# Measuring the Impact of Solutions Journalism Through Surveys

SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM NETWORK

Produced by fathm

**Measuring the impact of journalism is a continuous challenge for journalists and editors trying to serve their audiences.**

This guide from the Solutions Journalism Network, in collaboration with Fathm, is designed as a practical tool to help you measure the impact of your journalism through audience surveys.

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# 1. Survey templates

A combination of the questions below should be used to build your survey. We recommend a survey of no more than 15 questions in total.

The section below will help you create the content of your survey, from introduction to questions and post-survey thanks to respondents. We have drafted some questions as an example, but of course you should customise the survey according to your needs and audience.

## Before you get started

Surveys are a very useful way to collect meaningful audience data. Of course you don't want to annoy your audience running too many surveys in a set period of time. So if you've just recently run a survey, you might want to wait for a bit or run a shorter survey with only a few targeted questions.

## Setting an internal goal for your survey

Before you start, in order to design an effective survey, take a moment to summarize what is the purpose of your survey. What are you aiming to find out by asking your audience directly? Surveys can become a bit overwhelming for readers, having a clear goal will help you make sure you're selecting the right questions and just the ones that are in line with your objectives. It's also a good idea to only ask questions that will help you meet your goals - don't collect data for the sake of collecting data.

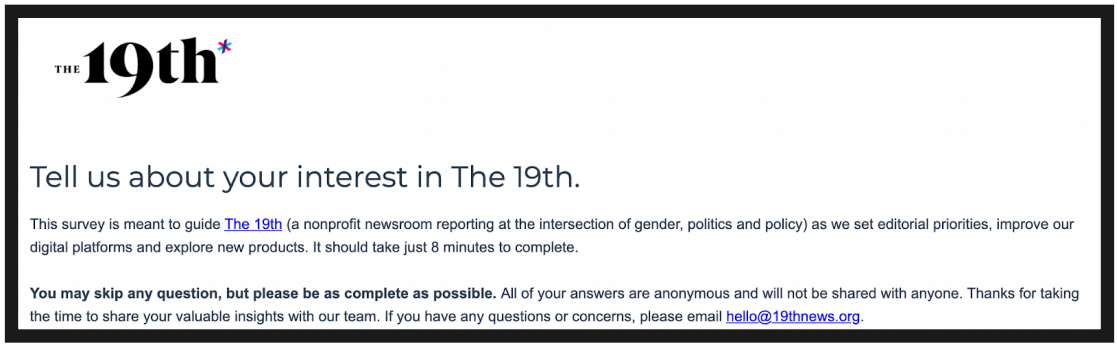
## Introducing your survey to your audience

Include a couple of sentences that explain to your audience:

- What the survey is for;
- An indication of how long it will take to complete;
- Why their participation is important;
- How their answers will be used and what you will do with their data (this might include mentioning privacy legislation compliance.)

This will encourage audience members to take part by explaining why you need to know these things. It's also transparent about the purpose of the survey and use of their responses.

Here's an example from The 19th.


THE 19th*

Tell us about your interest in The 19th.

This survey is meant to guide The 19th (a nonprofit newsroom reporting at the intersection of gender, politics and policy) as we set editorial priorities, improve our digital platforms and explore new products. It should take just 8 minutes to complete.

**You may skip any question, but please be as complete as possible.** All of your answers are anonymous and will not be shared with anyone. Thanks for taking the time to share your valuable insights with our team. If you have any questions or concerns, please email hello@19thnews.org.

## Demographic questions

*Demographic questions help us establish who is answering the survey. They are particularly important for post-survey analysis as they allow us to break down responses by things like age, location or occupation. Fewer open text questions in this section will make this analysis easier.*

We list as an example questions about age and gender, but if it's relevant to your reporting or your audience, you might want to add a question about ethnicity.

Here's more on how to collect demographic data respectfully: respectful collection of data and a guide from Survey Monkey.

**To easily copy and paste the below questions, you can find them in the question pack.**

1. AGE: What is your age?

   *Give your audience a choice of age brackets.*

   ***Question type: checkbox or radio button***

2. GENDER: How do you identify in terms of gender?

   ***Question type: checkbox or radio button with open text field for other***

   *Female, including transgender women*

   *Male including transgender men*

   *Non-binary*

   *Other*

   *Prefer not to say*

We recommend you read the guides above to determine the best wording for this question.

3. LOCATION: Think what you need to know here - do you need an indication of a geographic place or to understand if someone is living in a rural, urban or suburban environment?

