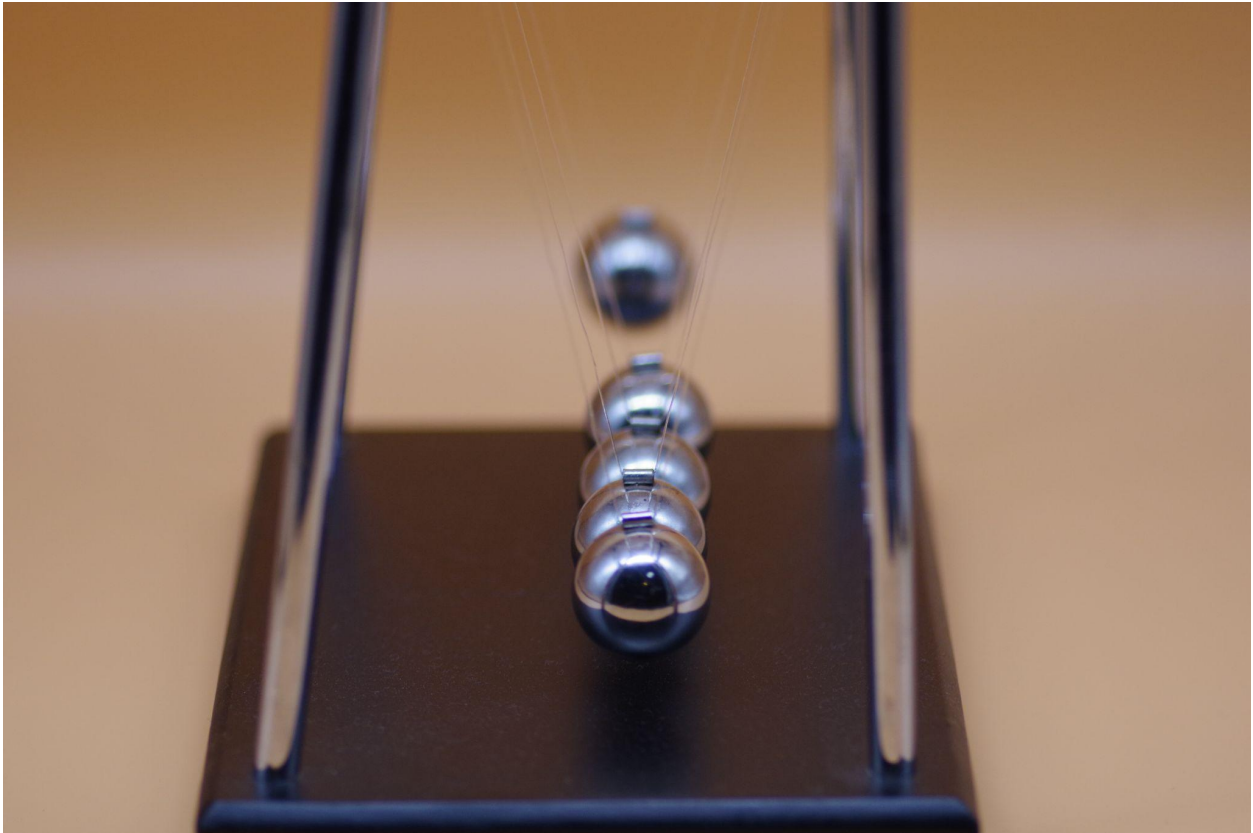# Newsroom impact tracking

How to better understand and capitalise on the power of journalism

By Katie Kenny, for completion of Canterbury University's Robert Bell Travelling Scholarship, 2019

ABOUT THIS REPORT

My pitch for Canterbury University's Robert Bell Travelling Scholarship in Journalism was to help New Zealand news organisations better understand how their content is perceived by and affects different groups in society.

Conversations with editors in New Zealand highlighted how different newsrooms — commercial or non-commercial, large or small — have different definitions of success when it comes to impact.

For example, NZME's recent move to a subscription model meant it was interested in how similar international models measure success. As the country's public broadcaster, Radio New Zealand valued diversifying its listeners. Stuff, the country's biggest news site, was searching for better metrics for measuring the quality of its journalism and how it's consumed by readers.

