Investing in Impact:
Media Summits Reveal Pressing Needs, Tools for Evaluating Public Interest Media

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This spring, National Public Radio launched a new blog, Go Figure, authored by members of its Audience Insight and Research Group. In a April 1 post, blogger Vince Lampone wrote, "Nearly all listeners have been moved to take action by NPR at some point in their lives. For instance, two in three have done further research into a topic, most have visited a website, and nearly 25% have become involved with a local or national political issue as a result of listening."

As Lampone's post suggests, NPR is just one of many media outlets, researchers, and funders that are currently struggling to answer the pressing question: "How do you know if your media matters?"

To gather answers, American University's Center for Social Media (CSM) and The Media Consortium (TMC) organized a series of Impact Summits in seven cities throughout the first quarter of 2010. The two organizations collaborated on this process because they share an interest in developing strategies and standards for public interest media: CSM focuses its research on the evolution of public media, and TMC serves as a network for independent outlets.

The summits—hosted with allied organizations in Chicago, New York, Miami, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Washington, DC, and Boston—drew together dozens of leading public and independent media makers, funders and researchers, representing a range of what we term here, "public interest media projects." Such projects range from hyperlocal to national, and represent a variety of practices, including investigative journalism, advocacy journalism, documentary film, public and community broadcasting, gaming for change, citizen reporting, and building access and media tools for diverse communities.

In this analysis we outline the major arguments for assessing impact, synthesize the **five top impact evaluation needs**, and propose **five new tools** for public interest media assessment.

Needs include:

1) **Getting on the same page**: *Developing shared categories of impact assessment*
2) **Following the story:** *Tracking the movement of content and frames across platforms and over time*
3) **Contextualizing the anecdotal:** *Refining methods for analyzing shifts in public awareness, deliberation and behavior*
4) **Understanding our users:** *Creating more sophisticated profiles of audience demographics, habits and concerns*
5) **Moving beyond market assumptions:** *Defining the uses and limitations of commercial metrics schemes for assessing public interest media*

Proposed tools to help public interest media makers assess their impact include:

1) **Putting it all in one place:** *Building a unified social media dashboard*
2) **Chasing the frame:** *Building a social issue buzz tracker*
3) **Telling your story of impact:** *Developing model formats and processes for strategically communicating outcomes*
4) **Asking the right questions:** *Creating common survey tools for evaluation and audience assessment*
5) **Identifying networks:** *Creating a suite of tools that track the growth, health and effectiveness of networks*

Last, but not least, we outline why funding for joint impact assessment projects is the true "killer app."

Why assess impact?

Currently, there is no consensus around what constitutes impact for public interest media. In fact, the very topic can lead to some heated exchanges: While many public interest media makers argue that without clear goals and corresponding outcomes, it is difficult to understand or explain their relevance for their communities, traditional journalists suggest that calls for evaluation threaten their objectivity and limit the focus of their reporting.

Recognizing the legitimate concerns about evaluating public interest media, we also believe that the field cannot advance without tackling the question of impact head on. To be clear, effectiveness is not synonymous with advocacy. Traditional journalistic values include holding the powerful to account, engaging users in dialogue about issues, and delivering timely, relevant information—all outcomes that can be tracked. Shifts in technology and user habits mean that old assumptions about what constitutes impact must be reconsidered. Simply reporting on an issue or community is no longer the final outcome in an era of multiplatform, participatory communication.

Understanding the impact of public interest media is critical for many reasons. Assessment can help to demonstrate the value of such projects to policymakers, support funders in making reasoned investments, allow media makers to communicate with users about what they're accomplishing, and force them to revisit and tweak their strategic plans to make their projects work better. Evaluation tools can also help to reveal how content moves through multiple platforms, is accessed by users and shared through networks (or not!), and last but not least, influences both individuals and the public dialogue. High-quality metrics could also help to direct new funding streams to a field that is woefully underresourced. As the recent Media Consortium report, *The Big Thaw* suggests, successful business models are based on shared metrics. "[The] more reliable and commonly accepted metrics emerge to measure content performance, the more that organizations can estimate the value they create. And, others can estimate how much they would be willing to pay for it. Money will flow to where there is value in the chain."