   *Option A: Where do you live? [open text field]*

   *Option B: Would you describe where you live as a city/town/small town/village/the*

   *Countryside?*

   *Option C: We'd like to get a sense of where our readers are based. What county do you live in?*

Some optional demographic questions:

*Don't just ask questions for the sake of asking questions; think about why you need to know something and how you would explain that need to your audience.*

For example, if the objective of your solutions journalism coverage is to empower or impact a certain socio-economic group or professional community you may wish to ask structured demographic questions such as:

1. **What is your current marital or family status?**

   ***Question type: checkbox or radio button***

   *Married or in a civil partnership*

   *In a relationship*

   *Single*

   *Are you a parent or guardian? Or Do you have school-age children?*

2. **What's your household's annual income?**

   ***Question type: checkbox or radio button with income brackets***

3. **What best describes your employment status?**

   ***Question type: checkbox or radio button***

   *Full-time employment*

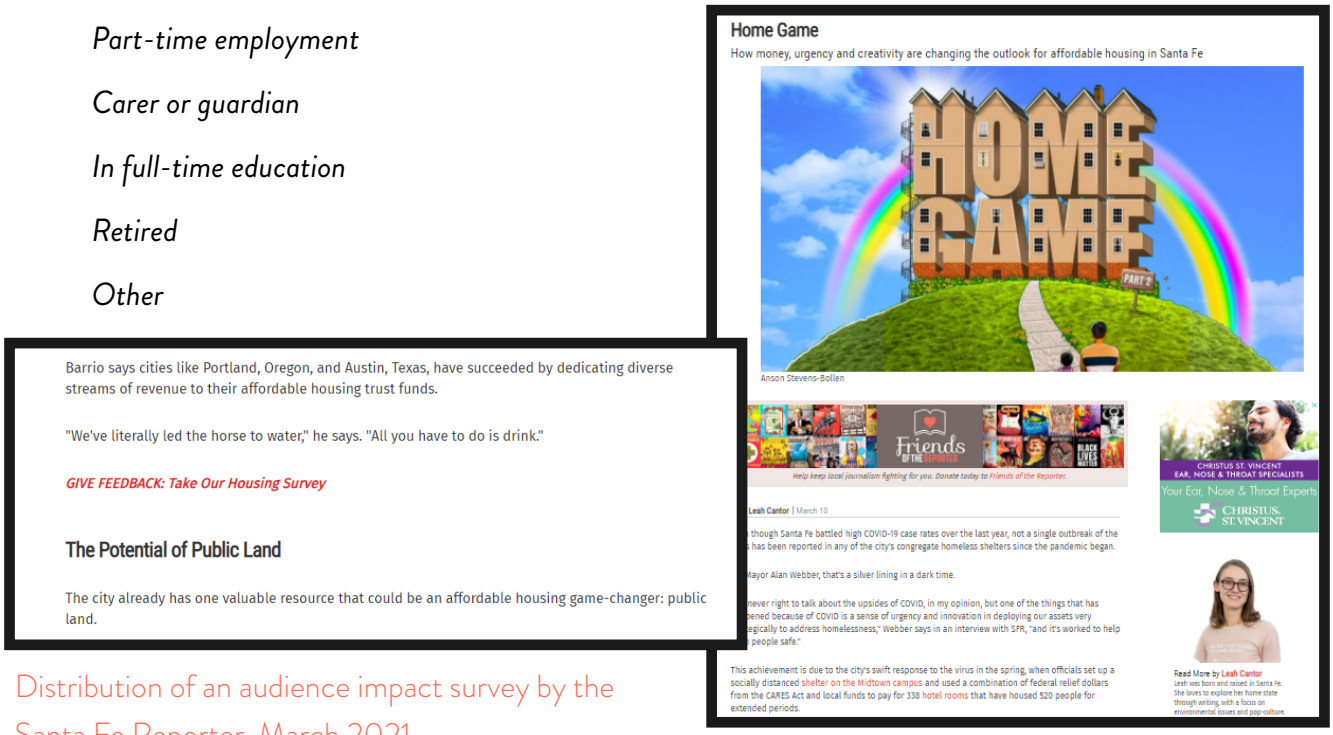
   *Part-time employment*

   *Carer or guardian*

   *In full-time education*

   *Retired*

   *Other*




Distribution of an audience impact survey by the Santa Fe Reporter, March 2021.

## Behavior questions

*Behavior questions can tell us more about your audience's relationship with your outlet, as well as how they consume news and spend their time.*

**To easily copy and paste the below questions, you can find them in the question pack.**

Potential questions:

Questions about relationship with news brand:

- How often do you visit [insert your title]'s website?
- Are you a subscriber to our paper/website/other [delete as applicable]?
- Which news sources do you go to for [the kind of coverage site does]?
- Which coverage areas or reporters appeal to you most? [multiple choice]

Questions about how they spend their time online:

- How do you consume news? (Please select all that apply.) [multiple choice]
- Mobile browser
- Mobile app
- Tablet browser
- Tablet app
- Desktop
- Email
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Snapchat
- Other:

Questions about their values and interests:

- What frustrates you most about news on [X subject] today? What would you most want to change about it?
- In terms of the site's coverage, is there anything that you think could be improved? Is there anything you feel deserves more news coverage? If so, what/how?
- What do you want to know about X subject?
- Do you support or are you a member of any local or national charities, community organizations or causes? Yes/no
- Please explain your level of support or involvement and for what initiatives.

