

COLLABORATING FOR CHANGE

APPROACHES TO MEASURING THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM

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About the Center



The Center for Cooperative Media is a grant-funded program based at the School of Communication and Media at Montclair State University. Its mission is to grow and strengthen local journalism in New Jersey and beyond.

The Center for Cooperative Media's flagship program is the NJ News Commons, which is a network of nearly 300 publishers and dozens of freelancers in the state of New Jersey. The Center's work for the NJ News Commons focuses on regular communication and networking, training, coaching and support, grant opportunities, ecosystem research, coordinating collaborative projects and more.

Nationally, the Center studies, researches and advocates for the practice of collaborative journalism, which includes maintenance of collaborativejournalism.org, an international database of collaborative reporting projects, a monthly newsletter, the publication of research studies and whitepapers and the annual Collaborative Journalism Summit.

The Center's work is supported by operational funding from Montclair State University, Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, the New Jersey Local News Lab Fund (a partnership of the Geraldine R. Dodge Foundation, Democracy Fund, and Community Foundation of New Jersey) and the Abrams Foundation.

To learn more about the Center and its work, visit centerforcooperativemedia.org and collaborativejournalism.org.

About the authors



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Sarah's professional experience with New America Foundation, American Press Institute, and others has focused on the digital transformation of journalism and on helping journalism live up to its democratic ideals.

About the report

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The Rita Allen Foundation invests in transformative ideas in their earliest stages to leverage their growth and promote breakthrough solutions to significant problems.

Introduction

Collaboration, once considered radical in journalism, an industry characterized by stiff competition, has become a commonly accepted practice with many examples in the nonprofit, commercial, and public media sectors across the globe. Moreover, collaborative journalism is increasingly seen as critical for the sustainability of journalism in the digital age. At the same time that the practice of collaborative journalism matures, news organizations have also begun to make more systematic efforts to implement impact measurement processes that go beyond traditional advertising metrics.

These two trends – collaboration and impact – are fast becoming core values in newsrooms, informing how organizations strategize around reporting, content, engagement, and distribution. And while significant research has been conducted on both impact from single-organization projects and on collaborative journalism, little research has brought these two strains together to answer the question: What, if anything, is different about measuring and assessing impact associated with collaborative journalism?

Below we present the findings from a systematic investigation into how collaborative journalism initiatives are measuring and tracking the impact of their work. We begin by defining the relevant terms and reviewing the literature. We then gather original data through review of materials, interviews with experts and practitioners, and the production of four case studies of examples of different types of collaborations, focusing on the methods employed by collaboratives for tracking impact and the challenges they face. We conclude with findings, best practices, and recommendations for tracking impact in future collaborative journalism projects.

Impact and collaboration

Impact: Definition

The idea that journalism does – and should – have impact is not new; in fact, journalistic impact has been a through-line for the field, beginning with party presses at the founding of the United States and continuing to the most sophisticated investigative journalism being practiced today. One need only consider that to win what is arguably the most prestigious award in American journalism, the Pulitzer Prize in Journalism Public Service, an organization must demonstrate not only the highest quality reporting but also the impact resulting from that reporting.

As journalism organizations and journalists confront the radically shifting landscape for news, there is a growing recognition that both understanding impact and communicating it with audiences likely plays a crucial role in future sustainability of the profession. In this research, we focus not on the debate about media impact, but instead on how the increasing impact imperative is being handled within one of the newer journalistic practices: collaboration. Here we ask, how are collaboratives embracing, strategizing for, and measuring the impact of their reporting?

We define media impact broadly as a change in the status quo at the level of an individual, network, or institution, resulting from a direct journalistic intervention that gathers, assesses, creates, and presents news and information (Green-Barber, 2017; American Press Institute). Based on work with journalism organizations across the U.S. and internationally, Impact Architects has developed a media impact framework that includes four types of change associated with journalism: individual, network, institutional, and media amplification.

MEDIA IMPACT	
INDIVIDUAL	Change at the level of the individual, such as increased knowledge or intent to take action.
INSTITUTIONAL	Change in institutions, such as legislative policy change, regulatory change, or corporate or personnel changes.
NETWORK	Change in networks, such as new networks forming around content or established networks making use of content in their own work.
MEDIA AMPLIFICATION	Greater reach of content through mentions and/or republication.

This model assumes that impact stemming from journalism is a complex process and is neither linear nor unidirectional. Instead, long-term change requires interaction among these different types of impact: individuals and networks ensure that there is not backsliding of institutional change, while institutional changes can affect the material reality of individuals.

Common types of individual-level impact include audience members learning new information, having greater awareness about issues covered, and possibly taking action. Reach and engagement metrics, such as circulation, pageviews, time on page, and engagement rates are sometimes used as proxies for measuring individual level impact. However, to truly understand whether people have more knowledge, an increased sense of self-efficacy, or intend to take action, additional research must be conducted using methods such as surveys, content analysis of comments, or focus groups.

Institutional change – legislative, regulatory, or company policy – is often considered to be the gold standard for journalistic impact, in part because it is readily observable and often happens immediately in the wake of reporting to remedy wrongdoing, especially investigative reporting. While institutional impact is undoubtedly important, it alone does not guarantee long-term change. For example, in *Democracy's Detectives* (2016), economist James T. Hamilton shows through the career of a single investigative reporter that investigations that resulted in immediate institutional policy change were sometimes repealed or experienced backsliding.

Network change is perhaps the most difficult impact to measure but has been shown to result in lasting social change. For example, after the Center for Investigative Reporting, Univisión, Frontline, and the Investigative Reporting Program at the UC Berkeley Graduate School of Journalism published *Rape in the Fields*, a multiplatform investigation exposing sexual harassment and rape of women working in the agricultural industry, individuals had new knowledge about the situation.

CIR staff, including reporters and editors, documented in the organization's custom built Impact Tracker database (discussed in detail below) each time they learned of a community screening of the *Rape in the Fields* documentary film, a community conversation, or other type of offline organizing happening around the content.

Ten months post-publication, CIR conducted a case study research project to understand the impact of the work, finding that the community members who came together around the content formed new networks, created shared language and understanding, and, ultimately, started a movement that changed labor contracting laws in the state of California (Green-Barber 2015). While news organizations often recognize when their work has contributed to a new law, CIR's diligent tracking of impact showed the strong networks behind this institutional change.

Finally, journalism organizations often see their role as setting the agenda, creating conversation, or generating buzz, which here is defined as media amplification. Content is republished, cited, and, sometimes, referenced without citation. Reporters also get requests for interviews in the wake of publication, and communications teams work to get reporters "on air" to increase their reach and create a long tail for the story.

For journalism organizations then, impact is the external change that is catalyzed by reporting. However, for collaborations, impact is also internal, meaning journalists and organizations experience a shift in their thinking, perspectives, and processes as a result of the collaborative process. To date, less research has been conducted about the internal impact of collaborative reporting; this project shares examples of approaches collaboratives are taking to measure both the external and internal impact of their work.

Impact: Methods for measuring

Journalism has long relied on advertising metrics – newsstand sales, circulation, cumulative broadcast reach, and, more recently, unique pageviews and time on page – to measure success. However, as suggested above, these largely quantitative and immediate measures of reach do not necessarily tell us whether individuals learned something, think about the issue differently, or intend to take action, nor if there were broader network or institutional changes associated with reporting.