I travelled across the United States to meet with nonprofit newsrooms and other creative startups about tracking impact. I also met with larger, legacy organisations focused on quality storytelling and truth, against a backdrop of growing public concerns about fake news and partisan content.

My aim was to return not with a list of technological tools to employ but rather a suite of recommendations to help newsrooms keep impact front of mind before, during, and after publishing work, to inform priorities and resource allocation.

This report constitutes three parts. In the first part, you'll find an overview of the research and findings. In the second, examples of impact measurement at three different newsrooms. Finally, a "decision tree", to help newsrooms figure out the most appropriate ways for them to become more intentional about tracking impact.

SUMMARY

The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has highlighted the impact of news media organisations on public health and safety. As World Health Organization Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus has warned: "We're not just fighting an epidemic; we're fighting an infodemic." Owing to the sheer amount of news and information about Covid-19, and the often misleading or outright false nature of some of it, journalism has had a special role to play.

Despite its imperfections (there are plenty of examples of alarmism, superficial reporting, and unfounded speculation), journalism has helped people understand the crisis better, according to a 2020 paper published by The Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford.

While there's no silver bullet for misinformation about the virus, a sustained and coordinated effort by trusted fact-checkers, news media, social platforms and public authorities has been shown to help reduce belief in vaccine misinformation, for example.

Through reflecting on the impact of journalism during the pandemic, we know that rather than "myth-busting", the best way to counter pervasive and dangerous rumours is with proactive and corrective information that preempts circulating falsehoods.

Only by continuing to track impact can we hope to improve the public's access to, and trust in, reputable, independent journalism.

What's meant by impact?

"It's nearly impossible today to separate engagement from magnification," said Jia Tolentino in her book of essays, *Trick Mirror*.

A story's impact is the mark it has left on the world. Beyond that, the concept is difficult to define, because it means different things to different people and organisations. For example, some newsrooms consider page views a measure of impact, many don't.

Understanding impact to be synonymous with effect or influence, it's fair to say readership alone doesn't

mean a story has changed the world. However, it's impossible to know exactly how a story has gone on to affect the everyday decisions of those who read it.

Michael Keller, a reporter and data journalist specialising in technology on the investigative team at the New York Times, in 2015 created NewsLynx, a tool for newsroom impact measurement, while a research fellow at the Tow Center for Digital Journalism at Columbia University.

"It has never been easier for a newsroom to design its own analytics geared toward questions it wants answered," he wrote. "And here lies the next challenge, which was really the challenge all along."

It's important to remember, a story doesn't exist in a vacuum. "We can't just rely on 'good' stories getting traction on their own," Keller told me. "You've got to compare apples with apples. For example, political stories might by default produce more impact. But that doesn't mean you should only do political stories."

Part of the benefit of impact tracking is it forces newsrooms to pay attention to the factors that influence how well a story is likely to do; promotion, distribution, timing, and so on.

At the Investigative Reporters and Editors conference in Houston, Texas, a panel (Emily Le Coz of GateHouse Media, Noah Pransky of NBC, Anne Galloway of VTDigger.org and Andrew Finlayson of SmithGeiger) spoke on how to identify follow-ups and use social media to maximise an investigation's impact.

Finlayson name-checked American singer Taylor Swift as the master of "subtle buzz" building. After a story is published, he said, engage colleagues to "amplify" your work.

Paying attention to the "ripple effects" of stories leads to more follow ups, said Lindsay Green-Barber of the Impact Architects. "Reporting on good outcomes is good for our audience. Positive messaging gets more attention than negative."

Finally, considering impact forces editors and journalists to ask hard questions about their organisation's mission and role in society.

"For any news organisation today, this is a good time to step back and rethink your core mission," said Djordje Padejski, investigative journalist and associate director at John S. Knight Journalism Fellowships at Stanford University. "For decades, we haven't done that. Previously, the business model was so clear. But now we need to ask ourselves: 'What are we trying to do?'

"What are you trying to accomplish? Locally or nationally? Then, ultimately, you can figure out the ideal metrics that will help you understand if you're doing the right thing."

