

## What is Impact?

(Jim Russell, DRAFT 04/30/13)

All of us in public service fields, like public broadcasting, are having to learn a new vocabulary. No longer is it enough to merely produce and broadcast programs. Not enough even to broadcast and engage in active social media and interaction with our audiences. All of these are only means to an end, and the end is to have impact. This is so because increasingly, funders want to determine if their grants are being used to good purpose. One participant in the field put it simply: “If we can’t measure our work, we’re not sure we’re putting resources in the right direction.”

But what is impact and how on earth do you measure it?

The name of the game is

---



Not quantity.  
Not scoops.  
Not in-depth reports.  
Not even frequency.

But

# Impact

**DRAFT**

**Eric Newton**, Advisor to the President of The Knight Foundation puts it this way:

“In general, too many media people say they created impact because they did a story that in theory was seen by an audience of XXX size.

That’s not impact, that’s distribution.”

The National Center for Media Engagement, in a report published in March of 2013, quoted a public media professional saying much the same thing:

*“Basic audience ratings data are used because they are standardized and the most economical way to get a quick notion of what you’re doing.”*

But as the Center’s report states, “Reach and use measures are not necessarily proxies for impact, nor do they reflect just how much, or how deeply, an individual values the organization or its content. **They are primarily measuring outputs rather than outcomes.**”

In April, 2013, the Knight Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation announced a \$3.25-million grant to the University of Southern California to probe more deeply into [how to measure impact](#). In its press release, Knight Foundation observed:

“Despite advances in big data, surprisingly primitive metrics are still commonly used to assess audience engagement with content and its effects on individual perceptions and behaviors. Page views, TV ratings, ‘likes’ and retweets alone don’t reveal how media influences people’s awareness or actions. This is a challenge for organizations that hope to connect audiences with important social issues and support long-term change.”

A cute *New Yorker* cartoon points up our angst over this “impact” question.



It seems that neither we nor the wolves can avoid defining it. We're back to Knight's Eric Newton.

*"Impact is if that mattered."*

**"Impact is evidence of change: Whether there were new laws, new institutions, new funding patterns, investigations, people going to jail, etc. "**

When something is really hard to measure, we tend to create a way around confronting it head on.

As Newton points out:

*"Many people consider "creating public debate" a surrogate for impact. While I agree that engagement metrics have value – whether people commented, shared, voted, etc. – they are only interim steps toward actual impact. The theory is they are related, that over time large audiences mean large engagement and that means impact. But that's only theoretical. When people produce actual change, when they create hard impact, they tend to drop all the interim, surrogate measures and just report what they actually did."*

*"Our Chauncey Bailey project sent the journalist's murderer and two henchmen to jail. How do I know? The district attorney prosecuting the case said it did. Therefore I never received any inflated reports from the*

grantees saying they reached X who debated Y. Only that the investigation made Z happen.”

**“The real problem with tracking impact is we don’t produce as much of it as we wish we did,** or when we do, it is not the type we like to talk about. That leads to all kinds of issues involving our own difficulties with transparency, accountability, etc. “

“These are all my opinions, of course. “

Eric points us to the ProPublica web site for examples of having impact. In their annual reports, ProPublica cites these examples:

- The New Orleans Police Department is now subject to federal monitoring, with three officers convicted and three others still awaiting trial in cases where our reporting led the way;
- Our national coverage of the damage wrought to homes by defective Chinese drywall spurred remedial action by Habitat for Humanity in Louisiana and caused home improvement chain Lowe’s to dramatically increase the money it offered to customers harmed by their use of drywall purchased in their stores;
- A new law was enacted in Illinois tightening standards of informed consent in the administration of psychotropic drugs in nursing homes;
- The Food and Drug Administration restricted the use of an MRI drug manufactured by General Electric that has been implicated in harming patients with kidney disease.
- In response to our “Brain Wars” series with NPR, the Army in March announced new guidelines that will result in the awarding of Purple Hearts to many soldiers injured by explosive devices who had been denied them.
- Leading university medical schools reacted to ProPublica’s “Dollars for Docs” series by tightening conflict of interest rules, and public reports indicated that payments from pharma companies to prescribing doctors may be declining.
- A ProPublica investigation of Heart Check America, a medical imaging company, and its high-pressure sales tactics was followed by a lawsuit brought against the company in June by the Illinois Attorney General’s office. The lawsuit seeks civil penalties, voiding of contracts and restitution to affected consumers. In August, Colorado regulators followed with a \$3.2 million fine.