News organizations are increasingly going beyond advertising metrics to understand the impact of their work. While these other methods for measuring impact can be more resource-intensive than digital analytics, newsrooms are recognizing that they can help them to better understand if they are achieving their stated missions and goals and to make strategic decisions based on this information. For example, news organizations from *The Seattle Times* to Gannett to The Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) are surveying audiences to understand the medium- and longer-term impact of reporting (Schiffrin & Zuckerman, 2015).

Within news organizations, reporters and editors who have strived beyond digital analytics still often have individual, ad-hoc systems for documenting examples of impact. In 2013, CIR created a platform called the Impact Tracker to centralize the documentation of individual, network, and institutional impact that is not captured by digital metrics.¹ Reporters, editors, and other staff members began to create records for each impact that occurred, applying standard tags and thus creating a qualitative dataset. Since then, many organizations and initiatives have put in place similar systems to centralize and systematize the documentation of offline impact. In aggregate, these records of impact allow news organizations to build qualitative datasets over weeks, months, and even years, to complement their traditional digital metrics. These databases are created on any number of technology platforms, including Google Sheets, Airtable, Salesforce, Chalkbeat's Measuring Our Reporters' Impact (MORI) CMS plugin, the CIR's Impact Tracker, among other homegrown tools. The work of creating and maintaining these datasets is distributed differently in organizations depending on their business models and editorial structures; in some cases,

¹ The author of this report, Lindsay Green-Barber, created the CIR Impact Tracker.

reporters are responsible for creating records, while in other cases membership managers, development (fundraising) staff, or engagement editors do this work.

Media amplification can be measured with simple content analysis or more complex computational text analysis. Many media companies use marketing and public relations platforms, such as Meltwater, to create automated searches for reporters' names, organizational names, and sometimes, specific words associated with a story or project. This allows news organizations to see the number of re-publications and/or mentions, and the geographic reach of their work, as well as to identify when evergreen content or stories from the past resurface.

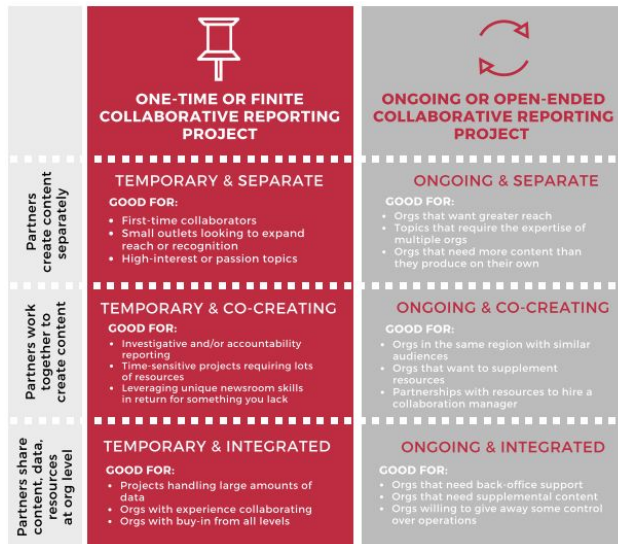
As news organizations employ these impact measurement methods and begin to get a more nuanced understanding of complex social change processes, they often come to see the value of partnering with other trusted sources of news and information to reach target audiences through content sharing and, sometimes, deeper collaborative reporting. For example, Annie Chabel, COO of CIR said, Tracking impact "has been especially useful for [CIR's] engagement and distribution side, because if we want to have an impact, we think from the beginning about who needs to see this, who can make change, what different avenues can we use to get this story in front of them."

Collaborative journalism projects have tended to focus impact measurement on media amplification and the internal impact on journalists who participate in a collaborative. We found that all collaborative projects included in this research (at least attempt to) document which partners publish which stories to understand the amplification of content. And the majority of these projects, as well as others in the field, use surveys, interviews, and informal requests for feedback to understand how participating in the collaborative influenced participants' perception of the value of collaboration, as well as ideas for making future collaborative efforts function more smoothly.

Collaborative journalism: Definition

The Center for Cooperative Media (CCM) defines collaborative journalism as an "arrangement (formal or informal) between two or more news and information organizations, which aims to supplement each organization's

resources and maximize the impact of the content produced” (Stonbely, 2017). Like “impact,” collaborative journalism is a concept that is both old and new.



Perhaps the earliest example of collaboration among newsrooms came in the mid-nineteenth century, with the creation of wire services and, ultimately, The Associated Press.

But throughout most of the twentieth century, the most common form of collaborative journalism took place either informally, through notes and tip sharing, or within organizations.

An example of the latter is Gannett’s USA Today Network, which shares between national and local arms of the company (Stonbely, 2017).

However, CCM posits that “there is a qualitative difference in the consciousness and intentionality with which collaborations are now being undertaken” (Stonbely, 2017). Collaborative journalism has grown into its own genre of practice, and the organizations participating in it are becoming more intentional and explicit in their practices around collaboration. CCM’s typology of collaborative journalism (below) identifies two axes for classifying collaborations: length of time (finite or ongoing) and level of integration among the organizations involved in the collaboration.

No one of these types of collaboration is “better” than any other; instead, it reflects the different types of collaborations currently being practiced in the field. Temporary and separate collaborations require the lowest level of commitment and coordination, while ongoing and integrated collaborations require the most.

Defining a framework for the impact of collaborative journalism

In our research, we find that the types of impact stemming from collaborative journalism projects are similar to the impact of individual news organizations discussed above. That is, collaborative projects talk about and can demonstrate the impact of their work on individuals, networks, institutions, and through general media amplification of stories.

However, organizations participate in collaboratives because they assume that, through partnership, the scale of the impact will be greater than it could be if they were to report a story alone.

For example, organizations said they collaborate to reach larger, more diverse audiences than they could alone and to reach those in positions of power, such as public officials. Therefore the measurement of impact from collaborations is inherently different, and usually more complicated, than measuring impact from content produced by a single organization.

In addition to the four types of impact listed above, organizations that participate in collaborative reporting initiatives say they assume there will be effects within the organization and its staff.

Examples of this internal impact could include learning new skills for individual journalists, an increase of organizational skills-capacity, or an organization experiencing a culture shift – all as a result of participation in a collaboration (Green-Barber, Interview, 2018).

— “ —

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IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM PROJECTS		
INTERNAL IMPACTS	JOURNALISTIC CAPACITY	Journalists learn new skills and expertise.
	HIGHER QUALITY CONTENT	Content has greater diversity of perspectives, data, and auxiliary materials.
	CULTURE SHIFT	Journalists in newsrooms demonstrate increased valuing of collaboration.
EXTERNAL IMPACTS	INDIVIDUAL	Content reported by multiple sources reaches audiences through most trusted outlets.
	NETWORK	Strengthened networks through access to and use of content.
	INSTITUTIONAL	Content appearing in multiple local media results in public attention and institutional response.
	MEDIA AMPLIFICATION	Stories published in multiple media outlets set the public agenda.

