Measuring Impact

Search {not} vs [now]

Add more results.

Rewrite first graph

One key aim of journalism is to educate the public about specific instances of corruption, social injustice, and institutional inequity (and possible solutions to the same) with the intention that the public, so educated, will create a more just society. That movement, from reporting to action, is how we define impact. [changing people’s minds]

How can we produce the impact we seek on a consistent basis? That’s the question the Media Consortium set out to answer in 2011.

Theory. We started with the belief that to produce impact we would first need to be able to measure impact. Unfortunately, journalists have not yet developed tools to measure the kind of impact we seek to produce, so we had to build a tool—and the infrastucture to test and to use it.

For a tool, we chose sentiment analysis[[1]](#footnote-1). Working closely with Professor Gary King, the Albert Weatherhead III Professor and Director of the Institute of Quantitative Social Science at Harvard, we decided to measure whether particular instances of journalism moved the public to change the way they talk about a particular issue.

For example, after a story profiling undocumented immigrants living in detention camps, will more people be sympathetic to undocumented immigrants? King’s method uses Twitter as the source of data on sentiment. Looking at the entire Twitter firehose, King can analyze all tweets before and after a story comes out, looking to see if sentiment on the deportation of immigrants changes in a statistically meaningful way. This method goes beyond looking at hashtags and actually uses machine + human learning to analyze the content of the tweets as either pro immigrant deportation or anti immigrant deportation. Finally, we had a tool to measure impact!

The next step was to set up the experiment. Most people believe that the larger an outlet’s reach, the bigger an impact it will have. However, using the theory of collective impact developed by John Kania and Mark Kramer[[2]](#footnote-2), we hypothesized that if small outlets copublished and copromoted a story, their impact would be greater than the sum of their user numbers would suggest.

Finally, to meet the researchers’ needs, we had to randomize the experiment. We thus asked outlets to agree to publish on a date specified by the researchers, within a predetermined range.

Practice. Because we were pioneering a new tool, conceptualizing the project took almost a year. We then had to bring the Media Consortium outlets on board as willing participants. That was no easy task.

The Media Consortium is composed of 80 progressive news outlets. These outlets pride themselves on their independence—and subversiveness. We spent much of 2013 and 2014 creating tests to determine what kinds of experiments the outlets would be willing to do, and how to set up protocols that would meet both the researcher’ needs and be acceptable to these independent journalists. Finally, we had to communicate with the editors and publishers multiple times, via emails, phone conference calls, conferences, and other methods, in order to recruit outlets willing to participate.

We launched the experimental protocol in April 2015. We aimed to include 25 outlets and to create 30 to 40 experimental instances. We are very pleased to report that in 10 months we included 36 outlets and created 35 experimental instances. In addition, we created 6 collaborations that failed to meet experimental protocols and so were not measured.

Results. The first result was one we had not expected. Outlets found they benefited from working together. For the outlets, a culture of collaboration led to:

1. More engagement from users
2. Higher quality content (and more content) on a wider range of topics
3. Professional development for reporters and editors

In short, the initial Voqal investment has produced an infrastructure of collaboration that is beneficial in itself. This development also means that future experiments will proceed much more quickly.

Secondly, we were pleased to find that these small outlets do have measurable impact. The researchers are still analyzing the results, but the first rough analysis shows an impact of xxx. Researchers are not using additional techniques to check and refine this first analysis, and will have final numbers by the Voqal Boards meeting.

Bottom Line. This research project has been successful.

* We have created a tool that provides a meaningful measure of impact, defined as the movement of users from consuming information to acting on that information.
* We have created a culture of collaboration among formerly fractious progressive news outlets.
* We have built an infrastructure that will allow us to conduct further impact experiments in an efficient and effective way.

The progressive media always knew we were making an impact, but that impact was not visible. Our experiment uses sentiment analysis to reveal that impact. The question we now want to ask is how can we learn more about how our outlets achieve this impact, so that we can grow it. That will be phase2.

Footnotes:

Actual methodology:

Gary did a complex analysis of the results which he hasn’t explained to me yet. That analysis ended up being a little muddy. To confirm results he is looking at two other metrics:

Two other levels:

1. Google analytics

2. Influencing national media on the issue.

Again, these are not the primary tools, but supplementary tools. His idea is that if we can nail down these layers then we can do a new intervention that can go from inception of article to clicks, social on article, viral.

John: this is laborious

Gary: if we only published the final result it looks noisy, and people would tell us to collect more data.

2 pages on what happened--due Friday

A memo on what we aspire to do--due Friday

Not mostly about data but about the aspiration

Viral stories are visible; but what about stories that are not as visible?

If we could know about them than we could figure out how to amplify them!

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1. King’s seminal work on this topic can be found here: Daniel Hopkins and Gary King. 2010. “[A Method of Automated Nonparametric Content Analysis for Social Science](http://gking.harvard.edu/files/abs/words-Abs.shtml).” American Journal of Political Science, 1, 54: 229–247, 01/2010. Copy at <http://j.mp/1M2zFGN> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stanford Social Innovation Review Winter 2011 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)