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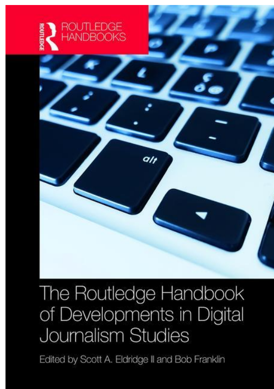

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WHAT CAN NONPROFIT JOURNALISTS ACTUALLY DO FOR DEMOCRACY?

Magda Konieczna and Elia Powers

Journalism is considered the 'fourth estate', tasked with helping to uphold democracy. Despite this weighty responsibility, there is little consensus about how its practitioners are expected to perform this task. As Gans (1998) argued, the journalistic theory of democracy offers little clarity on whether and how journalists contribute to democracy. Perhaps as a result, many U.S. journalists have, at least until recently, felt uncomfortable discussing the impact of their work and claimed to be agnostic about outcomes (Ettema and Glasser, 1998), often arguing that their responsibility ends at publishing or broadcasting a story. As news organizations struggle to define and promote their own relevance, some argue that journalists should make explicit their efforts to contribute to democracy and the results of those efforts (Anderson et al., 2014; Keller and Abelson, 2015).

Lately, we have begun to see journalism evolve on this front. Advancements in audience-tracking tools help news organizations measure engagement metrics (Napoli, 2014; Stray, 2012) of interest to advertisers and foundation funders seeking a return on their investments (Simons et al., 2016; Tofel, 2013). This process of collecting data on audience analytics and the more difficult-to-quantify impact – what happens when the story is published or broadcast – presents journalists with an important opportunity to sort out which metrics matter.

With both journalism and democracy in trouble in the twenty-first century, news organizations have started to shed their veneer of impartiality, allowing and even encouraging reporters to consider the impact of their work. National data show journalists overwhelmingly care about the impact their stories might have (McIntyre et al., 2016). Of course, that may always have been the case; it may be that journalists with this orientation now perceive that they have greater freedom to openly discuss outcomes.

This chapter explores the recent evolution of American journalism's orientation toward impact. We focus on nonprofit news organizations, which have been more explicit than their counterparts about their desire to affect change through journalism. Specifically, we explain our case study, which examined how journalists at the Pulitzer Prize-winning nonprofit collaborative International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ) talked and thought about the impact of their work.[1] This helps us, as journalists and scholars, broaden our understanding of journalism's role in supporting democracy.

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Journalism's (potential) impact on democracy

While journalism and democracy are inextricably linked, the precise nature of that link has not been fully specified. That means that although journalists tend to be dedicated to strengthening democracy, they cannot always articulate how that orientation translates into practice. Those missing links threaten to erode journalism's usefulness to society.

Renowned sociologist Herbert Gans (1998) argued that these problems are the result of shortcomings in the journalistic theory of democracy, which he described as consisting of three steps:

1 Journalism's role is to inform citizens;
2 The more informed citizens are, the more likely they are to participate; and
3 The more they participate, the more democratic the country will be.

Gans argued that the theory fails on all three levels. It is not clear whether or how journalists inform the public. How that information encourages participation is also foggy. Finally, it is not obvious that more participation leads to more democracy. (Gans argued that in fact this conceptualization ignores the imbalance of power in society – specifically the fact that powerful individuals and interest groups can override the influence of citizens). Ultimately, Gans wrote, the theory enables journalists to ignore consequences by suggesting that newly informed citizens spontaneously choose to act, which somehow leads to a strengthened democracy – a chain of vague events that doesn't require journalists to take responsibility for the outcome of their work.

Indeed, in their extensive study of investigative journalists, Ettema and Glasser found that most resisted discussing the impact of their work because they "underst[oo]d their power, as well as their responsibility, to be limited to telling a story" (1998: 82). While public policy might change or public opinion might shift as a result of their work, the investigative reporters Ettema and Glasser spoke with in the 1990s professed not to care.

Merritt and McCombs (2004) argued, however, that it was not sufficient for journalists to be agnostic concerning impact. Instead of clinging to objectivity or detachment, journalists should redefine their role as fair-minded participants in public life, Merritt (1998) argued elsewhere. While journalists claim to simply be reporting the news, they are in fact making decisions based on values about how the world should work. If journalists were open about that orientation, journalistic content and journalism's relationship to the public would change, he argued: "We could, for one, regain some lost standing with the public and, as a result, be more effective in our role in the democratic process" (1998: 12).

