Metrics Impact Project Report

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The Metrics Impact Project entered its experimental phase six months ago, in March. It thus seems appropriate to send out a brief report on where we are to date. This report will be accompanied by a much fuller report from the researchers.

**Interventions To Date**

We issued a call for collaboration proposal in March 2014, and received the first proposal on March 18. From April through August, 7 interventions launched, with 3 more in process, for an average of 1.4 collaborations per month. For a quick look at these collaboration, see the accompanying spreadsheet.

The first collaborative effort, focused on charter schools, launched on April 24, 2014, followed quickly by a collaboration on immigration. These two collaborations launched quickly because the lead outlet had already planned a story on the subject matter; what made the effort an “intervention” was recasting it as a collaboration rather than a one-shot effort.

Actually asking outlets to create new content, in a collaborative framework, was much more difficult. The next set of stories, on food and democracy (a new topic) and reproductive justice, launched in June, followed in August by stories on charter schools and immigration. A final set of stories created under the current protocal will launch in October, focused on food and democracy, charter schools and immigration. One last collaboration, on reproductive justice and fracking, may launch in December.

**Interventions: The First Protocol**

The initial protocol called for 3 or more outlets to come together to create new content around a shared topic, and to jointly publish and promote that content. Early hurdles included ensuring that the content was actually new (i.e. had not been planned previously) and that the publication of content was timed within a short window.

One collaborative effort, a set of stories combining health care with immigration reform, failed because the lead outlet involved (News Taco) did not have the capacity to share their editorial nor did they understand how essential timing would be. News Taco had data many outlets wanted to use to create their own stories, but they held the data too tightly and ended up publishing three of their own stories over a month-long period.

After the first set of interventions, researchers asked that the stories all debut on the same day. That was done from June onward. New hurdles arose, however. Outlets argued that the financial incentive ($500-$1500 per story) was not enough to cover the extra time involved in creating new content in the context of a collaboration, pointing to extra time needed for phone meetings and coordination between reporters, editors and social media personnel at a number of outlets. Large outlets in particular saw short-term financial downside and not enough long-term upside.

As a result of the costs to outlets of participating, the project had to spend more dollars per intervention than originally planned. The hope was that this extra expense would decrease as outlets learned to work with each other and saw the benefit of the project. We did see some decrease along those lines (from payments of $2000/outlet to $750/outlet) but the financial cost continued to be outsized compared to the value researchers derived from each intervention.

The good news is that the results from these interventions seem to show that the storied have impact, and that the impact is measurable. However, as we had expected, there is a tremendous amoung of “noise” in the media world, such that we would have to run many more interventions under this protocol in order to produce academically rigorous results.

With only a core of 14-15 outlets willing to participate fully, it has been challenging to create enough instances of intervention. We had hoped to create 4-5 interventions per month; instead we have only been able to produce an average of 1.4 interventions per month.

**Interventions: New Protocol Proposed**

We knew all along that the protocol might need to be changed. Fortunately, a sufficient number of interventions were performed under the first protocol to indicate what could be improved. The second protocol will follow these rules:

1) Collaborations will be defined as instances of joint promotion rather than nose-to-tail working relationships.

2) Outlets will not be asked to create content they had not otherwise planned to create.

3) Outlets will be asked to allow researchers to name the publication date for content. Specifically, outlets that agree in advance to co-promote a set of stories will be told that those stories may be run week 2 but not week 1 of a month.

This new protocol aims to incentivize outlets to create many more interventions by diminishing the downsides of participating, namely, the extra time needed for editorial conferences and pre-publication content-sharing, and the cost of creating content not otherwise planned. At the same time, the new protocol will enable researchers to better randomize the interventions.

Because the new protocol does not require outlets to do anything other than to hold content once in a while, and to co-promote content, outlets should also not require a significant financial incentive. Thus, this new protocol is also designed to conserve funding for the project as a whole.

Under the new protocol, we aim to increase the number of interventions to 6-8 a month, with 2-3 interventions per topic per month.

**Interventions: A Qualitative Good**

In closing this report, it should be noted that the interventions undertaken via the Voqal grant during this six month period have had extraordinary positive qualitative impacts on the outlets themselves.

1. **Partnerships**

Several outlets that joined together because of the financial incentive issued by the project have found that they benefit from working together. In particular, these outlets have forged much closer relationships:

In These Times and The Progressive/ Center for Media and Democracy

Bitch magazine and Feministing.com (both feminist)

Feet in Two Worlds and City Limits (both NY based)

Grist and Earth Island Journal (both eco-based)

2. **New Techniques for Reaching Audience**

As part of the experiment, we have pushed outlets to seek new ways to reach audience around their stories. Some of these methods are clearly promising as a way of building audience, whether or not they build impact:

* **Reposts:** Feet in 2 Worlds, in particular, found that very large outlets such as the HuffPo and WNYC are interested in reposting their content.
* **Media Matters:** The feminist outlets discovered they had a true friend in Media Matters, which is willing to do PR for their stories and also provide them with rich data.
* **Working with Activists:** The pesticide group found that doing a pre-launch briefing for activists led activists to repost their articles. As a result, we will be creating briefings for activists for future collaborations.
* **Tweet Chats, MicroSites and More:** The collaborations also gave outlets an opportunity to experiment with new tools for reaching audience. In general, outlets felt that microsites were not worth the time, money or effort. However, tweetchats around twitter hashtags led to increased reader participation in social media. Outlets in general became more interested in such experiments as part of a collaboration, which felt different from their day to day work life.

3**. Improved Editorial Quality**

Editors and reporters both confessed that they learned an incredible amount from working with editors and reporters outside of their organization. Different outlets have different standards for fact-checking, proofreading, and so forth, and they ask different questions of their reporters. Several individuals reported that being involved in these collaborations felt like going back to J-school.

In short, this study has so far produced an intriguing set of results, both in terms of quantitative impact and, perhaps surprisingly, in other categories that we had not anticipated.

**Next Steps and Support**

By changing the protocol, we aim in part to conserve the initial funding for this project that was dedicated to encouraging media outlet participation. We currently have $42,000 available to implement the second protocol; given that we are asking outlets for less, this should be enough money to incentivize them to participate.

However, we must once again ask for project management support as the project enters a new fiscal year. The new protocol will be time-intensive, requiring the organizing of 5-7 collaborative instances per month. We appreciate the support of Voqal through this project.