The Knight Foundation uses similar measurement of impact in its own evaluation of its Knight International Journalism Fellows project, where “international media

professionals work in countries where there are opportunities to promote reliable, insightful journalism that holds officials accountable.” In evaluating the project, Knight reported “In the 19 settings where Fellows had completed at least one year of work, there were at least 20 governmental policy changes or other actions in response to stories produced by journalists trained by Fellows.”

### **But how do you measure it?**

First, **know what you want to measure**. Kevin Starr, head of the Mulago Foundation, talks about 3 ways of testing for Impact.

1. Know your mission – what you’ve set out to do.
2. Measure the right thing.
3. Measure it well.

Starr says that his foundation looks for simple 8-word mission statements – a verb, a target population or setting, and the desired outcome. He gives three examples:

- “Save African kids’ lives.”
- “Get African families out of extreme poverty.”
- “Save island species from extinction.”

## What to count?

Jonathan Stray<sup>1</sup>, a journalist and former senior computer scientist for Adobe Systems, recently posed the question: “How do we measure the impact of our work. Not the economic value, but the democratic value.” As Stray observes, in the digital environment “we are awash in metrics (but) the problem now is figuring out which data to pay attention to and which to ignore.” With this thought in mind, Stray suggests a few things that can be measured and whose metrics would help inform the process of finding impact in journalism:

1. Measuring audience knowledge, pre and post your reporting.
2. Stray quotes a pithy warning from British sociologist John Brewer: “Counting the countable because the countable can be easily counted renders impact illegitimate.” So, Stray cautions us to acknowledge that “not all data is numbers.” Be willing, he says, to examine the effect of journalism in anecdotal or qualitative terms – “comments, reactions, repercussions, later developments on the story, unique events, relayed interviews” and others. Rather than discount this non-numeric data, Stray urges that it be collected “reliably and systematically” to be able to make comparisons later.
3. Don’t become paralyzed by the fear that seeking to have impact risks moving a journalist from neutrality into advocacy. Stray writes, “The dominant professional ethos has often been uncomfortable with the idea of having any effect at all, fearing ‘advocacy’ or ‘activism.’” He continues, “While it’s sometimes relevant to ask about the political choices in an act of journalism, the idea of complete neutrality is a blatant contradiction if journalism is important to democracy.”
4. Finally, Stray concludes his essay by saying “Most importantly, we need to keep asking: Why are we doing this? Sometimes, as I pass someone on the street, I ask myself if the work I am doing will ever have any effect on their life – and if so, what? It’s impossible to evaluate impact if you don’t know what you want to accomplish.”

---

<sup>1</sup> *Metrics, metrics everywhere: How do we measure the impact of journalism?* [Nieman Journalism Lab](#), August 17, 2012.

## Planning for Impact:

American University's Center for Social Media recently acknowledged the difficulty of measuring impact in a paper entitled "[Social Justice Documentary: Designing for Impact](#)." As the authors stated, “

Determining the impact of a mission-driven media project—one designed primarily to drive social outcomes rather than to entertain or yield profit—can't just be a numbers game. Quantitative metrics such as audience size and sales figures are imperfect indicators of how a media project changed minds or inspired participation.