Accordingly, foundations that support public interest media are asking themselves hard questions about evaluation. An April 2010 report, *Funding Media, Strengthening Democracy: Grantmaking for the 21st Century*, published by Grant Makers in Film + Electronic Media notes, "The social impact of grantmaking can now be more specifically measured...using technology and tools that the web provides. Indeed, media grantmakers may be able to develop systems—for their own grantmaking as well as grantmaking in other sectors—that track where media has been instrumental in increasing public awareness and engagement, strengthening social movements, effecting social change."

What might those systems track? After analyzing the conversations from the dozens of participants at each of the seven summits, we have identified five key categories for assessment, five broad needs of media organizations struggling with evaluation and five types of tools that would help public interest media makers and funders to better gauge their projects' impact. We hope that this analysis will spur both further conversations and new investments in this area.

Five needs: What do public interest media need in order to evaluate their impact?

1) Getting on the same page*: Developing shared categories of impact assessment*

In order to make meaningful comparisons across projects and inform strategic planning, media makers, funders and project leaders need common rubrics to structure evaluation. Shared benchmarks can also serve as a basis for collaboration or healthy competition among organizations who share common goals.

At the summits, we asked attendees to describe their tools and approaches for evaluation across five categories:

- *Reach:* How many users encounter a media project or outlet, and if those numbers can reliably be broken down by key demographics
- *Relevance:* Whether a media project gains notice due to its pertinence to the broader news cycle, or its relationship to a targeted user group
- *Inclusion:* Whether a media project includes diverse staff, sources and users, through explicit design, open architecture, or both
- *Engagement:* Whether a media project's users are moving beyond just consuming content to a range of more participatory behaviors, such as co-creation, redistribution, commenting, or action
- *Influence:* Whether a media project reaches inflencers, shifts frames, or pioneers new production practices

Attendees offered many fascinating insights and suggested additional categories for impact assessment. The Center for Social Media will report on these conversations in a forthcoming paper, due out on June 7. However, rigorous comparisons will require a much more systematic and wide-ranging collective effort.

Perhaps the field of public interest media could take some lessons from other nonprofit fields which have engaged in collaborative assessment efforts. A July 2009 report published by FSG Social Impact Advisors, *Breakthroughs in Shared Measurement and Social Impact*, examines shared platforms, systems and adaptive learning models for evaluation in several fields, including nonprofits concerned with public health, arts administration, education, and poverty. "Funding individual initiatives and evaluating their impact in isolation rarely solves complex social problems," the report notes. "Instead, lasting progress depends on improving the alignment, coordination, and learning of the entire constellation of organizations that affect an issue."

2) Following the story: *Tracking the movement of content and frames across platforms and over time*

For many summit attendees, influencing the public discourse around a particular issue, perspective or policy is a critical component of their project's mission. While there may be occasional flashpoints of exposure that are easier to identify, public interest media makers express difficulties in tracking the long-term trajectory of how their productions have changed frames, minds or policies over time.

Several summit attendees expressed concern that few tools exist to monitor the "slow burn" of coverage that might not be hot in the moment, but gathers attention and urgency over months or even years. How are people using media content, they asked, to support and grow movements?

Piecing together this trajectory involves both traditional public relations methods—cataloguing press coverage and locating mentions across the social media universe—and more in-depth content analysis that traces the way that the context of coverage shifts. Simply adding up the estimated number of readers, listeners and viewers who might have encountered a story or project doesn't provide any real insight into how that moment might have moved them. While new semantic search tools offer powerful and promising ways to track such shifts, in the end, qualitative analysis is still needed. For example, in the New York summit, we discussed how efforts to tie environmental and economic issues together through narratives about "green jobs" succeeded in reaching influencers—most notably, several 2008 presidential candidates— but failed when the substance of the proposals did not travel along with the newly popularized term.