Observations and recommendations

Across dozens of interviews, three main themes relating to impact stood out.

First, a newsroom's values drive its definition of success and therefore its preferred metrics for impact. These values have to be top-down; often they're articulated by a mission statement. A well-defined mission statement can help all staff understand what's expected of them and whether they're meeting those expectations.

Second, impact isn't a dirty word. Those working in audience engagement roles told me they face resistance from reporters who equate impact tracking with advocacy. Being aware of how content exists in the world post-publication isn't the same as pushing for specific outcomes.

Third, there's no point introducing fancy tools if employees aren't going to use them. Think instead about small ways you can recalibrate your newsroom's focus on impact. For example, regularly highlight real-world changes inspired by the newsroom's work, internally and also in public-facing ways.

FIRST, VALUES

At the forefront of impact tracking are nonprofit and foundation-funded newsrooms, who subscribe to the [measurement and evaluation philosophy](#) of NGOs and the international development field. In short, they rely on success stories to keep the money coming in.

Consultancies have also sprung up in this space, such as Chicago-based We Are Hearken. Co-founder Jennifer Brandel said newsrooms often treat citizens "like children": "We give them what they need, not what they want." Brandel and her team help newsrooms bridge that divide.

The process often begins with newsrooms redefining their fundamental values and goals.

"We ask them what their goals are. Do they want to increase overall numbers, convert more subscribers, reach new demographics?"

Different strategies apply to different goals, she said.

The Boston Globe's metric of choice is new subscribers. A recent project with relatively low page views was considered a success because it reached a new audience and "had a high conversion rate", meaning it attracted new, paying subscribers to the site.

IMPACT ≠ ADVOCACY

There's an historical tension between advocacy and journalism. Engagement editors expressed frustration at the reluctance of reporters to strive for impact. Tracking impact is less about promoting a certain outcome and more about observing how a story affects society, they said. To ignore a story's potential impact is to fail to articulate or examine implicit decisions made during the storytelling process. "Which is actually dangerous, I'd argue," one editor told me.

Director of The Signals Network, Delphine Halgand, believes the biggest stories of our time are broken by whistleblowers. The Signals Network works with whistleblowers and newsrooms, to increase the impact of the revelations by involving activists and experts.

"It's not the work of the journalist to become an activist," Halgand said. "That's one of the reasons we're here."

Often, whistleblowers sacrifice the life they've known for a story. "A lot of the time, they tell us the story wasn't worth ruining their life for, because it didn't have the impact they intended."

Reveal — The Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) has a long history of revealing corruption and abuse and holding power to account.

CIR uses an impact tracker introduced by Lindsay Green-Barber, now of The Impact Architects. CIR Development manager Vivi Nguyen said some reporters remain uncomfortable talking about impact. She stresses the tracker isn't about advocating for a certain type of impact so much as it's about observing its trail.

HABITS > TOOLS

Repeatedly, managers told me they had introduced new and often expensive technological tools and software for tracking impact, only for the tools to be ignored or used inconsistently by staff who didn't have the time or desire to incorporate them into their workflow. Without a proper induction process, and clear expectations for use, tools can be more hassle than they're worth.

Chalkbeat, a nonprofit news organisation dedicated to covering education in America, has been tracking impact since 2014 with a WordPress plugin called MORI (Measures of Our Reporting's Influence). Chief executive Bene Cipolla explained that reporters log the impact generated by their work, categorising it according to seven different types with corresponding numerical values. Examples of impact types include protests, petitions, institutional action, legislative action, awards, public appearances and more.

Other newsrooms had less structured approaches. Gabriel Dance, deputy investigations editor at the New York Times, said his team set goals, including impact-related ones, ahead of a project's publication, and followed up on them during a post-project debrief. These steps have to be built into the process of storytelling, he said, because "news isn't good at looking back".

Many other newsrooms encouraged journalists to think about impact by highlighting successful examples of it at monthly or quarterly meetings, or in internal newsletters.

Conclusions

On and off the record, journalists and their editors expressed frustration at the lack of a consistent approach to measuring impact within an organisation. For this reason, a newsroom's definitions of impact and success need to be set by top-tier management.

