

# Impact for independent news publishers

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This curated set of materials is derived from conversations and sessions that took place at PINF's Independent News Forum in 2022. It aims to delve deeper into some of the questions and points raised by participants, and to guide future conversations between members of the network that will take place in working groups and at the next Forum later this year.

This resource will help users to:

- Review the difference between inputs, activities, outputs and outcomes, and how they contribute to impact;
- Create a theory of change for their organisation;
- Define what makes sense to measure (indicators) and what tools are available to measure impact.

## [Part 1: Why should I care about impact?](#)

## [Part 2: How do we define impact?](#)

## [Part 3: How to measure impact](#)

## [Part 4: How to articulate impact](#)

## [Part 5: Seven impact resources and case studies](#)

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### **Part 1: Why should I care about impact?**

Defining, measuring and articulating their impact helps newsrooms demonstrate their work and value to a wide variety of people: among others, to the community they serve, to people who have the capacity to support them, financially or otherwise, in achieving their mission (funders, policy makers, other institutions), and even to individuals they may want to hire or collaborate with.

An organisation that has defined what impact looks like will have a clearer process for deciding which activities, initiatives and stories it should prioritise and dedicate resources to in order to effect change in the long term, as well as how these outcomes and contributions will be measured and proven to others.

In a nutshell, impact is a crucial part of an organisation's ability to tell its own story: how it's adding value through its journalism, and how it contributes towards positive change in society.

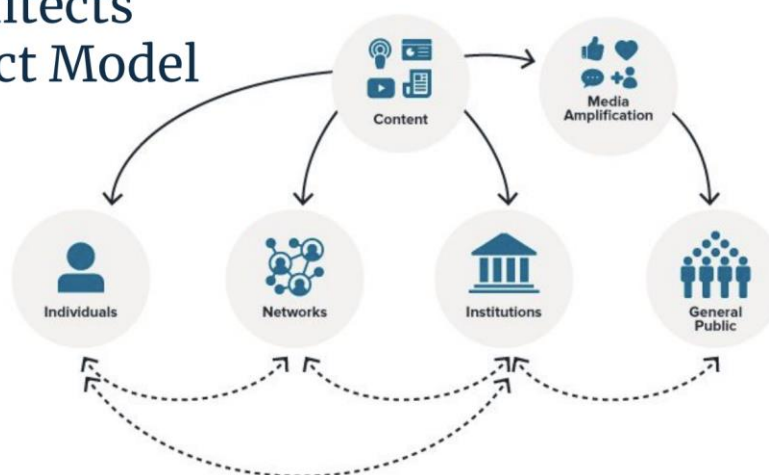
### **Part 2: How do we define impact?**

“Impact is a change in the status quo resulting from a direct intervention, be it a text article, a documentary film, or a live event.”<sup>1</sup> Impact can be positive or negative, direct or indirect, intended or unintended.

Definitions of impact may vary from one organisation to another, in accordance with their missions. However, there can often be confusion about the different steps or elements that ultimately lead to impact. These can be categorised as such:

- 👉 **Inputs** (the financial, human, material resources needed for the organisation to operate and conduct its activities)
- 👉 **Activities** (actions taken or work done through which inputs, such as funding, training, assistance and other types of resources, are mobilised to produce specific outputs)
- 👉 **Outputs** (the products, services and content which result from an intervention, for example an investigation, a community reporter training or a web application that allows users to check their eligibility for government support)
- 👉 **Outcomes** (the likely or achieved short-term and medium-term effects of an intervention's outputs, such as X number of people securing government support by using the application, or Y number of people trained)
- 👉 **Impact** (for example, improved understanding of eligibility for government support and the process required to obtain it, or upskilling citizens and creating new job opportunities for them as community reporters)

## Impact Architects Media Impact Model



[Media Impact Model](#) from Impact Architects

The Impact Architects' media impact model shows how impact spreads between those who are interacting with an organisation's content.