This gap between journalism's operations and its democratic impact has long been evident. The public journalism movement of the 1990s was one attempt to remedy this disconnect, with goals that included "deliberatively positioning ordinary people as capable of some action," (Schaffer, 2015: 1) establishing journalism as "democracy's cultivator, as well as its chronicler," and restyling the press so that it "supported a healthier public climate" (Rosen, 1999: 4). Schaffer (2015) argued that public journalism worked because it built in simple ways for people to participate in democracy. Yet it ultimately failed, in part because the movement didn't develop its own theory of how journalism should function in a democracy, focusing instead on "creat[ing] and sustain[ing] a conversation to help newsrooms break out of their disconnected relationship with their audiences" (Glasser and Lee, 2002: 205).

Still, much has changed since then. The thinking around journalistic impact has evolved in the last two decades in part through the improved ability to track audience metrics and, for journalistic nonprofits, pressure from funders to show a return on their investment. A report by the

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Tow Center for Digital Journalism (Keller and Abelson, 2015) found that the field of measurement and evaluation "has taken a strong foothold in journalism" (2015: 9). The report describes a scenario that would make the reporter-subjects of Ettema and Glasser's (1998) project cringe: an editor at the *New York Times* who stuffs envelopes with responses to and mentions of particular news stories, with the thickest envelopes – that is, the ones with the most public resonance – more likely to earn the newspaper's support as submissions to the Pulitzer Prize.

Impact-oriented investigative journalism

If, as Merritt and McCombs (2004) argue, investigative journalism is inherently more impact-oriented than are other forms of journalism, investigative nonprofits are more impact-oriented still. A report by the Knight Foundation, which funds and promotes nonprofit journalistic projects, referred to a group of news nonprofits it studied this way: "They are producing high-quality journalism that is reaching hundreds of thousands of people, changing government policies and laws, sending wrongdoers to jail, and protecting consumer interests" (Knight Foundation, 2013: 4).

Small, nonprofit investigative newsrooms are at the forefront of impact measurement (Keller and Abelson, 2015), driven, at least in large part, by funders who want to contribute to journalism that spurs change. Inundated with grant applications, foundations are seeking ways to fund promising ventures (Lewis and Niles, 2013). "The livelihoods of nonprofit newsrooms have become increasingly linked to their ability to collect and report meaningful metrics of impact" (Keller and Abelson, 2015: 20). Traditional web metrics provide limited value to nonprofit newsrooms (Keller and Abelson, 2015; Knight Foundation, 2013; Napoli, 2014). Such analytics may be able to hint at audience engagement but are less useful in determining whether they have made the world better. "None of our existing analytics tools measure impact – they don't tell us how our reporting has influenced the public to create a better society" (Kaiser, 2016: para 6). Responding to the lack of methods to quantify impact for nonprofit news outlets, the writers of the Tow report (Keller and Abelson, 2015) developed an open-source analytics platform to enable news organizations to measure their impact. The Center for Investigative Reporting also created an open-source impact tracker that lets news organizations measure qualitative and quantitative metrics (Green-Barber, 2016). Still, neither platform goes so far as to define impact itself, leaving that up to each news organization.

Few are as transparent about impact as the investigative nonprofit ProPublica, which each year highlights the ways its reporting has produced change, such as prompting congressional hearings, new legislation, and reform of public agencies and private companies (ProPublica, 2016). While news organizations increasingly track audience metrics and user engagement and may define what impact means in their own newsroom, they have until recently rarely shared this definition publicly or engaged in a broader conversation about how journalists should define (or redefine) impact in the digital age. This research examined one attempt to begin that redefinition in a way that we feel hints at a need for new conceptualizations of the role of journalism in democracy.

An impact typology for investigative journalism

The lack of a clear definition of impact in journalism is a major reason the culture of measurement and evaluation has yet to become widespread in the field (Knight Foundation, 2013; Keller and Abelson, 2015). "We don't have the same names for common phenomena of change that flow from our work. So we – media makers, content producers, researchers, and foundations – face obstacles to collectively increase our understanding of how and why impact occurs" (Green-Barber, 2014: par. 2).