In interviews with U.S.-based journalism organizations across the sector about when, why, and how they decide to collaborate, we surfaced common observations about the different types of impact that collaboratives have. In general, temporary and separate collaborations, which often involve cross-publication and coordinated publications on one topic, are seen as best for increasing media-amplification impact; i.e. guaranteeing reach to a larger and more diverse audience. In addition to increasing media amplification, temporary/co-creating and temporary/integrated collaborations are more likely to result also in greater internal impact, because journalists work more closely with their colleagues at different organizations thereby increasing the opportunities for cross-organizational learning.

Accordingly, ongoing collaborations have greater internal impact than temporary collaborations, and they tend to result in greater external impact as well. Ongoing and separate collaborations, while not necessarily building journalistic capacity, are assumed to shift culture internally to be less

competitive. Ongoing co-creating collaborations are assumed to increase journalistic capacity, result in better content, and shifting organizational culture, while also creating media amplification, reaching large audiences, and holding institutions to account through sustained reporting. Organizations such as the Solutions Journalism Network, profiled in a case study in this report, have found evidence (through surveys and interviews) that SJN-led collaborations do, in fact, increase journalistic capacity. Finally, ongoing integrated collaborations are thought to have the greatest potential for all types of internal and external impact.

ASSUMED IMPACT OF VARIOUS TYPES OF COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM							
	INTERNAL			EXTERNAL			
	JOURNALISTIC CAPACITY	BETTER CONTENT	CULTURE SHIFT	INDIVIDUAL	NETWORK	INSTITUTIONAL	MEDIA AMPLIFICATION
TEMPORARY + SEPARATE		✓					✓
TEMPORARY + CO-CREATING	✓	✓					✓
TEMPORARY + INTEGRATED	✓	✓					✓
ONGOING + SEPARATE			✓				✓
ONGOING + CO-CREATING	✓	✓	✓			✓	✓
ONGOING + INTEGRATED	✓	✓	✓		✓	✓	✓

It is worth noting that collaboratives of all types often assume that the work will have a greater impact on individuals than reporting done by a single organization. The logic goes that collaborative reporting will inherently result in greater trust among audience members, and thus contribute to great individual level impact. However, there is little evidence that this is, in fact, true and would require additional research to better understand these dynamics.

Challenges in measuring the impact of collaborative journalism

As discussed, while collaborative journalism has become common to the point of a “revolution” in the industry, it has not developed standard impact measurement practices for at least four reasons.

First, impact measurement is still in early days in organizations, generally speaking. While nonprofits and for-profits are slowly developing and adopting impact frameworks and measurement practices beyond advertising metrics, for the most part, X impact measurement is still not systematic to the point of being routine. These frameworks are often not made public and have not been stress-tested sufficiently that organizations feel comfortable sharing with the field and/or their audiences. As a result, there is no standard set of agreed-upon X impact metrics across the industry.

Second, and related to the first obstacle, collaborations often include organizations distributing content on different platforms, meaning they have disparate indicators of success. For example, broadcast television has one standard set of ratings metrics (e.g. Nielsen), while print newspapers rely on circulation and newsstand sales, digital platforms employ a wide range of analytics, and community-focused media may rely exclusively on qualitative data.

Third, while the industry is shifting, journalism still has competition at its core. Most organizations are reticent, at best, and loathe, at worst, to share actual numbers with anyone, especially those that might be considered competition - even if they are involved in a collaborative project.

Finally, collaboration is challenging, and when prioritizing everything from issues to be reported on, communities to be included, geographies covered, timeframe for reporting, publication dates, embargos, legal review, and more, agreeing upon areas of potential impact, metrics, and methods for understanding success often fall to the bottom of the list. And, especially if the collaboration is temporary and/or finite, there is little motivation to see what might be done better next time. If impact is considered at all, it is often assumed in the form of reaching the “distinct” audiences of each publication and a “media blitz” through concentrated attention on an issue. When it

comes to actual measurement, it is often an afterthought and difficult to recreate baseline data or to gather information to parse the impact process.

CHALLENGES OF MEASURING IMPACT IN COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM PROJECTS	
CHALLENGE	DEFINITION
IMPACT STANDARDS	There is a lack of standard impact measurement metrics and methods across the sector.
DIVERSE PLATFORMS	Organizations publish across a multitude of platforms, each of which has unique success indicators.
NETWORK	Journalism is a competitive industry and organizations do not want to share their “numbers.”
MEDIA AMPLIFICATION	Impact measurement is often not a priority for collaborations.

Measuring the impact of collaborative journalism

To better understand organizations’ and collaboratives’ approach to impact measurement, as well as what they’re learning, we conducted 16 hour-long interviews with people working in a variety of different types of journalism organizations, including commercial media, nonprofit, digital only, print newspaper, broadcast television, and journalism support organizations (e.g., Institute for Nonprofit News).² We transcribed the interviews as we conducted them over the course of two years.

Given our goal to learn trends and best practices in measuring impact from collaborations across the diverse media ecosystem, we chose four different collaborative efforts to focus on as case studies. We selected the collaborations based on their variation across different characteristics: business model (commercial or nonprofit); duration (temporary or ongoing); collaborative approach (republishing, resource exchange, collaborative reporting); and type of journalism (project-based, solutions-oriented, daily news).

² Sarah Stonbely, PhD of the Center for Collaborative Media conducted six interviews in 2018; Lindsay Green-Barber, PhD of Impact Architects conducted 10 interviews in 2020.

While we did not find one agreed-upon set of indicators or methods for measuring the impact of collaborative journalism projects through our research, we did find there to be trends emerging from the field. In particular, we found that collaboratives are using common language to talk about the external impact of their work, and that they are employing common methods to measure the internal impacts of collaborative journalism initiatives, most often through surveys with participating journalists and organizations.

Three of the four collaboratives said they measure their internal impact through surveys. Central organizations, serving as project managers, design and administer post-project surveys with participating journalists, and in the case of the Solutions Journalism Network, also pre-project surveys.

The survey questions aim to understand how journalists' perceptions about collaboration shifted as a result of their participation, as well as to get logistical feedback on the collaborative process to inform future collaborations. We found that surveys with participating journalists to measure the impact of collaborations is common for at least two reasons.

First, collaborative reporting efforts are often supported by philanthropy, meaning that the grantee(s) is required to submit reports about the projects, including information about the impact. One funder, Kathy Merritt, Senior Vice President of Journalism and Radio at the Corporation for Public Broadcasting said in an interview, "Collaboration itself is an activity, so when you're involved in a collaboration, you have to have a sense of whether it's working. ... With collaboration we really want to know: how are you working with your partners? Is the editor serving the needs of all the stations in the collaboration? Do all the stations have shared goals around the work you're doing? So, there's an element of measuring the success of the collaboration itself that we consider to be impact" (Interview, 2018).

Second, surveying journalists who participated in a collaboration is relatively easy. It can be done post-project and in a short timeframe, requires relatively few resources, and these individuals are generally known and accessible.

Collaboratives, like single news organizations, talked about the external impact of their work in terms of individual reach and impact, and effect on networks and institutions. Of the four collaborative efforts included in this report, three employ external impact measurement, although the methods

vary. Collaboratives often attempt to measure media amplification by documenting cross-publication of stories by partners and republication or mentions of stories by other media. However, methods for generating this information looked different among different collaborations; some rely on newsrooms to report the stories they have published, some using PR platforms like Meltwater, and some not documenting media amplification at all.

