

Strategies for Tracking Impact

A Toolkit for
Collaborative Journalism



BY AMY MAESTAS and LEAH TODD LIN

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How to Use This Guide

Introduction

You're close to launching a collaborative journalism effort. Your partner organizations are on board, you've identified a topic and scope of work. You've talked about your collective goals in broad brushstrokes. Now it's time to set a clearer plan. What will your ideal outcomes be, and how will you know whether you've been successful together? How does tracking this kind of impact in a collaborative setting differ from tracking impact at an individual news outlet?

Planning for metrics-tracking in a collaborative journalism setting can be challenging. Each newsroom likely has its own way of measuring audience engagement and impact individually already. Some favor online audience metrics and regularly use analytics to shape editorial decisions. Others rely more on anecdotal feedback from their audiences through informal systems. For some journalists, gathering evidence of impact may be a new idea.

This guide is intended to help a collaborative journalism effort launch a simple, successful impact-tracking strategy. It is designed to help you identify your collective key priority areas — like improving audience trust or engagement in local news, making change in audience awareness of an issue area, or reaching a new audience — and choose strategies for how you'll track your progress toward those goals together. Just as important, this toolkit will help your collaborative members develop new knowledge, ownership and skills. Strong buy-in and participation from across the group will help your collaborative succeed in this impact-tracking work over time. How you get there is as important as where you end up.

For this guide, we draw on our experience guiding several collaborative journalism efforts from concept to execution in Philadelphia; Charlotte, North Carolina; New Hampshire; and more. When should you use this toolkit? In our experience, conversations about goals and impact-tracking should happen upfront, before the project begins. The steps in this guide could take place over a single half-day workshop, or be spread out in smaller segments over a period of several weeks.

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STEP ONE

Orientation

KEY QUESTIONS: What do we mean when we say “impact” in journalism? Why does it matter?

SUGGESTED TIME FRAME: 30 minutes

Why does tracking your collective impact matter? There are several reasons to consider: **(1)** The process of collecting impact examples can lead to new stories and sources you wouldn’t have known of otherwise. **(2)** Knowing your collective impact is key to successfully telling *your* story to your audience — how do you describe what value the collaborative brings to your community, to encourage more loyalty and participation? **(3)** Future news partners and potential funders will want to know what this group has achieved, and having concrete examples at hand will help make the case for the collaborative’s value. **(4)** Current funders often ask about what impact your work has had in your community. The information you collect over time can be used in reports to your audience and funders.



TIP: Download this link from Dropbox to access slide-by-slide notes and annotations.

<https://www.dropbox.com/s/p9iuc3ik2t81my9/2020%20Collaborative%20impact%20tracking.pptx?dl=0>

TOOL NO. 1: A presentation you can adapt to start your collaborative impact conversation

This tool introduces a framework for journalistic impact that goes beyond tracking page views and traditional policy change, citing current research from the field. We suggest looking for impact on multiple levels: at the individual level, as well as in networks and institutions, and in media amplification. This presentation covers what impact is, presents concrete examples from The Reentry Project in Philadelphia, and shares resources from additional research. Additionally, it offers a brief overview of tools you can use to collect impact.

DEFINITION: What is impact? *“A change in the status quo at the level of an individual, network or institution resulting from journalism that gathers, assesses, creates and presents news and information.”*

—Lindsay Green-Barber, 2017; American Press Institute

REMEMBER: Impact can be as a result of a story, live event or any other interaction with the collaborative or the collaborative’s work.

EXAMPLE: Impact collected from The Reentry Project, Reentry Impact Assessment (2019)

CHANGE IN INDIVIDUAL AWARENESS: WHYY is a public radio station in Philadelphia. An article it produced describes a program in a Camden County jail where incarcerated people train rescue dogs to be companion animals for veterans. A representative of the Atlantic County jail reads the story and expresses interest in creating a similar program. While the idea never gets off the ground, the representative notes: “The Reentry Project was instrumental in spurring my interest in this project. It is something I have continued interest in and I hope to pursue in the future.”

CHANGE IN INDIVIDUAL AND NETWORK BEHAVIOR: An Ikea representative attended an event with The Reentry Project and the Chamber of Commerce for Greater Philadelphia (“Reentry: Hiring From an Untapped Pool”) and said later that Ikea was reevaluating the way it hires the justice-involved population.