Is impact, for instance, synonymous with outcomes? In a report prepared for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, Green and Patel

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defined impact as "changes among individuals, groups, organizations, systems, and social or physical conditions that your work helps to advance" and noted that "here we use impact in the same way that conventional evaluation uses the term outcomes, referring to the desired change among a target community" (2013: 29). The Gates Foundation, however, made a clear distinction: Outcomes are "intermediate observable and measurable changes that may serve as steps toward impact for a population, community, country, or other category of beneficiary", and impacts are "ultimate sustainable changes, sometimes attributable to action" (Gates Foundation, 2010: 8).

Napoli (2014) made a similar distinction: Outcomes are shorter-term effects that journalism can have, such as informing, engaging, and mobilizing audiences, while impact refers to longer-term changes in individual behavior or changes in public policy. Another demarcation is between the micro-level orientation of fields such as media effects that typically focus on changes in an individual's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and the macro-level orientation of media impact measurement that, in addition to focusing on individual change, includes broad systemic changes in organizations and institutions (Napoli, 2014).

Impact, some argue, is a nebulous term by necessity. Simons et al. (2016) wrote that useful definitions of impact should be "adaptive" given that it can be measured longitudinally or after exposure to a single story. Tofel argued that there cannot be one universal definition of impact because "different sorts of journalism have different objectives, and will therefore produce – seek to produce – quite different sorts of impact" (2013: 3). Explanatory journalism, for instance, aims to clarify complex topics, and so perhaps its desired impact is a readership with a clearer understanding of the issues. For investigative journalism, however, the goal is to reveal information that someone wanted to keep secret. Thus, one major desired impact is altering the frame around policy change – something that is, in a sense, outside of the control of the journalist. Protess et al. (1987) made the case that measuring the impact of investigative journalism depends on the target of the impact – on the public, on elites, or on policy.

Ettema and Glasser (1998) categorized the accomplishments of investigative reporting as publicity, accountability, and solidarity. Publicity means trying to bring public attention to cases of systemic break down that have largely gone unnoticed or have been concealed. Then-*Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter Bill Marimow explained his criteria for selecting stories to Ettema and Glasser, and his explanation was representative of the absence of the notion of impact among the investigative journalists they studied: "Is the information important? Is it interesting?" (1998: 8). Even if there is no measurable shift in public opinion, Ettema and Glasser argued that investigative reporting can change the way that public affairs issues are understood. Accountability is about demanding responses – whether deliberative (hearings, public debates, etc.) or substantive (passing laws, enacting reforms, taking punitive action against those who have committed maleficence) – from those in positions of power. Solidarity is defined as helping the audience establish an 'empathetic link' toward those who have suffered. Ettema and Glasser argued that investigative journalism does not always have to result in action by politicians or voters to have an effect. It can simply test the conscience of a community.

In our examination of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, though, we noted a slightly different conception of impact.

ICIJ and its typology

ICIJ is one of a growing body of nonprofit news organizations founded by journalists concerned about the struggling news industry. It was born within one of the oldest and largest news nonprofits, the Center for Public Integrity, in 1997, and was spun off from CPI in 2017. ICIJ has roughly a dozen employees in its Washington, DC, office and works collaboratively, often with dozens of news organizations around the world and its in-house data experts, to make sense of

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some of the largest journalistic leaks in history. Some of ICIJ's readers come to its site for stories written by its journalists, summaries of reporting in other countries, and blog posts describing the ICIJ's work, but a much larger audience sees its reports when news organizations around the world republish them or write their own versions (ICIJ, 2012).

We were particularly interested in ICIJ because its staffers are explicit about their orientation to impact. Staff members explained that they consider three criteria before deciding whether to pursue a project:

1 Is a system that's designed to protect people broken or failing?
2 Is it of global concern?
3 Are they going to get a reaction? In other words, is the work likely to have impact?

(Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 12 February 2015)

We examined in detail four projects undertaken by ICIJ:

1 "Secrecy for Sale", published in 2013, which examined offshore tax havens through an anonymous leak of 2.5 million secret files (ICIJ, 2013);
2 "Luxembourg Leaks", a 2014 investigation into 340 companies that channeled hundreds of billions of dollars into Luxembourg and saved billions in taxes thanks to rulings secured by PricewaterhouseCoopers;
3 "Swiss Leaks", which, in 2015, detailed how HSBC provided services to clients connected with the global arms trade, blood diamonds, and bribery; and
4 "The Panama Papers", published in 2016, which involved 400 journalists from six continents in what ICIJ called "the biggest investigation in journalism history" (Alecci, 2017: par. 1), and won the ICIJ and partner organizations a Pulitzer Prize.

We looked at how ICIJ journalists discussed the impact of each project in all of the documents we could collect, including news articles by and about ICIJ reporters, blog posts, emails to readers, a report to funders, and tweets. We supplemented that with two interviews with a senior ICIJ staff member.

We observed ICIJ writers discussing impact in four ways:

1 Being cited or referenced by other news organizations;
2 Spurring deliberation that could lead to public policy change;
3 Changing public opinion; and
4 Causing substantive change, including suggestions that ICIJ's work is changing policy or triggering official forms of deliberation that could lead to policy change.

ICIJ staffers were adamant that they were not seeking a particular type of reaction or response to their work. Regarding LuxLeaks, online editor Hamish Boland-Rudder told us the ICIJ didn't aim for particular results because "we're journalists, we're not activists." Overall, the goal is "to provoke public interest of an issue and provoke debate hopefully at the highest levels; the outcome of those debates we leave in the hands of the people making them, the public, anyone who cares about those issues" (Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 4 March 2015). These thoughts were echoed by ICIJ's director, Gerard Ryle, in a radio interview about the SwissLeaks project. When prompted by the interviewer for his opinion, Ryle noted that "I don't think it's our job to comment or to get involved. Once we've published we need to walk away and allow authorities and the public to decide what should happen next" (Moss-Coane, 2015).

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These statements offer insight into the type of impact ICIJ is *not* looking to have. Below, we document how ICIJ staff members refer to the impact they *are* seeking. We use the four categories listed, which arose from our initial analysis of the texts: references by other news organizations, deliberation, changing public opinion, and substantive change. Our analysis revealed that mentions of impact were never apparent in the initial investigative news stories produced by ICIJ. That is, they appeared not in the work itself, but only when staffers talked *about* their work – not just to us but also to audience members and the broader public, often in blog posts describing their projects, rather than within the work itself.

Citations or references by other news organizations

In the projects we examined, ICIJ relied on other news organizations to distribute its content, and the degree to which others published or mentioned its articles was a major way ICIJ conceptualized impact. ICIJ assiduously tracked pickup of its stories, even though the resulting data were challenging to analyze. ICIJ tracked page views on its own site, asked media partners to embed code on their websites to count visitors to those pages, and hired a clippings service that flagged stories that explicitly mentioned ICIJ, but also used keywords to capture second-wave stories – reporting on the reporting (Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 4 March 2015).

ICIJ also frequently drew attention, through all available communication channels, to mentions of its work. The impact section of its report to a funder counts page views on ICIJ's own site, partner sites, social media shares, and a database where they made the documents available, as well as the number of media partners.

On social media, ICIJ promoted partnerships with news organizations and shared content produced by journalists who collaborated on investigations. Nearly all ICIJ tweets about the projects linked to articles or videos produced by media partners or other news organizations reporting on ICIJ's initial investigation. ICIJ also tweeted quotations from editorials supportive of holding accountable the individuals or institutions associated with offshore tax havens. One tweet, for instance, quoted an editorial published in the *EU Observer*, making the case that "If there is one thing we should learn from LuxLeaks, it is the power of transparency".

Interestingly, when it came to Panama Papers, just one story tagged "impact" on the ICIJ website – about journalists facing blowback for reporting on Panama Papers – noted references to the series by other news organizations. Still, ICIJ frequently referenced the number of media partners, produced a video focused largely on press coverage of the initial Panama Papers reporting (Alecci, 2017: par 2), and highlighted the fact that it shared the Pulitzer Prize with two partner news organizations.