<sup>1</sup> As [defined](#) in the Media Impact Model from strategic consultancy Impact Architects.

This content can have a direct impact over individuals, networks or groups of people, and institutions. It also leads to further media amplification of the message or information, which reaches and can have an impact on the wider public. Each of these stakeholders can effect change or influence each other – individuals and networks can shape the institutions that serve them, and these institutions impact the general public and their lives.



**Reflection prompt:** *How do you or your organisation define impact? Is there anything you would add to the definition above?*



#### Additional reading and resources

- The Bureau for Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) writes about [impact beyond headlines](#), and how can it be considered as part of an outlet's publishing and outreach strategy (TBIJ, 5 minute read)

## Part 3: How to measure impact

Along with defining impact, measuring it is the second most challenging thing. Defining and measuring impact are closely intertwined – an organisation cannot decide what to measure and how to do it without first having an understanding of what is the impact they hope to achieve, which is reflected through their mission, values, strategy and activities.

In 2014, the US education non-profit Chalkbeat wrote a [white paper](#) examining what impact meant to them. As part of the process, they explored what journalism was for: providing accurate information, holding power to account, convening conversations, and serving their communities. They also realised they needed to develop a theory of change for their organisation: “to prioritise stories and decide which had succeeded, we also needed to define what we hoped the work would lead to.”

### Create a theory of change

According to the think tank and consultancy NPC, a **theory of change** is a process or tool that an organisation can use to describe how its activities will lead to the outcomes and impact it wants to achieve, by reflecting on its aims and plans, discussing them with others and making them explicit.

NPC provides a [10-step guide](#) for charities and organisations in the social sector to develop their own theory of change. It covers all aspects, from problem definition and understanding assumptions, to describing the target users/communities and defining outcomes, activities and impact, as well as examples from social sector organisations.

It's key to highlight that this process is made up of two equally valuable components: the **research and discussions** taking place among team members and relevant stakeholders; and the **output**, which can be a plan, framework or diagram that

summarises the discussions with clarity and purposes, which will help you evaluate and communicate your work internally and externally.

After clarifying its mission through the theory of change process, the Chalkbeat team defined their broad journalistic impact categories as “evidence that our stories have influenced either: informed action (the actions readers take based on our reporting) or civic deliberation (the conversations readers have based on our reporting)”.

Only after this step did they create a taxonomy and impact subcategories<sup>2</sup> that could be used by reporters to track and collect examples of impact.



**Exercise:** Using [NPC's 10-step guide](#), set aside a few hours to go through the theory of change process with your team members. Remember to designate someone to lead the process (it can be yourself) and allow enough time for discussions and reflection of each step.

- Communicate to others the goal of this activity and why it's important to do it and in a collaborative way;
- Keep your mind open and be curious – bring an awareness of your organisation's work and activities, but be open to the fact that by the end of the process, you and your team may decide to scrap, change or start new activities. It's not necessarily about trying to make your current work fit squarely into the process;
- The output can be a simple Google Document that summarises your discussion, or something more visual. If you need a **theory of change template**, [Nesta has one](#) (make a copy of the document to fill it out in Google Docs, or download the PDF [here](#)).

## Choose what to measure

As noted earlier, outcomes precede impact. If impact is typically what your organisation hopes to achieve long-term, outcomes are changes that can take place in the near future. Measuring outcomes will help you build evidence and understanding that you are on track to achieve your desired impact.

Outcomes may be about knowledge and/or skills that people gain after engaging with your content and activities, or they can be about changes in attitudes or behaviours. Essentially, how do you want or expect people to be or act differently in their community or in society as a whole?

Considering Impact Architect's model in part 1, you can identify desired changes in awareness or behaviour at various levels: individual level, network level, institutional level, or in terms of the general public.

Some examples of outcomes include:

- Increased voter turnout at local elections

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<sup>2</sup> Page 8 in [Chalkbeat's white paper](#).