3) Contextualizing the anecdotal: *Refining methods for analyzing shifts in public awareness, deliberation and behavior*

Many summit attendees offered tantalizing anecdotes about users' reactions to their content, but were frustrated in their efforts to connect these accounts with broader trends or concrete outcomes. Few have the funds to conduct surveys or focus groups before and after a project's distribution or to dedicate staff hours to tracking down data about users' contributions, conversations and next steps. In many cases the vagueness of media makers' goals—e.g. to "raise awareness"—also foiled attempts to track impact.

More successful evaluation efforts were able to incorporate mechanisms for data collection directly into the projects, such as social issue games or citizen journalism projects, which can provide users with multiple opportunities to respond. In general, however, the public interest media field needs better models for transforming anecdotes into data points that reveal trends and attitude shifts. The answer, however, is not to simply flee to the safety of numerical measures of success. By systematically collecting and interpreting qualitative responses over time, media producers can use them to support ongoing user engagement, fundraising, and long term strategizing.

4) Understanding our users: *Creating more sophisticated profiles of audience demographics, habits and concerns*

Even many of the largest public interest media projects lack access to high-quality demographic research and user models that would help them to build sophisticated content, distribution and outreach strategies. Attendees at the Los Angeles summit noted that they need not only more accurate and deeper information about their current users, but also data about how those users fit into the larger universe of potential audience members. Another concern was how demographic data could be used to predict how different user groups might respond to different types of engagement appeals.

More general data on shifting media habits among various demographic and regional groups is also crucial. For example, the typologies of media users currently being developed by the Pew Internet and American Life project could provide important insights for public interest media organizations.

5) Moving beyond market assumptions: *Defining the uses and limitations of commercial metrics schemes for assessing public interest media*

While many summit attendees are using commercial tools and services to track reach, engagement and relevance, their usefulness in this arena is limited by a focus on delivering audiences to advertisers. Public interest media makers want to know how users are applying news and information in their personal and civic lives, not just whether they're purchasing something as a result of exposure to a product. They are just as interested in the voting habits of users as they are in their brand preferences.

At the Washington, DC summit we discussed how commercial services such as Arbitron and Nielsen are not only prohibitively expensive, but provide limited and conflicting demographic information about users. However, public interest media outlets are not ready to take on the task of building standalone audience tracking systems, both because the challenge is too steep and because they want to be able to compare themselves to external commercial outlets.

Five tools: What tools will help public interest media assess and support their impact?

After we discussed overarching impact evaluation needs, we asked summit attendees to think creatively about the tools that could really help them understand and communicate their projects' impact. We then synthesized these ideas and suggestions into five recommended tools:

1) Putting it all in one place: *Building a unified social media dashboard*

Many summit attendees expressed frustration with the inconsistency of current social media analysis schemes. "Dashboards"—which combine and analyze a range of data points on one screen—are in wide use across the online media environment. For example, web traffic analysis tools such as Google Analytics or Mint allow webmasters to track the numbers of site visitors over time, page views, and time spent on a site. Such figures then gain more relevance when compared to the traffic of comparable projects; services like Alexa and Technorati index sites and blogs in order to provide comparative rankings.

However, many public interest media projects are not only too small to show up on these larger comparative services, but are increasingly using social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and YouTube to distribute content, rather than centralizing distribution of their work on a single site. By developing or adapting a unified dashboard that integrates not only site-level metrics, but commonly tracked social media metrics, public interest media makers could develop their own comparative indices. This has already been attempted to some extent in the public broadcasting space—for example, a recent *Current* article detailed how traffic to public broadcasting station sites stack up against their broadcast equivalents, and PBS has recently started to construct a social media metrics dashboard—but these efforts are still nascent and need both support and broader collaboration.

In addition, public interest media makers could work together to develop tailored dashboard categories related to public engagement, such as the various data streams and reactions tracked by WITNESS, and to help rank different levels of engagement according to time, effort and substance.