Many sources talked about a philosophical tension between journalism and advocacy that stands in the way of better understanding and tracking impact. Improved education on the value of observing how a story exists in the world after publication is needed across the board.

While some newsrooms used specific tools to record examples of impact, many relied on ad hoc methods such templated project planning that involved consideration of maximising a story's impact, and post-project debriefs that assessed whether goals had been met. Others employed less traditional approaches, such as audience engagement events to solicit face-to-face feedback from members of the public.

The same approaches to tracking impact cut across all types of journalism, though most of the outlets I visited would describe themselves as investigative ones. In the future, it would be worth further exploring whether journalism with less of a focus on creating change, and more of a focus on, say, audience entertainment, employed different approaches.

Among the newsrooms I interviewed, there was a fairly consistent denouncement of social media statistics as useful measures of impact. Retweets, likes, and even comments were seen as easily manipulated and not indicative of real-world change. However, using social media was still encouraged to promote stories and engage advocates and politicians, for example, who could go on to raise the profile of an issue.

Page views were a controversial metric, given a view doesn't necessarily indicate meaningful, audience engagement with the content. However, every newsroom kept tabs on page views and regarded them as an important gauge of reach.

One newsroom mentioned no one logs "negative impact". The concept is a relevant one given the harm that can be perpetuated online. As well as considering whether a story has influenced public policy, prompted legal action, or won an award, perhaps news organisations could pay more attention to whether a story — even inadvertently — put someone in danger, resulted in the subject being harassed, or fueled divisiveness within a community.

While values should drive a newsroom's definition of impact, for many, the bottom line is a more pressing concern. The friction between the business models of media companies and the goals of journalism poses an ongoing challenge in prioritising resources.

But considering how little attention is paid, even by newsrooms, to the impact of their output, it's fair to assume the social impact of journalism is dramatically undervalued. For that reason, it's not a given that impact and profits are diametrically opposed.

CASE STUDIES

Chalkbeat

Chalkbeat is a nonprofit news organisation reporting on education across America. Founded in 2008, its mission is "to inform the decisions and actions that lead to better outcomes for children and families by providing deep, local coverage of education policy and practice". It reports from and about eight locations: Chicago, Colorado, Detroit, Indiana, Newark, New York, Philadelphia and Tennessee. Its financial support is largely sourced from sponsors and donors. (I visited the New York office.)

When it comes to measuring impact, the organisation values knowing whether, and to what extent, its stories influence the stew of ideas, predispositions and understandings that build community debate and individual actions.

Executive Editor Bene Cipolla, who joined the organisation in 2017, told me Chalkbeat's focus is on "informing" rather than "deciding" potential consequences of their reporting. "Impact is truly at the heart of all we do," she said.

One of the shared, key beliefs at Chalkbeat is that not only can journalists make a difference, but the ability to measure the difference can multiply a newsroom's impact over time.

MORI

In 2014, the organisation built its own impact tracking tool, a WordPress plugin called MORI (Measures of Our Reporting's Influence).

MORI pulls in quantitative data from third-party applications such as Google analytics and social media sites. Readership numbers are also added. Reporters are responsible for entering qualitative data, categorised as either "informed action" or "informed debate". Within these categorie are further subcategories of "journalistic impact".

Examples of informed action include formal protests or petitions, institutional action, or legislative action, state- or district-level changes in policy or practice. Examples of informed debate include awards, public officials referring to the report, or the story being picked up by another publication or

organisation. These categories were based on work done by Lindsay Green-Barber, who is now at The Impact Architects.

Monthly, Chalkbeat produces an internal report on impact, numbers and goals. Quarterly, it does an "impact spotlight". Cipolla is passionate about goal setting both at individual and group levels. "It's time consuming up front, but worth it."

MORI allows the newsroom to see the big picture of how its content affects the world, beyond raw readership analytics. Of course, the information is also powerful in the hands of Chalkbeat's fundraising team.

In 2016, Chalkbeat made MORI available as a WordPress plugin other organisations can download, install and start using.

Tables depicting types of journalistic impact as categorised by MORI:

Informed Action
Readers took action based on our reporting.