- Increased participation in the neighbourhood's volunteering scheme to tackle loneliness
- Improvement of mental health as a result of an initiative/activity tackling isolation of vulnerable groups
- Increased representation of diverse backgrounds and identities in community activities
- Improved access to local information for elderly people via the distribution of a weekly print newsletter
- Increased awareness of the impact of climate change on the local environment
- Increased confidence and development of new storytelling and reporting skills for citizens

You can also define outcomes related to behaviours or attitudes towards your newsroom, for example:

- Increased trust in your brand and the information you publish
- Increased understanding of how local or community-driven reporting is produced
- Increased awareness of the importance of fact-checking techniques
- Increased frequency and type of engagement and participation from community members with your organisation (such as attendance at events, volunteering for the advisory board etc.)



**Reflection prompt:** *Why is it important to also establish outcomes pertaining to changes in behaviours or attitudes related to your organisation, such as trust or engagement? How can these outcomes influence your editorial and financial strategy and sustainability?*

### How to measure impact

Depending on the outcome and its purpose, measurement can be done through qualitative or quantitative indicators, and often a combination of both can help you build a strong case. The choice of indicators will also depend on which ones most closely align with and represent your theory of change.

**Quantitative indicators** are expressed as numbers, percentages, rates of change or ratios. For example: 60 people trained; 10 times more people turning out to vote compared to the previous year; a 50% increase in awareness of the local impact on climate change, etc.

**Qualitative indicators** are reported as statements, testimonials, case studies, stories and reports.

To measure these changes, a variety of **methods and tools** can be employed, including:

- Analytics (such as number of sign-ups to a newsletter or registrations for a workshop, completion rate, social shares, page views, number of comments, number of stories crowdsourced for a project, etc.);
- Surveys and questionnaires – can be done before and after a story or initiative to benchmark and compare people’s understanding/awareness of a topic prior to an intervention taking place;
- Interviews;
- Focus groups;
- Observation – ‘seeing’ things (processes, events) and formally recording the information against a checklist; there’s also expert observation carried out by an external person, or observation as a participatory exercise (the intended beneficiaries of a project or programme are involved in planning an observation exercise, observing, and discussing findings);
- Case studies.



*Exercise: Brainstorm and write down two outcomes for a recent project, initiative or story your organisation conducted. In 10 minutes, write down 3 to 5 qualitative and quantitative indicators you would measure for each outcome.*

## Tools for tracking and collecting impact

If your goal is for outcome and impact measurement and tracking to be something everyone in your newsroom contributes to, the next step is developing a clear process and guidelines for what and how to capture. This can be as basic as a structured document or a spreadsheet or it can be a custom-made tool.

Some news organisations have developed their own impact trackers and made them publicly available for others to use – these may not be entirely applicable to your newsroom, but they can provide a starting point for defining and collecting your own impact:

**Chalkbeat’s MORI**: A WordPress plug-in to record individual impacts, review them over time and export them as a separate spreadsheet.

**Resolve Philly’s Customizable Impact Tracker**: An Airtable base that can be copied or further customised. Includes outcomes such as policy changes and reader feedback, and categories such as micro and macro, national and local, and more.

**Impact Architects’ Impact Tracker**: A customizable Google-based platform that organises and displays impact at the structural, community, and individual levels. Users (reporters, editors, development officers) provide data that feeds a visual, interactive, qualitative data set. It can be downloaded for free through a sign-up form, and the IA team also provides a free, 30-minute consultation and demo of the platform.