Three of the collaboratives also said they document institutional and network impact that happens in the wake of reporting. And two of the initiatives have developed sophisticated, custom methods for measuring the impact of specific reporting projects, discussed in greater detail in the case studies below.

COMMON MEASURES OF THE IMPACT OF COLLABORATIVE JOURNALISM PROJECTS			
	IMPACT TYPE	POTENTIAL MEASURES/METHODS	COMMONLY DONE?
INTERNAL	JOURNALISTIC CAPACITY	Surveys	✓
		Anecdotal observation	✓
		Interviews	✓
		HR assessments	✗
	CULTURE SHIFT	Surveys	✓
		Anecdotal observation	✓
		Interviews	✓
		Ethnography	✗
EXTERNAL	INDIVIDUAL	Digital analytics	✓
		Surveys	✗
		Anecdotal observation	✗
	NETWORK	Network analysis	✗
		Anecdotal observation	✗
		Anecdotal observation	✓
	INSTITUTIONAL	Case study	✗
	MEDIA AMPLIFICATION	Documenting cross-publication	✓
		Media mentions	✓
		Content analysis (in non-partner media)	✗

Examples from the field

1. North Carolina News Collaborative: Collaboration over Competition

Commercial newspapers across the state of North Carolina share content through this ongoing/separate collaborative to reach more North Carolinians with valuable stories.

2. Institute for Nonprofit News Amplify News Project, Seeking a Cure: Media amplification to reach broad audiences

INN's first Amplify News, Seeking a Cure was a temporary and separate collaboration among publications in the Midwest to share content and raise awareness about the lack of healthcare and hospitals in rural America through media amplification.

3. Solutions Journalism Network: Building systems to foster collaboration and measure impact

Since 2015, SJN has developed a model for leading ongoing, separate, co-creating, and integrated solutions-oriented journalism collaboratives in regions across the US, refining this model continually through ongoing internal and external impact measurement.

4. International Consortium of Investigative Journalists: Global collaborations for global impact

ICIJ is a global networked organization that conducts high-impact international investigations, rigorously measures their external impact, and clearly communicates impact with audiences to demonstrate the value of ICIJ and the power of investigative reporting.

North Carolina News Collaborative: Collaboration over competition

Overview

NCNC's "goals are to increase our capacity through sharing content, lock arms together to do ambitious projects that have a statewide impact, getting these stories to as many people as possible, and trying to find ways to work together to draw in resources that will help us fill the gaps in coverage."

— Robyn Tomlin, president and editor, News & Observer

In mid-2019 in Raleigh, N.C., 10 editors from Gannett, Gatehouse, McClatchy, and BH Media Group newspapers convened for a brainstorming session. Out of this meeting was born the North Carolina News Collaborative (NCNC) (Hare, 2020). With the changing media landscape, perhaps affecting print media most of all, this group of editors decided collaborating instead of competing to create stories could create possibility for them to be more efficient internally and lead to wider reach and impact for stories, informing more North Carolinians about critical information in the state. Now, 22 newspapers are part of the NCNC ongoing, mostly separate collaborative, which has three objectives:

1. Share content and reduce duplicating stories.
2. Report collaboratively, with the potential to take on ambitious projects with statewide impact.
3. Identify ways to bring in and/or pool resources to fill coverage gaps.

NCNC may be the only project in the U.S. where well-known newspapers collaborate on an ongoing basis that is not topic specific. Of critical importance to NCNC collaborators is mutual respect for the boundaries of subscriber-only content, requiring that partners share a story only after the original source has published it online. And, while this collaborative is quite new, it has hopes of identifying resources to support more longer-term collaborative reporting to cover important issues across the state.

The main challenge for NCNC has been technical, rather than substantive, and is a result of the business model of commercial news whereby publications' revenue is derived from audience reach through advertising. Because audience sizes are quite different from paper to paper, there were concerns that larger sites would end up rising to the top of search engine recommendations due to algorithms preferencing sites with greater traffic, reducing traffic (and thus revenue) to smaller publications. The collaborative solved this problem by using canonical URLs when publishing partner stories on the website. This link signals to Google that another source is the original publisher of the content.

For NCNC, collaboration is often as simple as one paper asking another member of the collaborative for permission to republish its content. NCNC has also implemented long-term collaborative reporting projects, whereby newsrooms around the state report on the same issue in a coordinated manner. In December 2019, NCNC published a seven-part series about the growing rural/urban divide in the state (Henderson, 2019). And, in 2020, it plans to conduct a collaborative series about broadband access in the state.

Measuring Impact

Impact measurement “was not part of the conversation in founding NCNC. We all have unique ways of understanding impact in our own organizations. We have a desire to have an impact but no shared measurement. We tried to make this as frictionless as possible, so we’re currently not sharing metrics.”

— Robyn Tomlin, president and editor, News & Observer

The NCNC collaborative is built upon a shared goal – and assumption – that cross-publishing content by newspaper publishers across the state means the content will reach larger audiences, resulting in a better-informed public. The papers interviewed for this research, the *Asheville Citizen Times* and the *News & Observer*, said that in general, they measure success within their organizations based upon reach (print circulation and digital). However, for NCNC there has been no formal impact measurement.

Katie Wadington, former news director for the *Asheville Citizen Times*, said that they’ve seen impact at the level of individual audience members:

“Anecdotally, we talk about a story doing really well, but we haven't talked about the actual readership. And, again, anecdotally, we've seen emails from readers, and more engaged readers.”

While NCNC has not yet attempted to measure the impact of its work, according to Robyn Tomlin, president and editor of the News & Observer, NCNC “has a shared desire to have an impact, but no shared measurement.” Similarly, Wadington said, “We would love to know if this makes more of a difference than us working individually. We think it does, but we haven't done something yet to be able to measure.”

Nor has NCNC attempted to measure the internal impact of the collaborative on the participating institutions and reporters. Tomlin and Wadington both said they use conversations with reporters and anecdotes to generally understand how the collaborative is working. In particular, both said that reporters are not concerned about competition, and instead are excited about their stories potentially reaching additional audiences and the possibility of additional resources for deep, enterprise reporting.

In the future, NCNC hopes that there will be resources, interest among partners, and valid methods to measure the impact of the collaborative's work, especially to understand if collaborative reporting has greater impact on individuals across the state. Tomlin said, “I hope we'll make that investment in impact measurement so we can see how these [collaborative] projects are more valuable. So we can know if more readers can see this story and if more people will be talking about it. If we could measure that more, hopefully that means we could be more thoughtful and spend our resources to do that work better.”

Lessons Learned

Historically, Tomlin says, “egos have gotten in the way” of news organizations openly collaborating and sharing content, and it can be difficult to move past that old mindset. NCNC is testing the approach as a new initiative and aiming to avoid any friction in its beginning phases. Impact measurement and analytics was seen as a potential area of friction, and thus was not included in the work of the collaborative, at least during this early stage.