Formal protest or petition	This can be any protest or petition that occurs in a formal setting, like a school or a meeting or at City Hall or Statehouse. It can also be an online petition that has been formally created and distributed.
Government investigation	If the government officially decides to investigate an issue we've reported on. This can also include government hearings.
Institutional action	These include firings, hirings or reorganizations, etc.
Lawsuit filed	When a lawsuit is filed that relates in any way to reporting we have done.
Legislative action	If a story we write, leads to an action in the local, state or federal legislature — such as a law change or bill introduced.
School- or classroom-level change in policy or practice	When a classroom or school makes a change in its policies or practice. (e.g., change in programming, teaching, school-wide policy)
State- or district-level change in policy or practice	When the state or a district makes a change in its policies or in its practice. (e.g., change in rules, regulations, budgeting)

Informed Debate
Readers had conversations based on our reporting.

Award	Any type of award won or nomination.
Non-press organization cites our work in a report	A government entity, nonprofit/advocacy organization, researcher or school cites Chalkbeat's work in a formal, published report.
Public official refers to report	This can be formally (e.g. through public statement or private document) or informally (e.g. through verbal feedback).
Chalkbeat staffer makes a public appearance or interview	This can be for a media outlet or any other type of organization.
Story picked up by another publication or organization	A pickup is when our stories influence the news cycle because they have been picked up or cited by another influencer (e.g. news organization, blog, foundation, school district or other influential group). If the influencer doesn't cite Chalkbeat, but you know they are writing the story because of our exclusive reporting, it counts as a pickup.

Image source: http://mediashift.org/2016/10/impact-tracking-action-build-impact-taxonomy-chalkbeats-mori/

The Boston Globe

The *Boston Globe*, the oldest and largest daily newspaper in Boston, Massachusetts, is a beacon for investigative journalism around the world, with a total of 26 Pulitzer Prizes.

Unlike most of the other organisations I visited, the *Boston Globe* has a subscriber-supported site with a paywall. The paper's prices have dropped considerably since the pandemic; unlimited digital access is [currently US$50 (NZ$69) for 52 weeks](). In mid-2019, subscribers paid US$30 (NZ$41) per month, making it much more expensive than comparable news sites around the country.

While the paper has a weekday circulation of just under 100,000, the news site has 150,000 digital subscribers.

Its funding model shapes how it measures impact, and as a result the organisation values content that promotes the retention of existing subscribers and the conversion of new ones.

"We focus more on subscribers than page views," Jason Tuohey, the managing editor for digital, told me. Tuohey has been the editor of BostonGlobe.com since its launch in 2011. Conversions — meaning, readers who become subscribers — are more valuable than one-off readers, he explained.

Tuohey's team has identified four types of stories that have the biggest impact on subscriber numbers:
1) Breaking news
2) Enterprise and investigative journalism
3) Sports
4) Opinion and commentary

After a reader has subscribed for more than a year, they tend to be a long-term subscriber. The struggle, therefore, is retaining potential subscribers after whatever promotional deal they signed up to has expired.

Post-project evaluations

The *Boston Globe* doesn't have a formalised system for assessing the impact of big projects. But usually a week or two after publication, the team will look at the relevant analytics as well as who read the content, and where they were from.

Specific projects have specific goals, Tuohey said. After a recent project on gun control, editors looked at how many readers used a link in the story to lobby their state representative as a measure of impact.

Another project, about legal marijuana, gained a relatively small number of page views, but the project's high reader engagement and conversion rate meant it was considered a success.

The challenge of communicating analytics

On a monthly basis, all reporters get a report from Adobe Analytics (previously called Adobe Omniture), which details how many people have read certain stories, and where the readers are from. It also highlights those who have subscribed after reading a story.

Tuohey referred to the ongoing challenge of turning "the numbers" into "actionable insights" for reporters and editors. "I need them to be able to look at analytics for two minutes, and understand how the numbers can inform their reporting."

The newsroom was constantly searching for better tools to translate the relevant data.