## Additional reading and resources

### If you have 5-10 minutes, check out...

- The definitions, labels and tools used by Nature and TBIJ to [measure their impact](#) (*Journalism.co.uk*)
- [Reflections](#) from TBIJ about the line between activism and impact, and what that looks like in practice (*The Bureau for Investigative Journalism*)
- How City Bureau [went through a process of aligning its metrics to its strategic goal](#), resulting in 12 outcomes including civic knowledge and information system resilience (*City Bureau*)
- After [defining what impact](#) looked like, Chalkbeat built a simple tool that makes it easy for reporters to track and measure impact (*Chalkbeat*)

### If you have 15+ minutes to delve deeper, check out...

- In [this detailed impact tracking guide](#) you can find examples of outcomes, together with suggestions for indicators and metrics, alongside short case studies (*Solutions Journalism Network & Fathom*)
- This [accompanying guide](#), also from Solutions Journalism Network, is focused on impact measurement strategies for collaborative journalism, but includes useful planning templates, surveys and examples you can adapt (*Solutions Journalism Network*)

## Part 4: How to articulate impact

Articulating the impact of your work, through a theory of a change process and also publicly, also plays an important role externally – for the community you serve to be aware of how you are serving them, and understand how they could contribute (financially and otherwise) to increase that impact; for funders, who typically want to see impact stories or indicators in grant applications and requests; and for other organisations and institutions that you may want to collaborate or partner with.

The Chalkbeat team makes a point of talking about and [celebrating impact](#) regularly in meetings and communications across the organisation, in their annual report, and by publishing follow up articles to stories they have covered to let people know what changes have occurred in light of their reporting.

The Bureau for Investigative Journalism (TBIJ) takes a similar approach. With an impact editor and several impact producers that embed impact practices in every investigation, they often [write](#) about their evolving approaches to impact. In 2022, the team wrote a [story](#) analysing whether their reporting on home adaptations in the UK from the year prior had made a difference for the community, as well as a [roundup](#) of different types of impact other stories had.

ProPublica dedicates a [section of its website](#) to the impact of its investigative journalism in the United States, referring to impact as “the principal yardstick for our success today”. The outlet has written a [white paper](#) exploring issues relating to



impact measurement as applied to ProPublica's work and to non-profit journalism more widely, and it publishes regular [impact reports](#) that describe the changes its reporting has had.

The Bristol Cable includes [highlights of its impact](#) on the 'about' page of its website, among other milestones that include crowdfunding targets being met or awards received for its reporting. Similarly, The Manchester Meteor showcases [select examples](#) of stories and the changes these contributed to on their 'about' page.

## Part 5: Seven impact resources and case studies

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### If you have 5-10 minutes, check out...

- The Ferret's [highlights of 2022 post](#) (particularly how they let readers know that "our journalism changed Scotland for the better");
- Civio's comprehensive [impact page](#), that neatly summarises the 8 principles underpinning their public service journalism, and details its activities and impact;
- TBIJ's 2021 [impact round-up](#) (interestingly broken down into categories such as 'changing corporate behaviour', 'strengthening justice', 'informing decision-makers' and other types of outcomes).

### If you have 15+ minutes to delve deeper, check out...

Annual reports or impact reports are a useful exercise in articulating your organisation's impact (qualitative and quantitative). They don't have to be 10 pages long – even a single blog post that reminds people of your mission, activities and changes your work contributed to in a given year could be used to start a conversation, as well as to take stock of current and upcoming priorities. Here are a few examples:

- El Tímpano's 20/21 [impact report](#) is broken down into impact categories (inform, amplify, industry-wide and connect) blending stories and testimonials from community members with other recognition the outlet received, including awards and grants;
- City Bureau's [2022 annual report](#) is designed as a mini website, using visuals and illustrations to showcase the impact of each programme through numbers and stories (both at a local level in Chicago, and at a national level);
- Even though it was written in 2014, Chalkbeat's [white paper on impact](#) provides an interesting insight into the organisation's initial process for defining and categorising impact, questions they asked themselves, and how they chose relevant outcomes to match their journalism.
- **Bonus resource:** [Systems thinking for journalists toolkit](#), by Journalism+Design. A general awareness and understanding of the [systems](#) at play in the topics or issues you cover will help you in the process of establishing outcomes and impact goals as



part of your theory of change, and this toolkit can help you get started. For example, El Tímpano [applied systems thinking](#) to its reporting on health and overcrowded housing, starting with a 'stakeholder map' and community contributions (*Nieman Lab*)