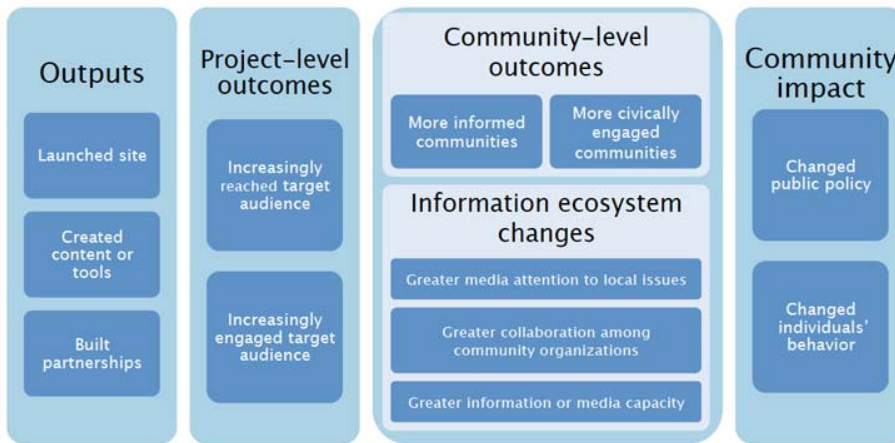
Instead, the accounts of impact that resonate are those that show how media can further the mission in question. Documentary filmmakers are learning not to just tell the story within their film, but to dynamically communicate the power and progress of the project to stakeholders.”

In order to incorporate impact in a project from the start, the authors of AU's study say it will require a new way of thinking about the problem – a new mentality, akin to “design thinking”:

“As reimagined for social issue documentary, design thinking steps might include:

- *Define the project's brief*—design thinking aims to identify new solutions. What problem does the film solve?
- *Design with users*—design thinking is user-centered. Surveys, interviews and observation before production can help to reveal how users will put a documentary project to work in policy, education and civic settings.
- *Build the production team*—design thinking is multidisciplinary, and so is filmmaking. Documentary filmmakers must think collaboratively; involve users, stakeholders, researchers, developers at each stage.
- *Prototype*—design thinking is iterative. Filmmakers should road test storyboards, short videos, campaigns with users to think through how their campaign and platforms will help them meet their mission.
- *Understand limits*—design thinking includes a keen awareness of constraints. Doc makers should consider the desirability, feasibility, and viability of their film or campaign, and how long each phase will take.
- *Evaluate, and then iterate*—design thinking relies on both qualitative and quantitative measures to determine if a design solution is working, or should be retooled.”

