking at the drastic change seen in the overnight reports could be stressful and overwhelming for reporters to look at. Focusing on monthly trends – the bigger picture – is a more accurate portrayal of how the station is doing overall in terms of reach.

“We don’t sit in on briefings where people talk about the numbers. We don’t get briefed on ratings. We don’t get orders to produce stories to hit a certain ratings point or to hit a certain demographic,” Trahan said.

Regardless of what your mission is and how you are measuring, impact tracking is vital for long-term growth and success in both non-profit and commercial newsrooms.

Jessica Clark started developing impact-tracking methods in 2004. She serves as the Center for Social Media Research Director. She says the importance of measuring impact is simple. Just ask yourself why you became a journalist.

“If you became a journalist because you think you should comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable, then impact is square in the middle of your mission,” Clark said. “You don’t know if you’re afflicting the comfortable if you don’t know how you’re doing.”

If you became a journalist to inform the public, you will never know if you are informing them without audience engagement and feedback. At the very least, journalists need to know who is reading, watching or listening to their work to understand their audience.

“You’re doing impact analysis to gather the systematic data you need to brag about yourself,” Clark said.

Brett Shipp, investigative reporter at WFAA-TV in Dallas, said impact is a reporter’s proof of performance.

“Making a difference and doing stories that change, make a difference and bring value to people’s lives, that’s the most important thing to me,” he said. “I am fully aware to win major awards, you have to bring about that change. You have to say, ‘Here’s the proof that what I’m doing matters.’”

Journalism vs. Advocacy

It can be a challenge for reporters to talk about the impact of his or her story because they do not want to be seen as advocates, Green-Barber said.

Advocacy begins with answers and journalism begins with questions, according to Tofel. If there is a societal consensus on a problem, it is no longer advocacy.

He gives an example: “It’s literally like if the traffic signal at the corner broke and elderly people were being run over every day and you said you wanted change. Is that advocacy? No, not really. What’s the counter position.”

Investigative journalism seeks to reveal something, and therefore always involves change, Tofel said.

Journalists should feel comfortable presenting a problem and a solution available to the public.

“We’re really good at telling other people’s stories,” said Lauren Fuhrmann, Associate Director of the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Reporting. “We need to be better about showing how important the work that we do is. A lot of time, I hear complaints from the public. They hear about this horrible story in the paper but never know what happened. So, being able to show that is really important.”

Two: Track your story

Start tracking before the reporting begins by outlining a plan of execution and identifying possible outcomes you hope to achieve. Using your organization’s mission, focus on outcomes that matter most to all parties, and specify what methodologies you will use.

“Don’t be afraid to collaborate,” Green-Barber said.

There may be other organizations or newsrooms working on similar projects with more resources.

Green-Barber came up with an [impact tracker through the Center for Investigative Reporting \(CIR\)](#) that holds all offline qualitative impact for CIR. Rather than staying accountable for keeping tabs of a story in a Google Doc or an Excel spreadsheet, reporters fill out a web form using their organizations custom URL. Anyone in the organization can login to access the database to view entries and see what stories are creating the most impact.

The offline impact tracker web form is broken up into three categories of impact. Macro outcomes are changes occurring at an institutional level, resulting in a concrete change like the passing of a law. Meso changes influence the public, which could mean increased coverage of a certain topic from other news organizations. Micro changes occur at the level of an individual, such as someone writing a letter to a congressman.

“If someone asks me, ‘what has our impact been on our criminal justice beat,’ I can go in and filter just by ‘criminal justice,’” Green-Barber said.

The web form is filled out when something happens in regard to a reporter’s story. Green-Barber will have the impact tracker available for other organizations to use this year.

Another way to track your story, literally, is through geo-coding.

When Fuhrman started at the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Reporting, one of her first tasks was to figure out where its stories were being

published. The center releases investigative reports around the state and country.

She uses GIS mapping to showcase where the center's work is shared. "It's so easy," Fuhrmann said. "I just copied and pasted everything into [BatchGeo](#) and within a few minutes, the map is done."

BatchGeo is a free service that turns Excel spreadsheets into maps. The site geocodes the addresses and it only takes several minutes at most.

Gathering the data is fairly simple because the center uses a paid service. The center uses [Meltwater](#) – a clipping service. It pulls metrics to show where the center's work is shown, including mentions of the work using key terms.

"We're able to export a spreadsheet that has all the mentions of our work and that includes the URL, the headline and the news organization," she said.

Aside from pickups, Meltwater creates two other spreadsheets. The second one gives information about the news outlet that shared the story – circulation size and how many visitors they have on a monthly basis. The third is the story sheet that includes information about how the story ran, when it was published, the headline and URL.

By tracking where your story is shared, you will better understand your audience.

Three: Use necessary data, no more and no less

Metrics should never be the starting point for impact tracking.

Create a measurement model that corresponds with your mission. Figure out your objectives and how you can measure them in a meaningful way, rather than blindly gathering metrics.

“Don’t count things just because you can,” Dana Chinn said. “I do not measure traffic. Why? Because it’s not going to affect any decisions I make about what goes on my site.”

Chinn is the director of the Norman Lear Center Media Impact Project at the University of Southern California.

Impact is hard to quantify, as it is subjective in nature. “Everyone wants to come up with the impact number where you take all of this in to account and here is the impact score for the story and that’s just never going to happen,” Green-Barber said.

Standard metrics only tell part of the story. These metrics include page views, unique visitors and time on site, to name a few. While it is important to know how many people click on a story or like a post on Facebook, the numbers tell you little to nothing about the engagement or impact. Are people actually reading what they clicked on? Are they sharing or commenting? Was it an accident?