## Impact questions

*Impact questions allow us to understand the effect that your solutions journalism stories will have or have had on your readers.*

**To easily copy and paste the below questions, you can find them in the question pack.**

- **How strongly do you agree with the following statement:**

  ***Question type: Scale:***

***Strongly agree*** ***Somewhat agree*** ***Neither agree nor disagree*** ***Somewhat disagree*** ***Strongly disagree***

*"A story I have read on [section containing SJN stories] has changed my thinking on a subject"*

*"A story I have read on [section containing SJN stories] prompted me to change my behavior."*

*"A story I have read on [section containing SJN stories] led me to take a real-world action."*

OR:

- **In the last week/month/year, have you done any of the following as a result of news or information provided by [site or X sojourn stories]? (check all that apply)**

  ☐ Learned something new
  ☐ Changed your attitude or thinking on a topic
  ☐ Recommended [site] to others
  ☐ Shared info learned with others
  ☐ Made a decision or taken action with info

- **If you made a decision or took action, which of the following apply? [tick as many as apply]:**

  ☐ Took a one-off action
  ☐ Changed your consumption habits or lifestyle
  ☐ Became more civically engaged
  ☐ Attended a community event
  ☐ Voted differently
  ☐ Joined a political party or movement
  ☐ Volunteered
  ☐ Participated in online action or protest
  ☐ Gave more resources to organizations
  ☐ Took legal action
  ☐ Other

Include an open text box after each asking for more details and if they can recall the story.

### End of survey message

Craft a message for the end of the survey thanking the participant for their time and responses. You might want to briefly reiterate what you put in the introduction on how their answers will be used.

Add an optional box for their name and contact email as well as consent to contact them in the future in relation to audience research or focus groups.

You could include an opt-in or opt-out to your newsletter, if you have one.

Here's a Google Form example of how this survey might look.

## 2. Tools to run your survey

There are several easy tools that you can use to run your surveys. Some suggestions:

- **Google Forms (for business)**
- **Typeform** (typeform.com) has a free plan, which limits you to 3 typeforms, 10 questions per typeform and 100 responses per month. The Professional Plan is 35 USD/mo and it includes integrations with Mailchimp, Airtable HubSpot and Google Tab Manager. Typeform has good user experience, particularly on mobile.
- **Survey Monkey** (surveymonkey.com) also has a free plan. Its business plans start from 25USD/mo and allows multiple users to have access to the same account.

Remember to include a consent form (this is an example from Survey Monkey) or to state how your data collection is compliant with privacy regulations in force in your state or internationally, if you have an international audience (here's a GDPR compliance checklist for US companies).

### Test your survey.

Before we move to the next step about how to distribute your survey, ask a colleague to take a test and check for resonance or any confusing language. This will also help you estimate how long it will take to take the survey.

## 3. How to distribute your survey

*How you share your survey with your audience will have a big impact on the level and quality of responses. You will need to be responsive to traffic trends to ensure good reach and mindful of different platforms and distribution methods to ensure diversity of response.*

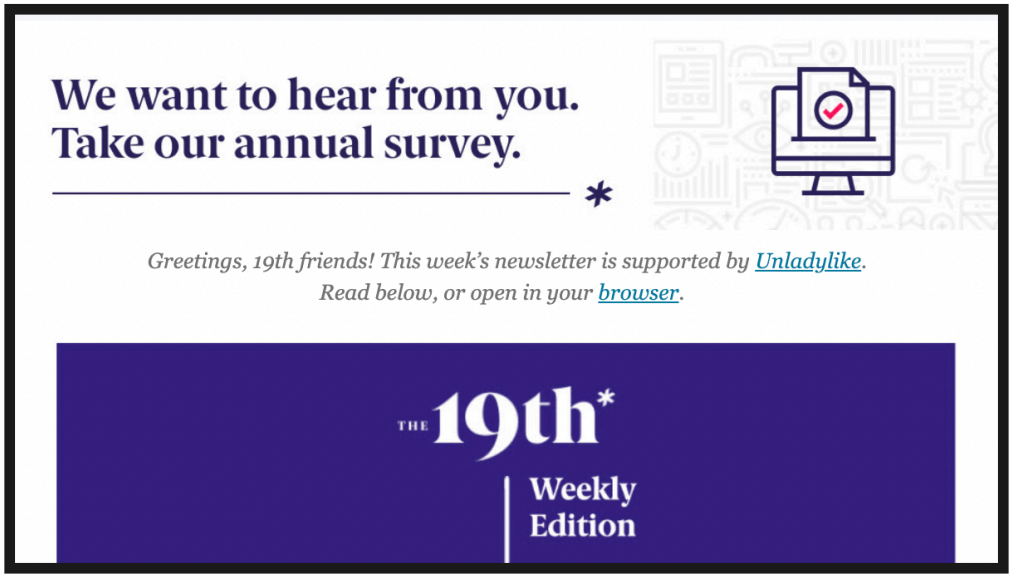
*Given that the focus of this survey is on your Solution Journalism projects, we recommend sharing the survey alongside the solution journalism stories and as part of any campaigns that promote them.*