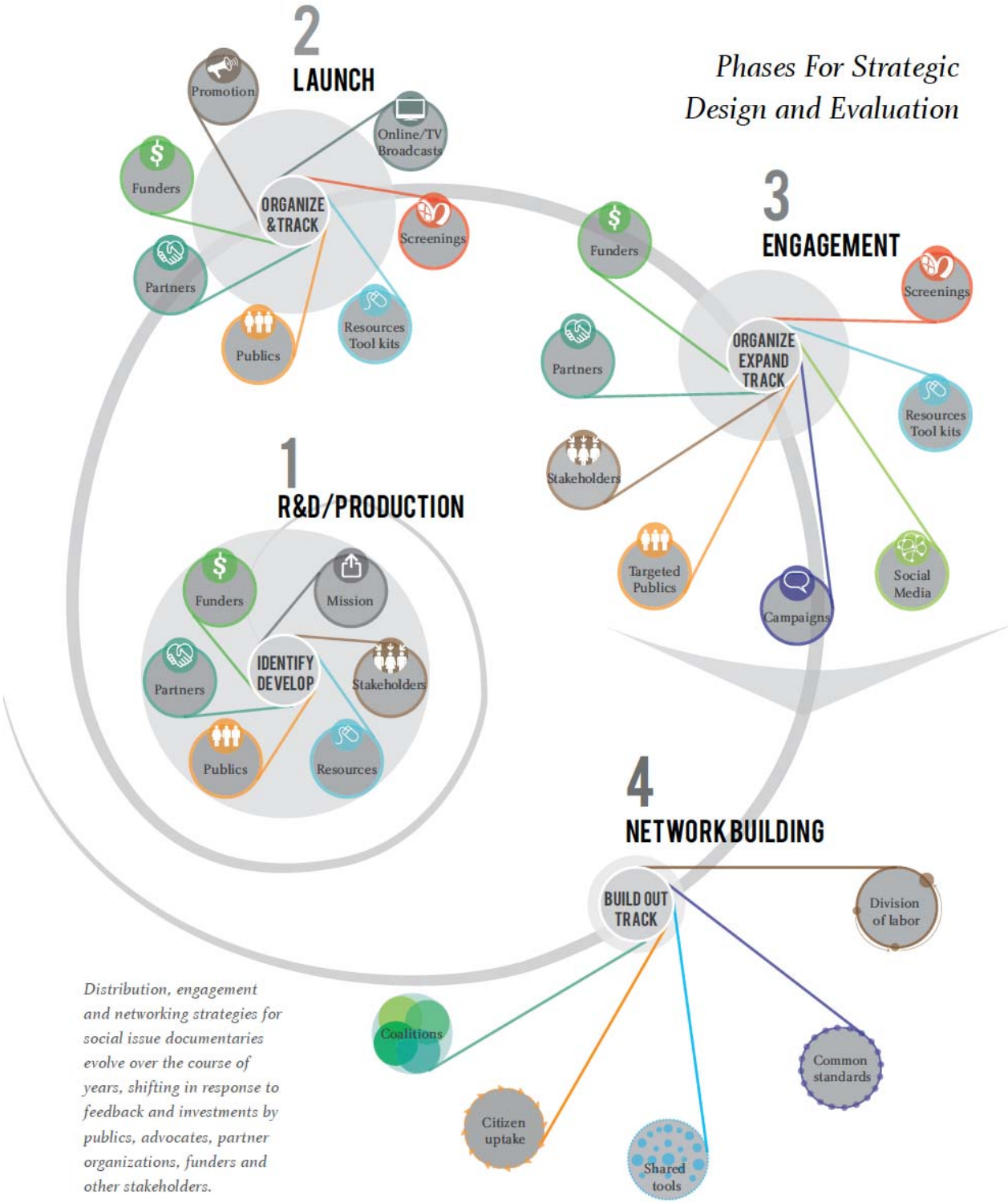
The point here is that impact is not an accident, not merely a byproduct of program production. It is planned for at the front end, along with the creative and editorial development of the project. The Knight Foundation’s methodology is cited in AU’s study, along with this very useful graphic.



The Knight Foundation's *Impact: A Practical Guide for Evaluating Community Information Projects* offers a framework for local online news outlets to plan and evaluate their projects.



*Phases For Strategic Design and Evaluation*



*Distribution, engagement and networking strategies for social issue documentaries evolve over the course of years, shifting in response to feedback and investments by publics, advocates, partner organizations, funders and other stakeholders.*

## Measuring Intangibles:

Even if an organization or a project knows what it wants to measure and actually does produce “impact” as defined by Eric Newton (“evidence of change”), it can still be devilishly hard to measure it and determine if the change or the impact was significant. Jack Galmiche, the President and CEO of Nine Network of Public Media (public television and public media in St. Louis) has been a national leader in community outreach and creating programs and projects that have impact. He acknowledges that “the measurement of impact has always been an elusive challenge for us in public broadcasting. “ Jack has assembled his own and others’ thoughts about “criteria for determining impact.” Among his criteria are:

- **Scale or volume:** Does the initiative reach/affect a large number of people? It will have higher impact if it reaches more people than less people.
- **Depth:** Does the initiative have a significant impact, even just for a relatively small number of people? The program may not have scale, but it may have a deep impact on a few individuals.
- **Filling an important gap (FIG):** Does the initiative meet a need that is not currently being addressed? Is our competition providing an alternative service to the service we are providing?

Two other of Jack’s criteria measure impact externally to his own organization.

- **Community Building:** Does the initiative build the capacity and strength of individuals and organizations within a community?
- **Leverage:** When we build communities and individuals that belong to those communities this contribution is appropriately recognized as impact. Programs do not exist in isolation. They operate in the context of their organizations and of their fields. As a result, one element of impact is leverage -- the degree to which a program or business line increases the impact of other programs.