NCNC editors said they would like to know more about how the stories perform, in terms of reach and engagement analytics, on partner sites. However, many newsrooms in the collaborative consider their numbers to be internal and proprietary. Tomlin and Wadington both expressed optimism that greater data sharing will be possible in the future, but that the collaborative needs to discuss the benefits of sharing numbers and figures among partners. Tomlin suggested that having better access to individual-level impact data about reach and engagement would allow the *News & Observer* to more efficiently allocate reporting resources.

Institute for Nonprofit News, Amplify News Project, Seeking a Cure: Media amplification to reach broad audiences

Overview

“In journalism, you're never sure what an outcome is going to be or what your role is in planning an outcome. But getting the stories in front of people who can help create action is part of” our job.

— Sarah Vassello, audience development specialist, INN’s Amplify News Project

INN’s Amplify News Project is a new INN initiative designed to expand distribution and collaboration among nonprofit news organizations (Vassello, 2020; INN). As part of the Amplify initiative, INN also manages editorial collaborations, including members and non-members. As the name implies, the main impact goal here is media amplification; through Amplify’s collaborative projects, INN hopes that its 240 nonprofit members’ stories can achieve greater reach, including with project partners and outside organizations.

Seeking a Cure, INN’s first Amplify project, was a collaborative reporting project that looked at the issues and needs associated with delivering health care in rural Midwestern communities (IowaWatch.org, 2019). The collaboration began after six members of the Institute for Nonprofit News (INN) recognized that health care access was a shared priority reporting area; Iowa Watch subsequently pitched a health care story to be supported through Amplify and served as homepage for all Seeking a Cure content.

In addition to IowaWatch, the Seeking a Cure temporary/separate collaboration included INN members KCUR, *Bridge Magazine*, Wisconsin Watch, Side Effects Public Media, and The Conversation; as well as non-INN members Iowa Public Radio, Minnesota Public Radio, Wisconsin Public Radio, *The Gazette* (Cedar Rapids, IA), Iowa Falls *Times Citizen*, and N’west Iowa REVIEW. In addition to INN support, Seeking a Cure received grant support from the Solutions Journalism Network. While INN organized the collaboration and helped raise money, partner newsrooms were responsible for all editorial decisions, from project ideas to published stories. In contrast to

NCNC, MOUs (memorandums of understanding) between INN and partners included an agreement to share data and analytics associated with the project.

Seeking a Cure partners reported and published 11 stories. Ten of the stories were simultaneously published on September 30, 2019, and the remaining story was published in January 2020 (INN, 2020). Partners were encouraged to publish not only their own story, but also those of other partners. INN tracked how the content was republished in media across the region and the country; for example, one story was republished through “126 unique outlets across 32 states and in 18 national/niche outlets.”³

Measuring impact

“You need an MOU for each project. People should be expected to provide any reach/social data they have, and for outside grants, agree to provide data needed for grant reports.”

— Jonathan Kealing, chief network officer, INN

INN was motivated to measure the impact of the Seeking a Cure collaboration for two main reasons. First, Amplify is a new initiative and Seeking a Cure was the first editorial collaboration managed by INN. The organization hoped to learn what did and did not work to inform ongoing program development. Second, INN wanted rigorous impact information that would clearly demonstrate the value of collaboration to share with various stakeholders, including the news organizations participating in the collaboration, newsrooms that might consider participating in future collaborations, and current and potential philanthropic supporters of collaborative projects.

INN developed an impact measurement strategy for the Amplify Seeking a Cure collaboration prior to the launch of any content. The two-pronged approach included measuring the external impact of the work, as well as the internal impact on reporters and newsrooms. INN’s audience development specialist, Sarah Vassello, used a variety of platforms (discussed below) to measure the external impact of the work, in addition to sending weekly emails to partners with a Google form asking them to share anecdotal impact

³ <https://inn.org/2020/01/seeking-a-cure-collaboration-reaches-more-than-120-outlets/>

and evidence of the reach of their stories. INN also sent a one-month post-project Google form survey to partners to assess the internal impact of the project.

The shared goal for Seeking a Cure was to elevate the issue of lack of access to health care in general, and hospitals in particular, in rural areas of the US. To measure the media amplification of the content, INN used a series of tools to track the stories' reach across websites and social media.

- Media monitoring: INN created custom searches using the Meltwater media monitoring service to see when “INN,” “rural hospitals,” and “seeking a cure” came up in searches.
- Manual searching: INN searched each media partners' site for all stories shared through the hospitals.iowawatch.org landing page.

Seeking a Cure also aimed to reach larger audiences to increase awareness about not only the problems associated with lack of access to healthcare in rural communities, but also solutions to these challenges. INN measured individual impact through the following methods:

- Social media shares: INN used the CrowdTangle browser extension to track when stories were shared on social media (INN, 2020).
- Digital reach analytics: INN asked partners to share (through a Google form) any metrics partners had for reach, social media shares, and recirculation one month after the project ended.

In January 2020, INN published a report documenting the impact of Seeking a Cure (INN, 2020). INN foregrounded the media amplification, individual, network, and institutional impacts that resulted from this initiative:

“Stories from Seeking a Cure, which launched on Sept. 30, were published by 126 unique outlets across 32 states and in 18 national/niche outlets. In addition, three presidential candidates and several online communities, such as r/news on Reddit with over 19,000,000 members, also amplified the story.”

In addition to successful media amplification, INN considered the large reach of content to indicate individual level impact, as audiences learned about rural health care and the lack of resources through exposure to the content.

Through INN's direct distribution efforts, three presidential candidates directly referred to the content in speeches and shared through their social media networks, an impact that INN considers to be institutional change. In its impact report, INN also highlighted network impact as illustrated by health advocacy organizations using content in newsletters and in social networks. In one concrete example of network impact, INN did direct outreach to Planned Parenthood to share a story about OBGYN care declining in rural communities. Planned Parenthood shared this story and said they subsequently heard from public officials interested in working together to address the issue. In an interview, Vassello said that INN knew about this impact through the weekly reporter feedback forms.

To assess the internal impact of the collaboration on participating newsrooms and reporters, INN administered a survey (Google form) one month after the project ended. Questions focused on overall satisfaction with the collaboration, the quality of the journalism overall and at reporters' home institutions, project management, communication, and editorial processes. Overall, participating reporters indicated that they were very satisfied with the collaboration and that they would be likely to participate in a future collaboration.

Lessons learned

"When news organizations get together to report on a topic and are overt about this, there are all sorts of downstream impacts that you don't anticipate."

— Jonathan Kealing, chief network officer at INN

One of the greatest hurdles in impact measurement of collaboratives is the news industry's historic aversion to sharing data and analytics. Audience reach and engagement numbers are considered proprietary, and, as illustrated by the NCNC collaborative, are not shared with other newsrooms unless there is a clear incentive to do so. In the case of Seeking a Cure, there are at least three elements that removed this hurdle and cleared the path for sharing analytics.

First, INN as the project manager was not a competitor in the space, but rather a trusted member-based organization with a mission to support the work of all journalism, and particularly of those INN members in the

collaborative. Second, INN included in the collaboration MOU an expectation that data and analytics would be shared. Third, INN committed to doing independent research about the impact of the collaboration, including tracking media amplification, something that is valued by partners but often something newsrooms do not have the capacity to do in-house.