2) Chasing the frame: *Building a social issue buzz tracker*

As noted above, many public interest media makers are seeking better ways to track both coverage on specific issues and the movement of their content across various platforms. They hope to pinpoint the "aha" moment, when a story or notion moves from merely interesting to spreadable.

This is a rising area of development online, with sites such as Addict-o-matic and Tube Mogul helping marketers and content producers track the dissemination of their content across a range of social media platforms. More specialized tools have also been purpose-built for the public interest media sector. For example, Linkfluence tracks the movement of issues across ideologically similar blogospheres to compare how they are trending, and the Media Cloud project helps users compare how certain topics are being covered across major news sources. Data visualizations are powerful components of both of these projects.

More investment in building a social issue buzz tracker that combines visualizations, traditional public relations tracking, and social media metrics could yield significant new insights and a tighter integration between experiments, evaluation, and strategy.

3) Telling your story of impact: *Developing model formats and processes for strategically communicating outcomes*

Ironically, while many public interest media makers are trained and experienced storytellers, they are often at a loss when telling the story of their own impact. Collecting and consolidating creative and effective ways to substantiate impact could help the field to standardize this important process.

For example, The American Independent News Network requires its reporters to demonstrate four "impacts" per year—substantive, trackable outcomes such as shifts in policy that follow on the heels of an investigative report, or exposure and trial of corrupt officials. At the Miami summit, Ben Berkowitz of SeeClickFix, a citizen media project that allows users to report community issues such as vandalism, trash and potholes, noted that for his project impact is very clear: the pothole is reported as filled. While not all media projects will have such tangible outcomes, public interest media makers could still work together to share templates for reporting impact to funders and users, as well as to capture that information for internal decisionmaking. Summit attendees expressed a particular interest in sharing ways to reveal the impact of coverage and storytelling over time, rather than just the "snapshot" approach represented by many evaluation methods.

4) Asking the right questions: *Creating common survey tools for evaluation and audience assessment*

Summit attendees suggested that they would be interested in developing two types of joint survey questions: questions addressed to users of their own projects about impact, and questions appended to annual, national polls that could shed better light on media consumption habits and preferences.

Within the field, expertise in designing high-quality survey instruments is limited: partnering with a university or a marketing firm might be one way for media makers and outlets to jointly develop valid surveys to see how their work is engaging users. Contracting with large polling firms is a more expensive and complex prospect; more research is needed to suggest how best to work with them, and what kinds of questions might yield useful data.

5) Identifying networks: *Creating a suite of tools that track the growth, health and effectiveness of networks*

While many of the summit attendees are still producing content for legacy platforms, or using online platforms as simple dissemination tools, the most cutting-edge projects are eager to develop evaluation tools that measure the growth of networks around their projects.

For example, the [Public Insight Network](#) is currently seeking evaluators to help them learn more about how their network of citizen sources is changing newsroom habits, providing a more diverse base of sources for stories, and creating community-level impacts tied to coverage. At the San Francisco summit, we discussed how influencers can function in networks by distributing content via social media platforms and serving as ambassadors for public interest media projects. A first step in better understanding this emerging field might be a project to share best practices.

Funding: the Killer App

Based on our analysis of these summits, we believe that the the most immediate next step is to embark on a set of tool-building projects that will involve multiple funders and outlets. Building tools iteratively and collaboratively will help to surface which shared categories of assessment are most important. With its forthcoming report, the Center for Social Media is positioned to help inform the development of a shared social media dashboard by working collaboratively with public media allies and developers. In addition, The Media Consortium is particularly interested in working with its network of members to brainstorm and test a buzz-tracking tool via its [Incubation and Innovation Lab](#), which brings independent media outlets together to work on collaborative projects.

For public interest media impact assessment to advance, however, the field's foundations and investors are going to need to dedicate more funds explicitly to evaluation when funding production. Across the board, summit attendees identified the need for more support to hire evaluators, purchase access to commercial tracking services, obtain evaluation training, and share best practices.