**Actual Measurement:**

Jack Galmiche has listed some ways to measure each of the criteria for determining Impact. They include:

<b>Excellence in Execution</b>	<b>Filling an Important Gap</b>	<b>Community Building</b>	<b>Leverage</b>
○ Program evaluation data	○ Reviewing competitors' and alternative providers' websites and information.	○ Interviews with community and field leaders	○ The organization's standing and ability to raise funds for other programs
○ Feedback from customers, patrons and clients	○ Asking clients and constituents where else they obtained or could obtain the service in question.	○ Reviews of the donor histories	○ When the demand and the funding for programs and services are growing rapidly in a field or geographic area
○ Direct observation	○ Polling referral agents in the area such as United Way, school districts or others to see where else they refer callers asking about this service or product.	○ Client/market surveys	○ When the products or the audiences developing a program become important tools and audiences in other programs
○ Staff performance evaluation	○ Reviewing page two of competitors' and alternative providers' Form 990s	○	○ When a program has marquee value, which is to say that the program gives the organization high and positive visibility and branding
○ Staff turnover and exit interviews			

**Public Television’s Major Market Group** of stations has been working in this area as well. In its report, MMG stated “Public media is shifting its mindset away from defining success based solely on programming quality and audience size to include previously identified community change outcomes ... Through understanding its assets, the degree of change communities are working towards, and the type of partnership relationship, public media identifies, works towards, and attains, reasonable community-based outcomes.” In its report, the MMG suggests these methods of measuring community impact:

### Measuring Community Impact

		Outcome	Success Indicator	Measures
1	Broadcast Content	Content	Content generated and displayed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Amount of media displayed (counts, time, duration, location)</li> </ul>
2	Media Driven Awareness	Individual awareness of the issue	Change in individual awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comments via phone, website, Twitter, Facebook, G+, snail mail, other media (qualitative)</li> <li>Network analysis, repeat hits, viewership, participant counts (quantitative)</li> </ul>
3	Media Driven Understanding	Individual knowledge / understanding	Change in individual knowledge / understanding / Attitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Comments via phone, website, Twitter, Facebook, G+, snail mail, other media (qualitative)</li> <li>Comments via survey, interviews, focus groups – single or repeated measures (quantitative &amp; qualitative)</li> </ul>
4	Individual Involvement	Individual behavior change	Change in individual behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Activity toward program goals (quantitative)</li> <li>Funding of organization or issue (quantitative)</li> <li>Calls to action via phone, website, social media, other media (Quantitative &amp; Qualitative)</li> </ul>
5	Collective Outcomes	Specific community change made over the short/medium term through a project	Backbone Organization Emerges Change in community behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Short-term duration outcomes driven by goal (quantitative &amp; qualitative)</li> <li>Measures may be indicated by survey/interviews/focus groups/ Comments – single or repeated measures (quantitative &amp; qualitative)</li> </ul>
6	Collective Impact	Systemic community change	Sustained collaboration Long term change to systems or society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Source and methods driven by goal (quantitative &amp; qualitative)</li> </ul>

In an article in the [Stanford Social Innovation Review](#), John Kania and Mark Kramer argue that one of the big problems in achieving community impact is that individual organizations seek to go it alone, to solve problems and generate demonstrable results ... by themselves:

“Most funders, faced with the task of choosing a few grantees from many applicants, try to ascertain which organizations make the greatest contribution toward solving a social problem. Grantees, in turn, compete to be chosen by emphasizing how their individual activities produce the greatest effect. Each organization is judged on its own potential to achieve impact, independent of the

numerous other organizations that may also influence the issue. And when a grantee is asked to evaluate the impact of its work, every attempt is made to isolate that grantee’s individual influence from all other variables.

In short, the nonprofit sector most frequently operates using an approach that we call *isolated impact*. It is an approach oriented toward finding and funding a solution embodied within a single organization, combined with the hope that the most effective organizations will grow or replicate to extend their impact more widely. Funders search for more effective interventions as if there were a cure for failing schools that only needs to be discovered, in the way that medical cures are discovered in laboratories. As a result of this process, nearly 1.4 million nonprofits try to invent independent solutions to major social problems, often working at odds with each other and exponentially increasing the perceived resources required to make meaningful progress.”