Even though newsrooms shared data, the Amplify team found it was difficult to get consistent metrics from the nonprofit newsroom partners. For example, Vassello said that she did not ask for pageviews from partners because INN was more interested in learning about audience feedback and other offline impact stemming from the project. “But that’s a challenge to tell that to partners,” as that was the metric they said was most readily available to share.

When reflecting on the institutional impact spurred by Seeking a Cure, mainly responses by presidential candidates, audience development specialist Vassello said that, going forward, she will continue to develop strategies for reaching out directly to public officials and lawmakers to spur even more impact. While she said that direct outreach to public officials might seem “taboo to traditional media,” the strategy proved effective for generating a public debate about access to health care in rural communities. And in INN’s impact report for the project (2020), one “observation for the future” states, “In order to increase the likelihood that these collaborations will have impact, creating a distribution list of elected officials and candidates is going to be helpful moving forward.”

Given INN’s main goal of media amplification, INN views Seeking a Cure as a success. The stories were picked up in media across the country and in the most affected regions. However, Vassello said that going forward, INN would do more to ensure that other INN members see content coming from collaborations and understand that they can republish stories for their audiences. “What matters [to INN] is building a network of orgs that will republish content.”

Solutions Journalism Network: Building systems to foster collaboration and measure impact

Overview

“I became a convert and started thinking collaboratives, collaboratives, collaboratives, 24/7.”

— Liza Gross, vice president of newsroom practice change at SJN

The Solutions Journalism Network (SJN) is a nonprofit organization with a mission to “train and connect journalists” to “bring solutions journalism to every newsroom worldwide” (Solutions Journalism Network). Solutions journalism, as a practice, is rigorous reporting that covers the whole story, investigating not only problems, but also “by reporting on where and how people are doing better against a problem,” catalyzing change.

Since its founding in 2013, SJN has focused on training individual newsrooms and reporters in the solutions approach to reporting. However, SJN realized there was a unique opportunity to use solutions oriented reporting to foster collaboration when, out of a 2015 training in El Paso, Texas, the *El Paso Times* wanted to collaborate with a local *Univisión* affiliate to translate a solutions-oriented series about hepatitis in Latino populations to extend the stories’ reach among the most affected members of the community. According to Liza Gross, vice president of newsroom practice change at SJN, “I realized that more orgs doing solutions journalism together is better: it reaches more audiences, has a broader dissemination of information, and is also a way to improve reporting.”

Following this organic collaboration, Gross says SJN made the strategic decision to advocate and support collaborative solutions-oriented journalism initiatives to reach larger audiences, disseminate content more widely, and improve the reporting through the sharing of skills and resources. SJN collaborative projects have included:

- The Re-entry Project: In Philadelphia, PA from 2016 to 2017, 12 competing newsrooms collaborated to report on prisoner re-entry. This

initiative spun off to become Resolve Philadelphia, a solutions-oriented engaged journalism hub in 2018.

- In 2016, 7 newsrooms in New Mexico came together to form Small Towns, Big Change, a collaboration that includes daily papers — The Pueblo Chieftain and the Santa Fe New Mexican; weeklies — the Rio Grande Sun and The Taos News; Santa Fe's KSFR public radio; KNME public television in Albuquerque; and High Country News, a regional publication focused on environmental concerns. In 2017, this grew to 11 newsrooms.
- In 2018, 13 newsrooms in Montana, Idaho, and Wyoming came together to participate in the collaborative Montana Gap initiative (The Montana Gap, 2018), growing to 17 newsrooms in 2020 (Montana Fourth Estate 2020; Hutchins, 2019). This collaborative network continues today.
- Media outlets across the state of New Hampshire came together in 2018 to report about potential solutions to the state's mental health crisis (Biello, 2018; Carroll, 2018).

In these collaborative reporting projects, many of which began as temporary and separate and grew into ongoing/co-creative, SJN serves as project coordinator, connecting print newspapers, digital media, commercial broadcast TV, public media stations, and other media outlets. Nonprofit organizations, civic institutions, libraries, and other non-media partners have also been involved in SJN collaborative initiatives. Leah Todd, the New England manager for SJN (and formerly the Mountain West manager), emphasized that while SJN plays the role of project coordinator, editorial decisions such as what topics need to be covered or what partners should be involved are made by the members of the collaborative.

Building on the success of SJN's early collaborative journalism initiatives, Gross is now leading a team that is implementing the Local Media Project, a five-year initiative with the goal of creating financially viable, solutions-oriented collaboratives (Gross, 2014). To date, SJN has formally launched three of these collaboratives in Charlotte, New Hampshire, and Philadelphia. SJN plans to have established 15 collaboratives by 2025.

Measuring impact

“Collaboration can improve the journalism itself. It can increase the reach. It can increase the impact of the work.”

— Leah Todd, SJN New England regional manager

While each SJN collaborative is unique, over time, SJN has developed a standard suite of impact measurement tools that are used across all collaboratives to understand both the external and internal impact of the initiatives. And while SJN has its own standard approach to impact measurement, funder requirements can also drive what impact measures and evaluations are used. For example, some funders may be invested in and focused on solutions-oriented content, while other funders may see solutions-oriented journalism as a means to an end goal that helps build public trust in journalism. Regardless, at the outset of collaborative efforts, SJN sets expectations about the types of impact metrics and reporting it anticipates partners will share, then works directly with collaborative partners to tailor the indicators to specific project goals and types of media (e.g., print, broadcast, digital).


SJN uses multiple measurement tools and approaches to understand the external impact of reporting on individuals, networks, and institutions. SJN asks partners to share specific quantitative data to track and measure how stories perform and to measure individual impact – such analytics as time spent on a page, pageviews, story shares, and retweets.

SJN also has an impact tracker⁴ whereby it gathers qualitative information about the individual, network, and institutional impact of collaboratives. To make its impact tracker simple to use for its diverse media partners, SJN does not ask the person creating a record of impact to identify what type of impact it is. The SJN impact tracker prompts reporters by saying, “Tell us, what has happened since you or your news organizations started doing more solutions-oriented coverage? Yes, we want to know if laws and policies have changed and if you won awards. But there’s much more we care to track.” The form then asks for open-ended examples of impact and includes such

⁴ SJN’s Impact Tracker is modeled after CIR’s Impact Tracker and the author of this research, Lindsay Green-Barber, PhD, contributed to its development.

examples as reactions and reflections by audiences, public officials, community groups, and more.

SJN sends “grant reporting forms” to collaborative partners at the midpoint and end of a project. The grant reporting form has an embedded version of the Impact Tracker for them to share their impact in a structured way. Todd says, “we also have many one-on-one conversations with collaborative partners where we learn about impact,” and then manually add impact to the SJN Impact Tracker database.



The image shows a screenshot of the Solutions Journalism Network Impact Tracker form. At the top, the logo for the Solutions Journalism Network is displayed. Below the logo, the title "Solutions Journalism Network: Impact" is centered. The form is titled "Activities and Impact" and contains a section for reporting on the impact of solutions-oriented coverage. It asks users to describe what has happened since they started doing more solutions-oriented coverage, including changes in laws, policies, awards, and more. It then provides a list of examples of impact to track, such as public officials responding, institutions changing staff, groups sharing stories, stories used as educational resources, audience reactions, changes in the newsroom, media coverage, and policy changes.