In addition, several attendees affirmed the need for the field as a whole to work on the sorts of joint frameworks and tools identified in the FSG report. This will require unprecedented collaboration and resources. As that report notes:

> The barriers to developing these systems, however, are formidable. They require a far-reaching vision, millions of dollars in investment, and years of effort by large coalitions of independent organizations. Once established, ongoing staffing is essential to provide technical assistance to participants and to validate the data they submit. Strong leadership is essential to overcome the initial reluctance of nonprofits and funders alike: Nonprofits frequently fear the complexity, disclosure, management time, and potential for funding biases that these systems may produce, while funders often hesitate to invest time and money in a reporting system that does not directly advance their immediate program goals.

But such an investment of time and money is worth it, if it helps to productively clarify the relationships between media funding, media production, and social impacts.

Authors:

Jessica Clark directs the Center for Social Media's [Future of Public Media Project](#), and is a Knight Media Policy Fellow at the New America Foundation. **Tracy Van Slyke** is the Project Director of The Media Consortium and was recently named one of "30 Women Making History" by the Women's Media Center. Together, they are the co-authors of *[Beyond the Echo Chamber: Reshaping Politics Through Networked Progressive Media](#),* published in February by the New Press.

APPENDIX: Impact Summit Attendees

MacArthur Foundation—Chicago, IL
February 16, 2010

- John Bracken, Program Officer, MacArthur Foundation
- Brenda Butler, Executive Director, Columbia Links
- Salome Chasnoff, Executive Director, Beyondmedia Education
- Mindy Faber, Coordinator, Chicago Youth Voices Network
- Mark Hallett, Senior Journalism Program Officer, McCormick Foundation
- Cristina Hanson, Director of Television Engagement, National Center for Media Engagement
- Josh Kalven, Editor, *Progress Illinois*
- Janet Liao, Program Officer, McCormick Foundation
- Alden Loury, Publisher, *The Chicago Reporter*
- Torey Malatia, President and CEO, WBEZ
- Gordon Mayer, Vice President, Community Media Workshop
- Jeff McCarter, Executive Director, Free Spirit Media
- Ethan Michaeli, Publisher, *Residents' Journal*
- Justine Nagen, Executive Director, Kartemquin Films
- Elspeth Revere, Vice President, General Program, MacArthur Foundation
- Steve Rhodes, Publisher and Editor, *Beachwood Reporter*
- Elizabeth Libbet Richter, Vice President, Chicago Community Trust
- Maya Schenwar, Executive Director, Truthout.org
- Wendy Turner, Vice President of Systems, Vocalo

Center for Media Culture and History, New York University—New York, NY
February 23, 2010

- Barbara Abrash, Director of Public Programs, Center for Media, Culture and History
- Rich Benjamin, Senior Fellow, Demos
- Claudine Brown, Director, Arts and Culture Program, Nathan Cummings Foundation
- Michelle Byrd, Independent Media Consultant
- Naomi Jackson, Program Associate, Democratic Practice, Rockefeller Brothers Fund
- Esther Kaplan, Investigative Editor, The Nation Institute
- Genaddy Kolker, Online Communications Coordinator, Demos
- Meg McLagan, Co-director, *Lioness*
- Kara Oehler, Producer, Mapping Main Street
- Sameer Padania, Hub Manager, WITNESS
- Erin Roberts, Operations Manager, Creative Initiatives, WNET
- Peter Rothberg, Associate Publisher, *The Nation*
- Suzanne Seggarman, President, Games for Change
- Benjamin Shute, Program Director, Democratic Practice, Rockefeller Brothers Fund
- Daria Sommers, Co-director, *Lioness*
- Lina Srivastiva, Principal, Lina Srivastiva Consulting
- Rachel Sterne, CEO, Ground Report

- Peter Teague, Program Director, Ecological Innovation, Nathan Cummings Foundation
- Katrina vanden Huevel, Editor and Publisher, *The Nation*