Kania and Kramer argue for Collective Impact, where organizations work together to collaborate and maximize impact. In a follow up article, they contrast the benefits of Isolated versus Collective Impact.

Isolated Impact vs. Collective Impact	
Isolated Impact	Collective Impact
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Funders select individual grantees that offer the most promising solutions.</li> <li>◆ Nonprofits work separately and compete to produce the greatest independent impact.</li> <li>◆ Evaluation attempts to isolate a particular organization’s impact.</li> <li>◆ Large scale change is assumed to depend on scaling a single organization.</li> <li>◆ Corporate and government sectors are often disconnected from the efforts of foundations and nonprofits.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◆ Funders and implementers understand that social problems, and their solutions, arise from the interaction of many organizations within a larger system.</li> <li>◆ Progress depends on working toward the same goal and measuring the same things.</li> <li>◆ Large scale impact depends on increasing cross-sector alignment and learning among many organizations.</li> <li>◆ Corporate and government sectors are essential partners.</li> <li>◆ Organizations actively coordinate their action and share lessons learned.</li> </ul>

## Digital Citizenship

In an article published in Fall 2012, the Knight Foundation pointed out that in business, profit is the one metric “that trumps all, (but) that’s not so for projects seeking a social impact.” Instead, says Knight’s report, “Engagement ... is about being attached, committed, involved and productive” What those seeking to measure impact are looking for are “behavioral changes on the ground.”

The Knight report concedes “there is no silver bullet to define success,” but that its participants in a summit it convened proposed this list of potential metrics:

1. Who participated?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Number of participants</li><li>• Demographics/diversity</li></ul>
2) Who was affected?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Prior level of engagement</li><li>• Participants</li><li>• Targeted beneficiaries</li><li>• Other stakeholders</li></ul>
3) Did we do what we said?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Stated goals</li><li>• Unintended consequences</li><li>• Effectiveness</li></ul>
4) What changed? Impact?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Individual vs. collective value</li><li>• Short, medium, long-term</li><li>• Trust and efficacy</li></ul>

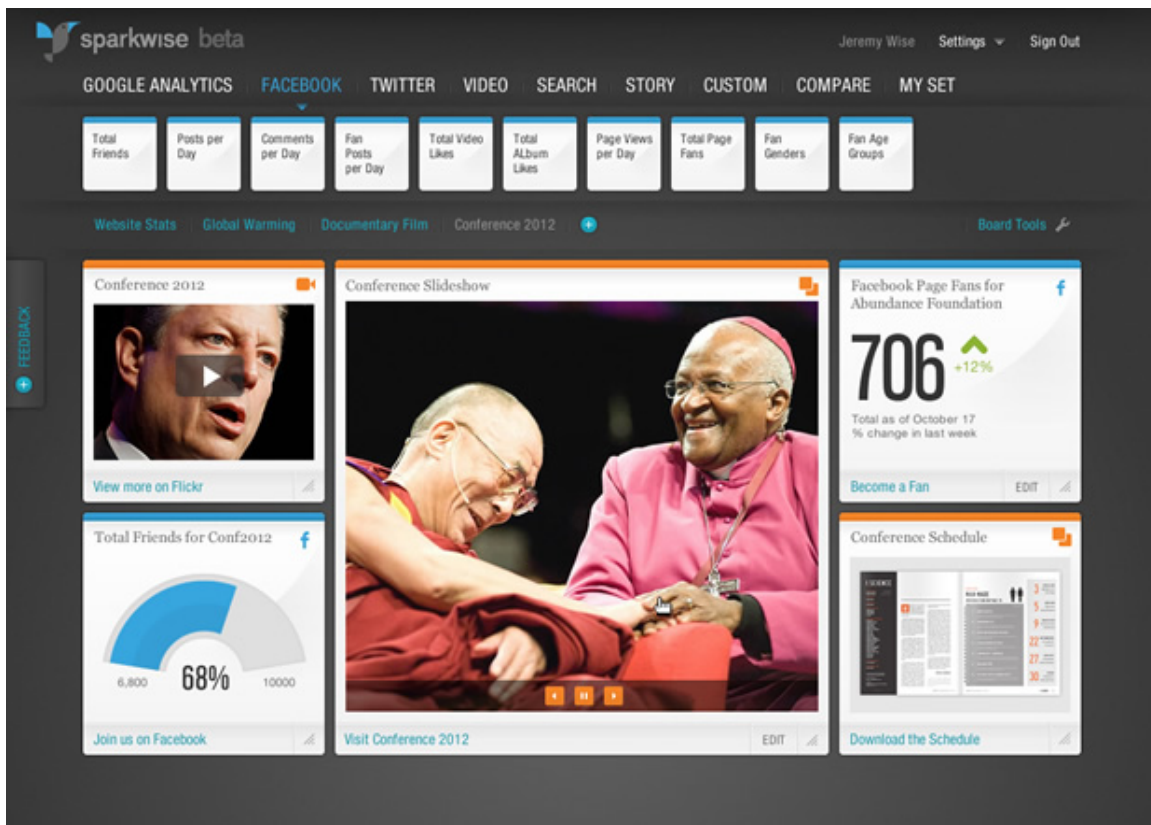
The Knight Report says “the data can be quantitative or qualitative. Impact and engagement may be captured by numbers as well as stories.”