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM NETWORK

Solutions Journalism Network: Impact

Activities and Impact

Tell us, what has happened since you or your news organization started doing more solutions-oriented coverage? Yes, we want to know if laws and policies have changed, and if you won awards. But there's much more we care to track.

For example, we'd like to know if:

- A public official responded or referred to your coverage.
- An institution changed or added staff, or created a new department in an issue area you covered.
- Groups or organizations working in the issue area shared your stories widely.
- Your stories were used as educational resources in a professional training or classroom.
- You noticed significant audience reaction as a result of your project, in online metrics or other feedback.
- Your stories prompted some noticeable change **inside the newsroom**. Did you create a dedicated solutions journalism landing page online? Is a reporter or editor taking more leadership on this kind of coverage? Did your project generate revenue for your newsroom?
- Your project spurred more media coverage: editorials, interviews with other outlets, invitations for your journalists to speak at public or private gatherings, requests for republication, etc.
- And yes, if policymakers proposed or passed a law because of your reporting.

In some collaboratives, there is a need to have project-specific approaches to impact measurement. For the Mountain West News Partnership, SJN conducted audience surveys through partner newsrooms, as well as focus groups, to understand individual impact in the form of how collaborative reporting had shifted audiences’ understanding of the wealth gap in the region, inequality, and potential solutions to these complicated problems.

SJN uses the following quantitative indicators to measure general success of collaboratives:

Internal practice and culture shift indicators

- Number of stories co-produced between two or more partner newsrooms, either with a shared byline or with some news organization contributing research or some other intelligence to the story
- Percentage of stories republished by at least one member news organization

Internal quality of content indicators

- Awards won by collaborative members, for work associated with the collaborative
- Additional funding catalyzed by collaboratives' work

Solutions-specific success indicators

- Percentage of stories that qualify as solutions journalism (versus those that focus solely on describing the problem itself)

Because SJN's organizational mission is to shift newsroom practice, it focuses significant attention on measuring the internal impact of collaborations in partners' newsrooms and among journalists. Over time, SJN has evolved a practice to conduct standard pre- and post-training surveys with participating journalists for all its projects. The pre-project survey asks questions about the journalists' experiences with and perceptions of collaborative reporting, as well as with solutions-oriented reporting. The post-project survey assesses any changes in journalists' experiences with and opinions about collaborative reporting. SJN staff also have one-on-one conversations with journalists and project managers to help understand progress and shifting perceptions and practices. SJN is considering adding monthly calls for their project managers to exchange ideas about how to track impact.

Lessons learned

"Always ask at the end of a project how many editors would indicate a permanent shift in their thinking about their news operation."

— Leah Todd, SJN New England regional manager

SJN-led collaboratives unfold over time, and, like INN's Amplify News Project, have a project manager to be the point person for external and internal impact data gathering, measurement, and communication. Nonetheless, challenges remain. Tracking the impact of news can be difficult and tracking this across multiple news organizations increases the challenge. Each SJN collaborative makes independent decisions about the editorial projects, engagement activities, and collaboration partners. Different organizations bring diverse business models, platforms, metrics, and goals. To avoid conflict

and unclear objectives, SJN has found that collaborative projects must define goals and shared success metrics at the start.

Additionally, SJN is a geographically sprawling organization that provides significant autonomy and space for creativity to its project managers. While this has resulted in impressive and diverse collaboratives, it also means surveys have been re-created from one project to another. SJN has worked to systematize surveys it conducts with newsrooms, both for trainings and collaboratives, and has now standardized the newsroom collaboration survey and is implementing it for all new projects.⁵ SJN hopes that with standard surveys for newsrooms it will be able to increase learning across its new collaboratives and continue to improve the process.

When surveys are administered, participating journalists do not always respond to requests to complete them. And because collaborations happen over time, often more than six months, there can be staff turnover and post-project surveys may be distributed to new individuals who did not participate in project trainings.

In addition to surveys, Todd says that it is critical to do one-on-one follow-up with funders, managers, editors, and other partners to gather additional information about what worked well and what was missing in a collaborative project.

⁵ One of the authors of this paper, Lindsay Green-Barber, PhD, has worked directly with SJN to develop and standardized journalist and audience surveys.

International Consortium of Investigative Journalists: Global collaborations for global impact

Overview

“Is the system broken, are people affected, and does it affect the public interest?”

— Emilia Díaz-Struck, research editor and Latin America coordinator with ICIJ

Founded in 1997, the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) is a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit organization with a small newsroom and global network of media partners and journalists. ICIJ’s 249-member investigative team spans 90 countries and territories.

While ICIJ’s network is ongoing, its editorial projects are temporary and co-created. Through its collaborative investigations, ICIJ has exposed multiple illegal, illicit, and harmful activities across the globe. This includes the Panama Papers, which uncovered an extensive offshore financial and tax evasion scheme in April 2016, implicating elected officials, celebrities, athletes, and others across the globe. ICIJ’s investigative reporting is conducted collaboratively by ICIJ staff, especially data reporting, and by a network of local reporters who can uncover information on the ground for global dissemination (Green-Barber & Pitt, 2017).

ICIJ’s reporting and publishing strategy is developed around a core mission to spur external institutional and individual impact (Green-Barber & Pitt, 2017), “holding power to account and empowering readers to engage with their local communities about issues of global importance.” ICIJ also aims to achieve internal impact among its partners, producing journalism of the highest quality, sharing skills and resources across the network, and building the skills and capacity of partner journalists and newsrooms.

ICIJ asks three preliminary questions before it begins a collaborative reporting project:

1. Which countries are involved?

2. Are there data?
3. Can the story have impact?

If the answer is “yes” to these questions, ICIJ reaches out to country partners, inviting those with expertise and connections who can bring valuable sources and reporting to collaborate on projects. ICIJ also seeks partners that have publication platforms that can reach key audiences in countries where change is most needed and likely. Interested partners must sign an agreement to collaborate and keep the information confidential until it is published.

ICIJ plays the central role of project coordinator and data hub for all projects. It also coordinates publishing dates across the globe to spur media amplification in the form of a tidal wave of widespread media, and thus public attention to investigations.

Measuring Impact

ICIJ communicates the impact of investigations with its audience through articles published and clearly labeled “Impact.” ICIJ uses both quantitative and qualitative approaches to measure the external and internal impact of its journalism, gathering examples of impact from reporters as well as using quantitative metrics, when and if possible.



IMPACT

Luanda Leaks sealed new Cape Verde banking law, minister says

While the MOU signed between ICIJ and partners does not specifically state that partners will share metrics, they find that partners are generally willing to share data. According to Díaz-Struck, “When we survey our partners at the end of our projects, we explain why those metrics are important to us, and they usually have shared them with us with no problem, when they have access to them,” (Personal correspondence, 2020). And while the organization has some consistent measures for external impact, most in-depth understanding of the change spurred by the collaborative reporting projects happen on a project-by-project basis.