Technical.ly Philly developed a “returning citizen-friendly” icon for local job boards.

“How could you not look at what the criteria for ‘returning citizen[-friendly] workplace’ is and not question whether you have that or not? ... As an organization ourselves in hiring, we’ve updated how we talk and hire. It runs through our newsroom understanding when we approach any issue. There’s a lot more understanding of those issues.”
—Christopher Wink, co-founder, CEO and publisher of Technical.ly Philly

PUBLIC OFFICIAL RESPONDS OR REFERS TO A STORY OR SERIES:

“I think The Reentry Project has had a huge impact. There’s no question that [the] city of Philadelphia is leading on issues of criminal justice and how we’re going to define it. The unflinching eye of journalists looking at this issue has a lot to do with people being energized.” —Councilmember Helen Gym, Philadelphia City Council

TOOL NO. 2: What should I look for? 22 impact examples to watch for

TIP: You can make a copy of the list on page 13 as a go-to guide for what to look for when tracking impact.

<https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/15L9rvNJNtqXtt7tFUV7san2vtlk9Xf63VLINY5UOQLY/edit#gid=0>

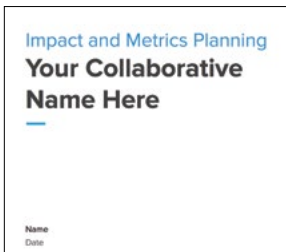
STEP TWO

Gathering Input

KEY QUESTIONS: How do our partners articulate their vision for the impact this collaboration will have? What strengths and tools exist within our partner organizations?

SUGGESTED TIME FRAME: 30 minutes

How will you know whether this collaboration was successful? Do most of your partner organizations already know and love Google Analytics? Does one news organization have expertise in a social media analytics tool it might be able to share with its peers? This part of the conversation will help you identify themes to focus on in your impact tracking, and what tools might make the most sense for your team to use.



TIP: Themes from this document can be very useful in crafting a mission statement for your collaborative effort.

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1a32vi978wldCEUlyPoEuR6OPvhz1tczqTNU0diNEDAA/edit>

TOOL NO. 1: A collaborative planning document with two prompts to gather reflections from each collaborative member: "This collaborative will be successful if _____," and "We'll know we got there when _____." This model is based on practices shared by the community engagement organization Hearken, which helps news organizations find ways to engage their audiences more effectively. You'll discuss the themes in this document in Step Three.

EXAMPLE: Northeast Ohio Solutions Journalism Collaborative: vision statements from the launch included:

The collaborative will be successful if:

- We continue to amplify the voices of LGBTQ+ Ohioans to support community and civic empowerment through the creation of engaging content that chronicles our triumphs, struggles and lived experiences.

We will know that happened when:

- Regular reviews of our content show broad representation, both geographically and demographically.

This project will be successful if:

- Published stories amplify the voices and solutions offered by people most directly impacted by the issues addressed and not just institutions and organizations that can simply speak on behalf of the problem.

- Truly collaborative stories are produced, endorsed and distributed by our full list of collaborative member outlets.

We will know that happened when:

- We see audience engagement from communities historically overlooked when it comes to news coverage.
- We see an increase in Northeast Ohio audience trust in our cooperatively-produced information.

TOOL NO. 2: A survey to gauge what tools your news partners use to track impact in their own organizations. This is attached as an appendix to this guide.

Using this survey can help you understand whether most of your partners are already familiar with one tool (like WordPress or Google Analytics), which you may also want to use; or whether many don't yet have ways to track impact. For example, if someone answers this survey by saying, "I'm not sure, follow up with me later," you'll know you may have to work more closely with that person down the line."

EXAMPLE: With **Google Analytics** and the **American Press Institute's Metrics for News** tool, newsrooms can learn how certain kinds of stories are impacting the audience. For example, the **Bangor Daily News** in Maine regularly uses both Google Analytics and Metrics for News. Its newsroom studied how its solutions-focused stories performed online during a six-month period in 2020. It found readers spent an average of 33 percent longer with solutions stories than the average story during the time frame, indicating audience support for that kind of coverage.

TIP: You can make a copy of the Google form on page 14 and adapt it as needed.