To effectively distribute your survey, you should choose a survey tool that works with your site CMS. For example, can you embed the survey or an ad for the survey easily into articles.

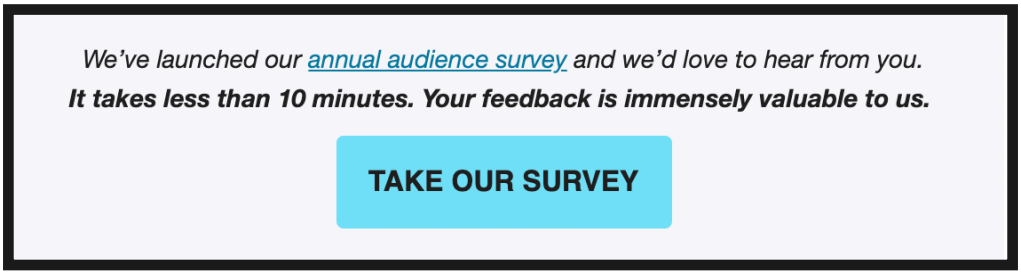
Then consider the following steps to promote your survey:

1. On site: Identify the most trafficked pages on your website (especially those related to your solutions journalism work)
2. On site: Identify the pages where visitors are spending the most time
3. On site: Embed the survey or a link to the survey on Solutions Journalism stories
4. Newsletter: If you have newsletter products, asking subscriber lists to complete the survey can be a highly effective way to distribute your survey. You can also retarget the survey to subscribers who don't open on first sends
5. Social: Include the most important question in your post copy. Remember that your social posts can reach beyond your site's audience.

This is an example from The 19th, which incorporated the survey as part of the Header Image in their weekly newsletter.



And this is how they included it at the bottom of the newsletter:




If distributing the survey on multiple platforms, add a question asking where participants found the survey. Alternatively, assign a UTM tracking code to each distribution channel. Here's more about how to do it via the Google URL builder. As results come in, you can check which channels are driving the greatest response.

If you've previously run surveys of your audience, what distribution tactics generated the greatest response and did participants agree to be sent future surveys?

## 4. Survey Metadata

As part of your work with SJN, please include the below information when reporting back to them about the progress of your project and your surveys.

- What was the purpose of your survey?
- What channels did you use to distribute it?
- What is the reach of those channels? (If you shared it on FB for example, how many likes does your page have? If you included it in your newsletter, how many people are on the subscribers list and what is the average open rate of the newsletter? If you shared it on site, how many monthly uniques do you have?)
- How long has the survey stayed in the field? (example: the survey run from day xx to day xx)
- What average audience does your solution journalism content or solutions journalism vertical get?
- Do you clearly label your solutions journalism content as such?
- Did you inform your audience, openly refer to or label the survey as part of your solution journalism efforts?
- How many survey responses did you get?
- If you previously ran surveys, how many responses did you get (average)?

## 5. How to read the data from your survey

If this is your first time handling audience data, don't panic. There are lots of resources available to help guide. Don't forget to ask your colleagues if they have any data analysis experience too. Here are some tips to get you started:

1. Once your survey has finished running, the tools in this guide will allow you to export your survey answers as a spreadsheet. Make a copy of this before you start any analysis.
2. Take a look at how the answers to your survey are arranged in the spreadsheet. Does it make sense? You may need to create separate columns for answers to questions that allow people to check multiple choices as their response.
3. Spreadsheet software like Excel or Google Sheets already have some useful tools for analyzing data. You can "Sort" the data in your columns by different values (e.g. by age of respondent, by location). Just make sure you select the whole data range before sorting so all your answers are included.
4. You may wish to "segment" your data by using a "filter" function on your spreadsheet. Segmenting means cutting the data by particular criteria. For example, if you want to only see responses from people who live in a particular location or by how often they consume your journalism. This can be useful to identify particular trends within groups of your audience, but be mindful of the size of your survey when doing this - a handful of answers does not constitute a trend.

Here are some helpful resources:

- Intermediate tips for Google Sheets
- A quick video on filtering in Excel
- Conducting audience research from the Membership Puzzle Project - look at the *How do we generate insights from our audience research?* section