ICIJ frequently referenced moments in which other news organizations highlighted widespread attention being paid to ICIJ's work. Regarding the LuxLeaks investigation, ICIJ noted in blog posts that the *New York Times* reported that revelations had sparked a "rising furor," that Reuters called the response a "tax storm," and that a Bloomberg editorial called for the European Commission President's resignation (Boland-Rudder et al., 2014).

Despite this assiduous tracking, it remained a challenge for ICIJ to understand how to analyze the data, with each staffer using his or her own measure of success: "We all have our own personal things. We all have the writers we admire, the publications we admire, so for each of us there's that moment of 'oh my god, we're on *60 Minutes* or the front page of *Financial Times*'" (Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 12 February 2015).

Deliberation

ICIJ carefully tracked and reported to readers and funders the conversation on social media and other online platforms generated by its initial investigative reporting. That's because,

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Boland-Rudder explained, while policy change is a desirable outcome, public conversation is just as valuable.

> We're looking at things like social media engagement, what sorts of conversations are happening online around our work and even down to what comments are being left on our website. [. . .] It's those ways of having it injected into the public conversation that's also really valuable, but it's a difficult thing to measure and it's a difficult thing to quantify exactly how that impact will play out.
>
> *(Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 4 March 2015)*

ICIJ often highlighted comments made by public officials in response to revelations from the leaks, such as "Responding to the new 'Lux Leaks' revelations, the Luxembourg finance ministry conceded . . ." (Boland-Rudder, 2014a). ICIJ suggested its work had a long-term deliberative impact by writing that tax avoidance schemes "have been in the spotlight in Europe since ICIJ and its partners published more than 500 secret Luxembourg tax agreements" (Boland-Rudder, 2014b). It also used social media to highlight deliberative responses by policymakers, often starting tweets with the word "IMPACT" in bold letters.

Ultimately, deliberative change – along with mention by news organizations – can help amplify impact, Boland-Rudder explained in an interview.

> Having a story on the front page of *Financial Times* or *The New York Times*, it definitely plays into *building that public conversation* [emphasis added] and quite often that public conversation finishes with questions pitched squarely at the decision makers, often politicians. So the more reach a story has, the more people are talking about it, it definitely plays into the amount of impact. It becomes an issue people can't ignore.
>
> *(Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 12 February 2015)*

In the case of the Panama Papers project, a large number of ICIJ stories on its impact referenced policy discussions, such as government proposals to increase financial transparency, proposals from tax agencies and other experts about tax reform – specifically targeting offshore enablers – and government hearings featuring testimony from journalists, world leaders, and bankers.

Public opinion

References to change in public opinion were rare and tended to be subtle – not quantified evidence of changing opinion but rather statements bordering on oblique references to public sentiment. For instance, an ICIJ blog post referring to the Secrecy for Sale project quoted a report by Offshore Incorporations Limited, a leading offshore services firm, saying that "The scandal has created a crisis of confidence in the industry" and led to issues concerning the banking industry's public image (Chavkin, 2013).

On several occasions, ICIJ tweeted quotations that made the case that the LuxLeaks investigation had changed public perception on tax havens. "Before #LuxLeaks, 'nobody really cared about this' and now 'the whole world has started to discuss rulings'", ICIJ tweeted, citing a *Bloomberg* article that quoted Luxembourg's new finance minister. Indeed, Boland-Rudder tweeted: "cool that #LuxLeaks and #SwissLeaks may now be part of Europe's lexicon".

In an interview, Boland-Rudder explained why ICIJ had a vested interest in how the public perceived its investigations:

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> We knew, particularly from receiving feedback from reporters, that there would be strong interest from local audiences in this story. Wherever there's a strong interest there's likely to be strong discussions. Strong discussions often lead to positive outcomes or at least a better informed public.
>
> *(personal communication, 4 March 2015)*

Substantive change

ICIJ journalists also frequently referenced substantive change occurring as a result of their work, especially when reporting led to "any inquiries, any prosecutions, laws changed, systems fixed" (Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 12 February 2015).

One dramatic result of the SwissLeaks investigation was the fact that Swiss authorities opened a criminal investigation against HSBC and raided the bank's offices in Geneva. "The raid comes amid growing scrutiny of the bank following ICIJ's Swiss Leaks investigation", ICIJ told its readers (Boland-Rudder, 2015). Many other references to this form of impact related to investigations and inquiries.