<https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSe11dNMXpPDDOulEJvS91BeE-mvObMZIBb8ZYHWp8OdL0ptlg/viewform>

STEP THREE

Planning

KEY QUESTIONS: What are our collaborative's most important outcomes and impact areas? For each priority, how will we measure our success?

SUGGESTED TIME FRAME: 90 minutes

So far, you've reviewed what impact is and why it matters. You have asked each of your partners to articulate what success will look like and suggest evidence that will tell them when they have arrived. Now, it's up to your group to decide the most important impact areas you want to focus on and how you will track your progress. Are there priority areas where you want to spend extra funding to understand if your work sparked any change over time?

TOOL NO. 1: A template set of conversation prompts to start a goal-setting discussion among a group of collaborating editors

First, review the input gathered on your [collaborative goal-setting document](#). Ask your group: What themes emerge among outlets' answers? What's missing?

Second, determine areas of impact to prioritize. Ask: Will you focus more on understanding whether your efforts build trust among local news audiences, or on engaging a sector of the community that has historically been disengaged from local news? Will you prioritize representative coverage that elevates voices traditionally marginalized from local news coverage? Choose between one and three areas to prioritize. Individual newsrooms may choose more to pursue on their own. The outcome is a living document. You can always revisit it as your project progresses.

Lastly, for each impact area you've defined, brainstorm ways you might track progress. Some may only require gathering periodic feedback from your editors or audience. For others, you may want to develop more involved surveys or outreach tools, like SurveyMonkey, GroundSource, Subtext, a story booth at a public event, focus groups, etc. Out of this emerges a draft impact and metrics plan.

TIP: *To be clear, not every impact area needs a formal survey, focus group or extensive analysis requiring many months and tons of data. Anecdotal and qualitative feedback from your audience is gold.*

TOOL NO. 2: See page 64 in the The Reentry Project Collaborative Playbook, "Guidelines to design an engagement and metrics strategy," for a list of strategies for measuring impact in a variety of areas.



https://collaborativejournalism.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/8/2019/05/Collaborative_Playbook.pdf

STEP FOUR

Doing the Work

KEY QUESTIONS: How can we keep all this important information organized in one place? Who will be responsible for gathering data, and when?

SUGGESTED TIME FRAME: 30 minutes

As a final step, ask each partner to identify someone from the organization who will be responsible for gathering and sharing data for your project. Discuss how often you'll collect the metrics you've decided to focus on. Will news organizations be asked to share impact data regularly, reporting metrics after a story airs or an event takes place? Will a project manager contact each news outlet directly to ask for any outstanding impact? Also consider how you will share that information back to your collaborative partners — in regular updates at periodic meetings, or with member "Spotlights" when outstanding impact takes place. In addition, we suggest scheduling regular check-ins to discuss what your impact-tracking efforts are showing. Ask yourselves throughout the project: Are we on track to meet our goals?

TOOL NO. 1: [An interactive Airtable dashboard](#) you can use to track content production, audience engagement activities, cross-publishing and impact in collaboratives, courtesy of Resolve Philadelphia. (**TIP:** *Simply press the "copy and paste" button to personalize this tool for your own project.*)

This dashboard includes a form members can use to submit impact that will automatically upload into the Airtable dashboard.



<https://resolvephilly.org/resources/customizable-impact-tracker>

ADDITIONAL Resources

Recommended reading

[Collaborative Toolkits Curated by the Center for Cooperative Media at Montclair State University](#), featuring the work of Heather Bryant, Shady Grove Oliver, Angilee Shah, and more.

[Metrics to Match Our Mission: Measuring City Bureau's Impact](#), by Darryl Holliday of City Bureau, Feb. 12, 2020

[7 Tips for Tracking Your Impact](#), by Anjanette Delgado for News Media Alliance, Jan. 13, 2020

[Collaborating for Change: Approaches to Measuring the Impact of Collaborative Journalism](#), by Lindsay Green-Barber, Impact Architects, and Sarah Stonbely, Center for Cooperative Media, Summer 2020

Looking for additional tools to creatively track impact and metrics? Here is a list of tools and software — curated by Solutions Journalism Network — that you can use to measure impact and evidence. Because collaborations include organizations of varying sizes, budgets and experience, this list also includes tools for tracking digital and social metrics. This is not an exhaustive list, but it is a snapshot of some of the most popular tools and software used by media and community organizations. It provides names, a brief description, cost and what can be tracked.