ICIJ consistently tracks the reach of investigations by documenting when ICIJ resources and data are used by partners, when ICIJ stories are republished by partners, and when partners publish their own stories. However, reach metrics are not included in the story of impact that ICIJ shares with its audiences under its impact vertical. Díaz-Struck said, “ICIJ tries to count the total number of stories. Panama Papers had more than 4,700 stories after 8 months, just from official partners. We monitor what is going on, but we don't do impact stories on that.”

After an investigation breaks, ICIJ pays close attention to network and institutional responses to stories, including asking partners to notify ICIJ about impact (through a web form and/or directly through their communication hub). In some cases, ICIJ will notice a pattern of impact emerging and undertake additional, more rigorous measurement. For example, following Panama Papers, ICIJ documented the number of responses by institutions, both government and corporate, and published their findings with the total number of people and companies that had been or were being investigated (Dalby & Wilson-Chapman, 2019).

ICIJ then clearly communicates network and institutional impact with audiences, sometimes in a story with a single example and sometimes with a larger analysis, such as a U.S. taxpayer pleading guilty and being sentenced to prison time after having been shown to have avoided tax payments (Fitzgibbon, 2020) or documenting at least 82 government investigations into tax avoidance (Wilson-Chapman et al, 2019), both as a result of ICIJ's Panama Papers investigation.

Díaz-Struck says that different projects require different impact measurement. “We're conservative with our metrics and only [publish about impact] when it's explicitly tied [to our investigations]. We did a three-year follow-up on Panama Papers and we were able to count \$1.2 billion recovered. In the case of Implant Files, [an ICIJ investigation into the medical device industry that found implants are not sufficiently tested and often dangerous], there were devices removed from the market and legislation change.

And with implant files, readers could reach out and tell us their stories and we did a follow-up about how many readers from how many countries had shared with us. That was another way of measuring. If a prime minister resigns, that's also impact, we document it in our stories.”

ICIJ measures the internal impact for all collaborative reporting projects through surveys with partners. In addition to producing high-impact investigations, ICIJ hopes that partners value data reporting and collaboration, and in some cases, that they have new and/or improved reporting skills.

ICIJ uses intelligence gathered through the survey to help improve its collaborative approaches with respect to data sharing, communication, and project management. ICIJ regularly reviews the countries involved, the size of its collaborations, stories that cross borders, and new partnerships. Sometimes new journalists who want to be part of a project will contact ICIJ, which the organization interprets as impact on the journalism field by being noticed and appreciated.

Lessons learned

“You need to be open-minded. You have to see once you publish and you observe what impact you're having and then figure out how to cover it. Be ready for the unknown. Have an intention and learn from previous experiences.”

— Emilia Díaz-Struck, research editor and Latin America coordinator with ICIJ

It can be difficult to directly connect journalistic content to impact (e.g. a politician resigning), but ICIJ has used its deep investigative and data reporting capacity to rigorously measure and report the impact of its collaborative investigations. ICIJ is careful to only make a connection if the impact can be linked directly to its own work and it puts in significant time and reporting energy to deeply understand the impact of its collaboratives.

If an outcome can be tied directly to ICIJ's work ICIJ will create a corresponding measurement methodology. Three years after ICIJ broke the Panama Papers investigation, reporters devised a methodology to calculate how much money governments had recovered as a result of the investigation. Díaz-Struck said, “We did a three-year follow-up and we were able to, conservatively, count \$1.2 billion recovered.” A clear methodology allows ICIJ to have standards about what does and does not count as impact,

and it can “show its work” to audiences and partners alike. ICIJ has found that it is critical to report on impact when it happens to show audiences, as well as partners, the type of change that is catalyzed by high quality, cross border, investigative journalism.

Case study takeaways

- Early-stage collaboratives, especially among publishers without experience with collaboration, benefit from being simple and straightforward to provide “proof of concept,” with as few points of friction as possible; after the partnership is proven, stickier topics, such as sharing impact metrics, may be discussed.
- Media, and especially commercial media, need to see clearly how impact measurement can contribute to internal and shared strategic decision-making and resource allocation.
- Collaboratives need to clearly communicate expectations and responsibilities about impact measurement with partners, ideally through an MOU or other written agreement.
- Having explicit and shared goals can help reluctant partners see the value in tracking impact.
- Using consistent impact measurement tools and approaches over time spurs organizational learning.
- A clear framework for impact measurement helps move from anecdotal to rigorous impact.
- Impact measurement methodology must be flexible and responsive to the type of change that an organization observes – some of which can be surprising.
- Impact can be communicated with audiences to demonstrate the value of the collaborative work, but it should be clearly tagged as “Impact.”

A path forward

This research has surfaced trends and best practices for collaborations interested in measuring the impact of their work. Case studies present an array of approaches, methods, and platforms for measuring the impact of collaborations. Here we summarize three recommendations for any collaborative interested in measuring the impact of its work.

1. Define impact collectively at the outset of a project.

When thinking about the impact of collaborative reporting, it is even more complicated than media impact in general. Different newsrooms have different goals, values, and business models, meaning they generally have different key progress indicators or markers of success. And while there has been movement toward shared impact frameworks (as discussed above), the priorities of newsrooms will inevitably vary.

Our research suggests that projects that proactively define shared goals and metrics for success at the outset can successfully reduce friction at the end of projects and increase the chances for meaningful strategy design around impact and measurement. As many collaboratives rely on memos of understanding to set shared expectations, it is reasonable to think that shared impact metrics could become standard in these agreements.

2. Measuring impact takes work: make it someone's job.

The experiences of organizations like SJN, INN, and ICIJ point to the importance of one project coordinator to not only streamline editorial processes, but also to serve as point person for impact measurement. Data from each partner organization must be gathered, analyzed, and turned into a cohesive narrative that can be communicated back with partners and external stakeholders.

Organizations like ICIJ, INN, and SJN design and administer their own pre-and/or post-project collaboration surveys, often to help identify what training

and/or skill building is most needed and to learn about the short-term internal impact of the initiative. As these practices become commonplace, collaboratives should ensure that the surveys have been vetted rigorously, are administered consistently among all participants, and are repeated over multiple collaborations, when possible.

3. Be flexible and think long term for your impact timeline.

Social change is complicated. It is difficult for even a single organization to capture the impact of its reporting, and having multiple collaborators increases the potential for impact and for being surprised (Green-Barber & Pitt, 2017).

But one thing is certain about the impact of media: it happens in the short, medium, and long term. While there is often a flutter of activity after a project is published, especially when multiple organizations focus on the same story, in collaborative efforts, the longer-term change can still take weeks, months, or even years to become evident. But collaborations are often time bound, focusing on a specific news event or investigation. When the project is over, relationships among the journalists and media companies might continue, or they might go latent.

The disconnect between the time frame for impact and the structure of collaborations means that much longer-term impact might not be understood, or even known. Organizations like ICIJ have the potential to return to previous stories, like Panama Papers, to understand the long-term impact of reporting.

Looking ahead

Common practices and approaches in impact measurement are emerging among collaborative journalism efforts. There is opportunity for *collaboration among collaboratives* to share vetted survey questions, impact tracking strategies, case study methodologies, and more.

In practice, the definition of impact and the methods for measuring it are the same for collaborative journalism projects and news media in general. But

the promise of collaborative journalism is that not only can the scale of impact be greater, perhaps too can be the scale of shared learning.

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