We Media Conference— Miami, FL
March 11, 2010

Presenters:
- Patrice O'Neill, Executive Director, The Working Group
- Andrew Haeg, Editor, Public Insight Network

Participants:
- Interested We Media conference attendees

The Norman Lear Center—Los Angeles, CA
March 16, 2010

- Johanna Blakely, Deputy Director, Norman Lear Center
- Kristin Feeley, Manager, Sundance Documentary Film Program
- Tracy Fleishman, Co-Founder, Cultural Front Productions
- Marty Kaplan, Director, Norman Lear Center
- Tanya Miller, Co-host, Cyberfrequencies
- Sarah Newman, Research Manager, Social Action & Advocacy, Participant Media
- Alex Schaffert, Digital Media Director, Southern California Public Radio
- Sangita Shresthova, Acting Research Director, Civic Engagement Lab
- Kathy Spillar, Executive Editor, *Ms.* Magazine

NAMAC offices, 9th Street Independent Film Center—San Francisco
March 18, 2010

- Tanja Aitamurto, Journalist and researcher
- Pauline Bartolone, Producer and Online Editor, National Radio Project/Making Contact
- David Cohn, Director, Spot.us
- Cheryl Contee, Co-Founder, Jack & Jill Politics and Partner, Fission Strategy
- Sophie Constaninou, Director/Director of Photography, Citizen Film
- Helen DeMichiel, Co-director, NAMAC
- Eric Doversberger, Information Systems Analyst, Google
- Yolanda Hippensteele, Independent Media Consultant
- Angela Jones, Program Associate, Northern California Grantmakers
- Linda Jue, Director/Executive Editor, G.W. Williams Center for Independent Journalism
- Debayani Kar, Communications Manager, *ColorLines*
- Steve Katz, Publisher, *Mother Jones*
- Wendy Levy, Director of Creative Programming, BAVC
- Justin Louie, Senior Analyst, Blueprint Research & Design
- Matthew Meschery, Director of Digital Initiatives, ITVS
- David Michaelis, Vice President of Current Affairs, Link TV
- Patrice O'Neill, Executive Director, The Working Group

- Jeff Perlstein, Independent Media Consultant
- Lisa Rudman, Executive Director, National Radio Project/Making Contact
- Christa Scharfenberg, Associate Director, Center for Investigative Reporting
- Ellen Schneider, Executive Director, Active Voice
- Lissa Soep, Senior Producer and Education Director, Youth Radio

The New America Foundation—Washington, DC
April 9, 2010

- Helen Brunner, Director, Media Democracy Fund
- Terry Bryant, Vice President, Media Strategies, Corporation for Public Broadcasting
- Terry Clifford, Co-Chief Executive Officer, Station Resource Group
- Tom Glaisyer, Knight Media Policy Fellow, New America Foundation
- Chris Golden, Founder, MyImpact
- James Losey, Program Associate for the Open Technology Initiative, New America Foundation
- Sylvia Lovato, Director, PBS Kids, GO!
- Doug McKenney, Director, Public Awareness Initiative, Corporation for Public Broadcasting
- Charles Meyer, Executive Director, National Center for Media Engagement

The Association of Independents in Radio (AIR)—Dorchester, MA
April 15, 2010

- Mira Allen, VISTA Leader, Transmission Project
- Lo Audley, Office Manager, AIR
- John Davidow, Executive Editor, WBUR
- Sheila Leddy, Executive Director, The Fledgling Fund
- Robin Lubbock, Director of New Media, WBUR
- Erin Mishkin, Membership Director, AIR
- Rekha Murthy, Director of Projects and Partnerships, Public Radio Exchange (PRX)
- Kavita Pillay, Managing Editor, The World Project, WGBH
- Belinda Rawlins, Director, Transmission Project
- Colin Rhinesmith, Community Media and Technology Manager, Cambridge Community TV
- Sue Schardt, Executive Director, AIR