Finally, Knight cautions us to be leery of relying merely on web stats -- “clicktivism” – which it defines as “easy actions that feel good but generate little impact. “ And, to make its point, it quotes humorist William Bruce Cameron:

*“Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts”*

## Software to Measure It:

Increasingly, there are software ways to help measure impact. Sparkwise ([www.sparkwi.se](http://www.sparkwi.se)) is a new “digital dashboard” to do so. This startup venture describes itself as a “narrative data communication platform (that) collects and compares all kinds of metrics in all kinds of ways – and combines those richly visualized numbers with video, audio, text feeds and PDF’s to create a moving story ... to help engage their audiences for a measurable impact.”



The Sparkwise startup was initially funded by The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and incubated by Tomorrow Partners, a design firm in Berkeley, CA and Bay Area Video Coalition (BAVC), with the support of the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Ford Foundation, The Wyncote Foundation and The Fledgling Fund.

## **Produce for Impact:**

In my experience, impact doesn't just happen by happy coincidence. It happens because organizations *plan to have impact*. Impact results when it is an essential ingredient of the thinking and implementation of the project. Not repurposing, but pre-purposing.

In program production, these are the keys I have found for broadcasters and public media to “produce for impact.”

### **1. Selecting stories that matter to the audience.**

- Stories are always about people -- how they live, what they think, how events affect them, what they aspire to, what they find fun and funny, how they handle grief. Be able to answer the question “why should I care?”
- Stories always involve winners and losers – and an audience that has a stake in the outcome.

### **2. Producing them in a first-rate original way.**

- Your unique way with your sound and style.
- Your unusual or quirky approach.
- Your way of conversing with people.

### **3. Presenting those stories for maximum impact.**

- Featuring them. Give them marquis value and presentation in your media.
- Packaging them attractively.
- Placing them everywhere. Each story should have multiple repeat impressions to achieve breakthrough.
- Branding them. Make them stand out. Own them.



## Summary:

We can produce for impact, have impact and measure impact.

We all start with the same physical world and all of the knowledge that fills encyclopedia's, textbooks, newspapers and the Internet. We all have access to it all.

But, like art galleries and museums, *some of us know what to do with the pieces*. Some of us have the smarts and the esthetic talent to curate the collection beautifully and coherently -- so that it comes together and adds up to way more than merely the sum of the parts. Others take the same ingredients and end up ... with an unimpactful junkyard. The difference is the mind – the intellect and the art – that go into organizing and presenting the work.

**Making it stand out. Making it pop. Making it memorable and impactful.**

This is the exciting challenge that creating impact presents to the producer.