Web analytics

[Google Analytics](#)

Website traffic and loyalty. It is customizable to track the data you want. Provides real-time and historical analytics.

Free for basic version; \$150,000 for Google 360

What it measures:

External impact: Individual, media amplification

Metrics: Online readership statistics, social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative

[Google Realtime Content Insights](#)

Real-time article and video performance. Historic data. Regional trends.

Free with Google Analytics account

What it measures:

External impact: Individual, media amplification

Metrics: Online readership statistics, social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

[News Consumer Insights from Google](#)

Analysis of Google Analytics data, providing actionable recommendations to help grow reader loyalty, including reader engagement, revenue, video insights.

Free with Google Analytics account

What it measures:

External impact: Individual, media amplification

Metrics: Online readership statistics, social media, anecdotal
Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

[JetPack](#)

A WordPress plugin that lets you track analytics on your website built on that content management system. Also works as a comment moderation tool and for scheduling social media posts.

Some services are free. Some useful services start at less than \$100 per month.

What it measures:

External impact: Individual, institutional, media amplification, engagement, cross-publishing

Metrics: Online readership statistics, social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

[Chartbeat](#)

Website traffic and loyalty. It is customizable to track the data you want. Provides real-time and historical analytics.

[Cost varies](#) depending on plan and size of organization/amount of web traffic.

Some plans as low as \$5,000 annually. Has free trial.

What it measures:

External impact: Individual, institutional, media amplification, engagement

Metrics: Online readership statistics, social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

[Parse.ly](#)

Website traffic and loyalty. It is customizable to track the data you want. Provides real-time and historical analytics.

[Cost varies](#) depending on plan and size of organization/amount of web traffic.

Some plans as low as \$5,000 annually. Has free trial.

What it measures:

External impact: Individual, institutional, media amplification, engagement

Metrics: Online readership statistics, social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

[Metrics for News](#)

Blends digital and engagement analytics with editorial and business goals to determine what resonates with readers. Allows you to segment audiences to see behavior and loyalty.

Cost varies depending on subscription plan. Starts at \$5,000 annually.

What it measures:

External impact: Individual, institutional, network, engagement

Metrics: Online readership statistics, social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

Collaboration

[Airtable](#)

Offers content calendars, event planning, user research, project tracker and management, publishing campaigns — and more. See [example from Resolve Philly](#) for tracking impact.

Varies depending on usage, features, number of users. Has free trial and nonprofit pricing.
External impact: Individual, institutional, network, media amplification, event attendance, cross-publishing engagement
Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

Impact tracking

[Impact Tracker, originally designed at the Center for Investigative Reporting and now run by Impact Architects](#)

An interactive database that [tracks micro, meso, macro, media outcomes as a result of direct intervention](#)

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

[MORI Impact Tracker, designed by Chalkbeat](#)

A WordPress plug-in that creates a database to measure performance and impacts of stories. [Tracks types of stories, events and interaction and changes as results.](#)

[Free open-source code available on Github](#)

External impact: Individual, institutional, network, media amplification, event attendance, engagement

Metrics: Social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

Social media

[CrowdTangle](#)

A tool from Facebook that lets you track and analyze what's happening with public content on social media (Facebook, Instagram, Reddit).

Available to only a limited set of organizations. Contact Facebook for more information on access. (There is a [Chrome extension](#) that has limited capabilities to track the same information.)

External impact: Individual, institutional, network, media amplification, event attendance, engagement

Metrics: Social media, anecdotal

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

Engagement

[Hearken](#)

Uses technology and consulting to increase engagement, impact and relationships with readers and communities.

Contact for pricing.

External impact: Individual, institutional, network, event attendance, engagement

Metrics: Social media, anecdotal, source growth

Evidence: Qualitative, quantitative

[CityBase Screendoor](#)

Database tool to use to track audience/reader responses and grow list of sources.

Price varies based on size of organization.