Many news outlets rely heavily on these standard metrics, because they are tangible. Flawed, but tangible. However, that does not mean they are not usable. Chinn said anything involving standard metrics could be summed up in two phrases: “so what” and “it depends.”

“If you don’t know what to do with the numbers, they’re useless,” she said. “That’s the issue that the news industry has had using these metrics. They are just so desperate to count something because they feel they should because all of the sexiness around big data and metrics.”

The phrase “it depends” stems from a lack of standards. For example, in television news, a Nielsen rating is a standard metric. It is a relative value, with that value being set by people using those metrics, she said.

“A Nielsen rating is simply a methodology that advertisers decided is correct. It’s a currency,” Chinn said.

Glass said Nielsen ratings are incredibly flawed. In Dallas, there are 800 Nielsen homes, which represent the demographics of the 6.3 million people in the market.

When the system gets installed into a home, there are a series of buttons on your remote assigned to various members of the household.

“Every fifteen minutes, I’m required to press who’s in the room watching television,” Glass said. “If you walk out of the room, I have to punch you out. After 45 minutes of non-reporting, you’re supposed to be tossed out of the sample. It is so labor intensive.”

For a Nielsen family to get tossed out of the sample, it can take months or even years. By that time, the previous ratings already came out with the faulty metrics.

Another unreliable metric is time spent on page.

“The total is counted based on the pages that are sent from the server, so it doesn’t count the time if someone only [visits] one page, and it doesn’t count the time spent on the last page,” Chinn said. “You have to customize your tracking code.”

Chinn customized a tracking code to look at scroll rate. Time spent on a page is based on user behavior, rather than the server.

“We can tell if they’re reading something about the principal of the story at the top, or if they’re actually scrolling all the way to the bottom. That is useful and more accurate,” she said.

No longer can journalists rely on third-party vendors for data collecting, making it imperative to create and own their own analytics service.

In the end, consistency is what matters most.

“If you’re using the same platform all of the time, you’re probably roughly over or under counting by the same proportion every time, so you still understand magnitude,” Green-Barber said.

Aside from web metrics, media organizations are eager to correlate social media metrics with viewership and readership.

Chinn said there is no such thing as social media analytics because frankly, all media is social.

“The overemphasis of social media over audience pisses me off,” she said. “There is no such audience called ‘millennials.’ There is no such audience called ‘baby boomers.’ Demographics are dead. It’s all based on behavior and attitude.”

Despite the faulty metrics and an overwhelming amount of them, Chinn proposes three numbers to keep in mind when tracking impact: 1, 2 and 15. No. 1 represents the power of the individual. Find the person behind each click. Think about the key people your story may have affected. It doesn't matter how many page views you get, it matters who the person is, she said. No. 2 is the second response after seeing a story. It is the measure of "bounce rate," meaning the second or third click after the initial.

"Don't focus on the first click-type metric. Focus on the second," Chinn said. "Did your content actually lead to a second click or a third click? It's that action that indicates engagement."

Lastly, Chinn recommends spending fifteen minutes per day learning about metrics. Using these three numbers as a guideline for tracking impact can help refine the metrics that are important to your organization.

Four: Expect to spend a little extra time (and money)

While the numbers are important, audience engagement is oftentimes more telling.

Fuhrmann manually keeps track of web comments and Facebook comments in an Excel spreadsheet that takes roughly two or three hours per story.

"Truthfully, I think some of the anecdotal stuff is much more important than just looking at the number of Facebook shares," she said. "I think what's even more important is who are the people that are sharing it. Who are the people who are Tweeting about it? Who are the people that are sharing it?"

She pulls out exceptional cases and that is all information that goes into putting together a grant report.

Aside from time, tracking can cost a pretty penny, depending on how extensively you are tracking.

“It’s very time consuming. We are paying for Melt Water, but there are a lot of smaller non-profits that can’t,” Fuhrmann said. “When I was manually compiling, it took me a couple of days a months to manually type in the information in how the stories were being used. By the time I had compiled all the information, there was no time to analyze it.”

The time and resources gets even more extensive depending on publishing frequency. Fuhrmann suggests paying for a clipping service if your organization puts out frequent content, which is especially true for commercial news organizations.

Either way, there will be a cost.

“You’re either going to pay for someone to do it automated, or you’re going to pay with the amount of time it takes to pull it all together,” she said.

Five: One size does not fit all

There is no single way to measure impact. There is no master metric or algorithm for measuring impact. Using a mix of both qualitative and quantitative measures are necessary.

“Straightforwardness and simplicity are good qualities when looking at impact,” said Charles Lewis, founding and executive editor of the Investigative Reporting Workshop at the American University School of Communications.

There must be some sort of logic and purity to whatever metric and formula an organization uses, otherwise, questions may arise surrounding the complexity.

“If it’s too convoluted, people become suspicious of why it’s so convoluted. For an investigative reporter, if it’s too convoluted, someone tried to do it a certain way that would fit their own situation and agenda,” Lewis said.

As individuals from non-profits and commercial newsrooms have stated, impact tracking – regardless of the mission and method – is imperative in fostering growth and preserving the mission of journalism itself. Knowing how an audience reacts and engages with a story helps to better understand how to adequately and effectively serve the community. By tracking impact in a more formal and cohesive method using both qualitative and quantitative methods, it will be much simpler to keep track of proof of performance at a reporter’s level and a newsroom at large.