Reveal — The Center for Investigative Reporting

Reveal — The Center for Investigative Reporting (CIR) is a nonprofit news organisation based in Emeryville, California. It's also known as the United State's [oldest, independent nonprofit investigative reporting organisation](#). Supported by foundations and individual donors, it's been at the forefront of the reinvention of journalism and in filling the gaps left by the decline of traditional newsrooms.

It's also been at the forefront of media impact measurement. [Its website says](#): "Our investigative reporting consistently contributes to real-world impact, from civil and criminal investigations to new laws and policies, better-informed conversations and community-driven solutions.

"As a nonprofit, our bottom line is the public interest."

Annually, it publishes an impact report. [The latest report](#), from 2020, details an 82 per cent increase in the number of members making monthly donations, national awards won, and dozens of examples of real-world change sparked by stories.

Impact tracking is built into the newsroom's story planning and evaluation process. Before a story is published, for example, teams come up with a "targeted outreach" strategy to send the content to relevant public figures for maximum impact.

CIR's Impact Tracker

Lindsay Green-Barber of The Impact Architects formerly worked at CIR, where she developed the organisation's impact tracker platform. An interactive database, the tracker allows reporters to create records for real-world change associated with their work. The impact is categorised as ["macro", "meso", "micro" or "media"](#).

Macro relates to change at institutional levels, such as government investigations or policy changes. Meso includes awards, as well as the content being used in public debates or discourse. Micro signals individual actions or increased awareness of a subject. Media refers to other media organisations picking up or promoting the story.

Other tools such as [Meltwater](#) (a media monitoring tool) and Google Alerts feed into the impact tracker. Analytics, such as page views, aren't incorporated into the tracker. (Impact, according to CIR's definition, has to involve engagement beyond content consumption.)

Green-Barber said when she created the tracker at CIR, most reporters were already keeping track of their own impact but not necessarily consistently — some used spreadsheets, others newspaper clippings. "The first step was making a centralised place to put impact data, so that it was structured but still a qualitative dataset."

Reporters at CIR said they used the tool to quantify their professional success. At an organisational level, it was used in fundraising efforts.

Challenges

Those tasked with tracking impact at CIR (and other organisations I visited) face resistance from journalists and editors who equate impact tracking with advocacy. Development Manager Vivi Nguyen approaches this "philosophical tension" by explaining the tracker isn't about advocating for impact, but "observing a story's trail of impact".

Consistent data entry also poses a challenge. As with most tools, the biggest challenge is getting people to use them, and use them properly. Internal incentives, such as spotlighting weekly examples of impact, can help with staff motivation.

Screenshot from CIR's impact tracker:

Create Outcome

Please record deliberate distribution of your projects, organic pick-up of and response to stories, and impact stemming from your content.

Description of Impact *

Date of Impact

08/30/2016

E.g., 08/30/2016

🏛 Macro

- None -

Macro outcomes are those changes that happen at the level of an institution or power holder, resulting in structural change.

< Meso

- None -

Meso outcomes are those changes that happen at the level of a group.