External impact: Network, engagement

Metrics: Source growth

Evidence: Quantitative

22 Impact Examples

TO WATCH FOR

- 1 A public official responds to or refers to a story, series or event
- 2 Impact on a source in a story
- 3 Allocation of government funds
- 4 Institutional action, like a new position or department created
- 5 Policy change
- 6 New law proposed
- 7 New law passed
- 8 Change in tone or quality of public discourse
- 9 Exchange of knowledge between groups or organizations (i.e., a community leader shares your work)
- 10 Formation of a new group, network or collaboration
- 11 Content used in a training, classroom or presentation
- 12 Grant awarded or funds raised
- 13 Award or recognition
- 14 Increased audience engagement (i.e., outstanding social media engagement or shares)
- 15 Increased civic participation
- 16 Increased trust in news organization(s) as a source of information
- 17 Change in quality of audience engagement (i.e., engaging the people most affected by an issue you're covering)
- 18 Journalist gives an interview or public appearance to discuss their work
- 19 Media amplification: another outlet references or republishes your work
- 20 Change in a community's ability to access quality news and information
- 21 Change in practice at a newsroom
- 22 Change in practice across a group of newsrooms

Source: Impact Tracker, developed by Lindsay Green-Barber of Impact Architects for the Center for Investigative Reporting; and The Hechinger Report, "Hechinger's list of impact items"

TEMPLATE IMPACT AND METRICS POLL: Tell Us What You Track

This is a quick survey to better understand how partners in [your collaborative name here] are individually tracking audience metrics and their impact at the moment. How does your news organization measure impact? Tell us a bit about what you're already doing, and how your collaborative partners might learn from your expertise.

Email address: _____

Name and organization: _____

What metrics do you currently track?

- I track online page views.
- I track time on page, or another measure of how much of my content people are actually reading, hearing or watching.
- I track print subscriptions.
- I track which newsstands are most popular for my free newspaper publication.
- I track digital subscriptions.
- I track where my visitors are coming from digitally, whether they're visiting my site on mobile, desktop, etc.
- I track where my visitors come from geographically, whether they're from inside my city or outside.
- I track demographics of my audience: age, income, etc.
- I track social media engagement: number of comments, shares, reactions, followers, etc.
- I'm not sure. Can I get back to you?

Other: _____

What tools does your organization use to track these metrics?

- Google Analytics
- Chartbeat
- Media Cloud
- Metrics for News from American Press Institute
- Regular surveys of my audience
- I'm not sure. Follow up with me later.

Other: _____

What do you want your collaborative partners to know about how your organization defines success, or how you think this collaborative should define success?

That's it! We will share the results with the rest of the group.

THE SOLUTIONS JOURNALISM NETWORK (SJM) is an independent, nonprofit organization that is spreading the practice of solutions journalism: rigorous reporting on responses to social problems. Solutions journalism seeks to rebalance the news, so that every day people are exposed to stories that help them understand problems and challenges, and stories that show potential ways to respond.

Founded in 2013 by award-winning journalists David Bornstein, Tina Rosenberg and Courtney Martin, **SJM** is engaging with hundreds of newsrooms and thousands of journalists throughout the U.S., Europe, Africa and Latin America. Its proven approach includes:

- Training journalists to uncover the whole story — what’s wrong and the responses to those problems.
- Supporting high-impact solutions reporting projects focused on urgent social issues.
- Teaching news organizations to use solutions reporting to reframe and depolarize public conversations in order to bridge divides.
- Gathering and distributing high-quality solutions stories from around the world so communities can learn from one another and improve performance more quickly.
- Inspiring the next generation by connecting solutions from around the world to university-level curricula across multiple disciplines.

Solutions journalism is a key disruption for our times: a better news product, a better business model, and a path to renewing trust in the kind of news that guides us to a better future.

The **LOCAL MEDIA PROJECT (LMP)** is a multiyear initiative launched by **SJM** in 2019 with support from the Knight Foundation and the Ralph C. Wilson, Jr. Foundation to strengthen and reinvigorate local media ecosystems.

The LMP aims to catalyze at least 15 collaboratives that will report on a pressing challenge in a community with a solutions journalism perspective in order to change the prevailing negative narrative around the issue and stimulate audience engagement. Collaboratives will complete a two-year residency with the project.

At the end of the two years, each collaborative will have developed a sustainability plan, including an editorial, business and audience engagement strategy, and move forward as a permanent news hub to address its community’s most significant challenges using a solutions lens. These collaboratives will also become members of a network of collaboratives, giving them the opportunity to share knowledge, gain access to best practices and discuss innovative revenue and engagement ideas.

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