👤 Micro

- None -

Micro changes are those that happen at the level of an individual.
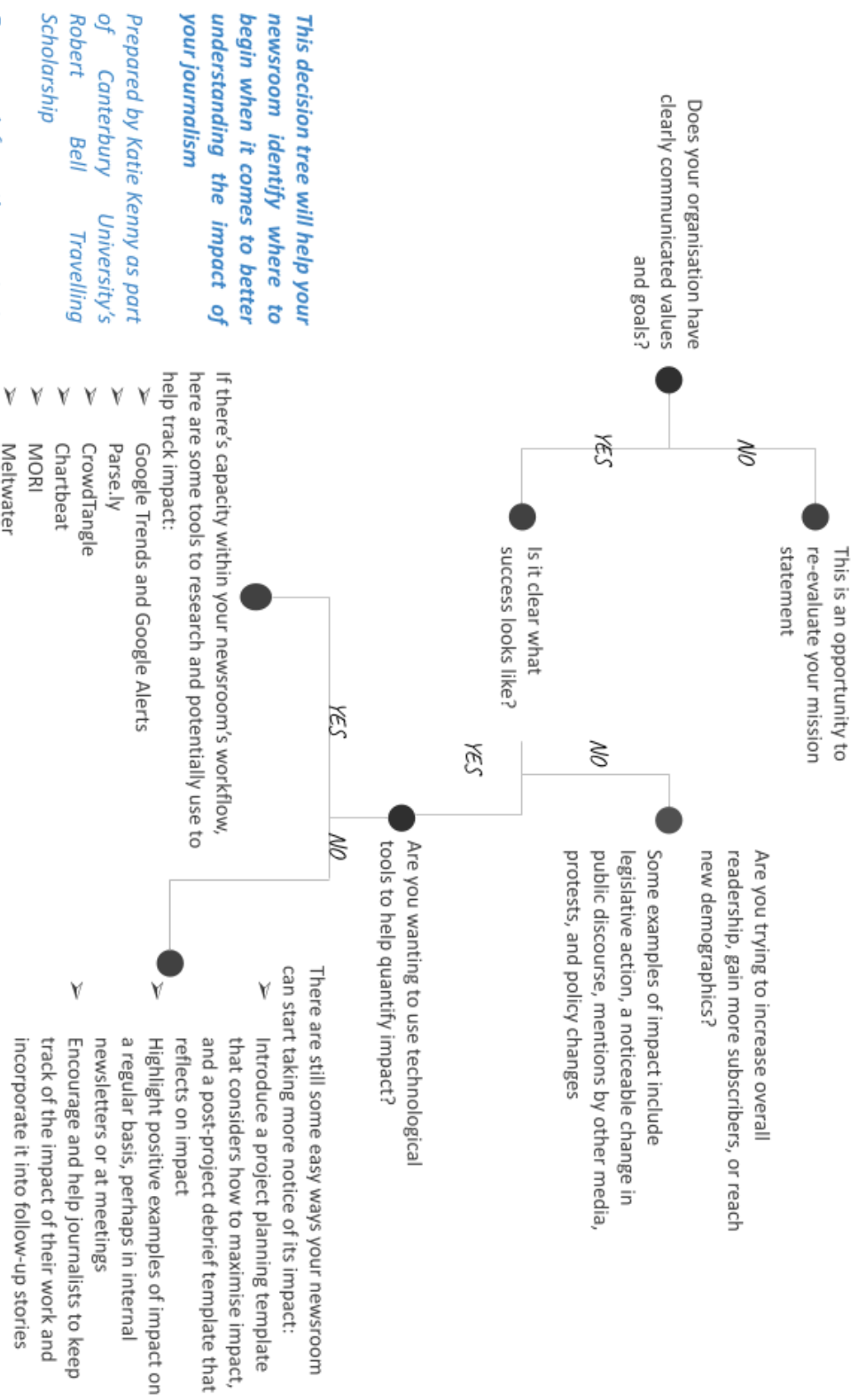
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Decision Tree: Tracking Newsroom Impact

This decision tree will help your newsroom identify where to begin when it comes to better understanding the impact of your journalism

Prepared by Katie Kenny as part of Canterbury University's Robert Bell Travelling Scholarship

For more information, contact: katie.kenny@stuff.co.nz

Does your organisation have clearly communicated values and goals?

NO → This is an opportunity to re-evaluate your mission statement

YES → Is it clear what success looks like?

Are you trying to increase overall readership, gain more subscribers, or reach new demographics?

Some examples of impact include legislative action, a noticeable change in public discourse, mentions by other media, protests, and policy changes

NO →

YES → Are you wanting to use technological tools to help quantify impact?

NO →

YES → If there's capacity within your newsroom's workflow, here are some tools to research and potentially use to help track impact:

- Google Trends and Google Alerts
- Parse.ly
- CrowdTangle
- Chartbeat
- MORI
- Meltwater

There are still some easy ways your newsroom can start taking more notice of its impact:

- Introduce a project planning template that considers how to maximise impact, and a post-project debrief template that reflects on impact
- Highlight positive examples of impact on a regular basis, perhaps in internal newsletters or at meetings
- Encourage and help journalists to keep track of the impact of their work and incorporate it into follow-up stories

(Ideally, **a community manager** or similar role would be appointed to track these analytics)