Among the most prominent substantive impact of the LuxLeaks project was a no-confidence vote over the European Commission's president, who had been the prime minister of Luxembourg during the time of the tax deals (Blenkinsop, 2014). ICIJ explained in a blog post that the president "has been under pressure since ICIJ and its media partners published stories detailing secret Luxembourg tax deals" (Boland-Rudder, 2014c).

The LuxLeaks investigation was followed by a call for an inquiry, which ultimately became a "special committee." ICIJ referred to the inquiry as "a LuxLeaks inquiry committee" (Schilis-Gallego, 2015) and explained that the European Parliament instead opted for a special committee to "look into tax avoidance in Luxembourg, following the LuxLeaks revelations published by ICIJ and its media partners in November [2014]".

Several articles on the ICIJ website about the Panama Papers project referenced public policy changes, including new financial reforms, legislation targeting tax avoidance, mandates that banks disclose information, and a range of actions – lawsuits, fines, and arrests (of the law firm's founders) – taken against the firm at the center of Panama Papers. In its review of impact one year after the publication of Panama Papers reports began, ICIJ noted that the investigation prompted

> police raids, arrests and resignations of high-profile figures.[. . .] Reporting by ICIJ and its partners has sparked more than 150 inquiries, audits, and investigations in 79 countries and has driven new legislation and financial rules in the U.S. and abroad.
>
> *(Hudson, 2017: par. 15)*

Implications: broader impact

Investigative journalism has traditionally been more impact-oriented than other forms of journalism (Ettema and Glasser, 1998), and the ICIJ journalists we studied push that orientation further toward explicitly discussing impact. ICIJ focused on potential outcomes from the outset of its projects, then assiduously tracked the stories produced by themselves and others, noting when they triggered deliberation, substantive impact, and changed public opinion. Tracking impact was fueled by both internal interest and external requirements from funders who wanted to know more than just how many stories were produced.

Still, we found that ICIJ journalists rarely suggested that change came *from* their work, instead describing their journalism *alongside* its outcomes. For instance, ICIJ noted that tax avoidance has been in the spotlight *since* the ICIJ revelations, stopping short of suggesting it was *because of* them.

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And its employees did not articulate desire for a particular impact, saying instead that they do not decide ahead of time on a desired outcome, which would look more like activism than like journalism (Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 4 March 2015).

ICIJ journalists did *repeat* explicit connections between their work and its impact when those connections were made by people outside the organization. For instance, ICIJ repeated an assertion about its own impact made by Luxembourg Finance Minister Pierre Gramegna, noting in a blog post that "Gramegna said the Lux Leaks revelations brought the world's attention to the issue"(Boland-Rudder, 2014d). Similarly, ICIJ noted that "*The New York Times* said the revelations have sparked a 'rising furor' in Europe. *Reuters* called the reaction a 'tax storm'" (Boland-Rudder et al., 2014).

As the nonprofit news sector becomes increasingly metrics-driven (Epstein and Yuthas, 2014), one might expect the foundations and individuals that fund ICIJ to look for impact measures from the organization as well. Boland-Rudder acknowledged that people who had given them money wanted to see results, noting the organization's funders "don't have any potential financial gain from our stories but they still want to see value for the money they're spending so we have to present that more and more in terms of impact" (Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 4 March 2015). Still, the hesitation and resistance described earlier suggest a desire to maintain some degree of traditional journalistic ethos – a distinction that has ICIJ walking a fine line.

Indeed, ICIJ journalists are not the only investigative reporters who feel a level of discomfort in discussing the impact of their work. A manager of ProPublica, perhaps the most prominent nonprofit investigative news center in the United States, had this to say:

> Before moving on to the mechanics of charting impact, there is another key issue with which we need to wrestle: Is it even appropriate for journalists to seek impact from their work? Does such an objective cross the line from journalism into advocacy?
>
> *(Tofel, 2013)*

Its connection to foundation and philanthropic funding is not the only thing that differentiates ICIJ from mainstream journalism. ICIJ describes itself as intentionally distinct, an antidote to traditional newsrooms that have cut costs and moved away from investigative reporting (International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, 2012). For ICIJ, solving these problems requires leveraging the capacity of its small, U.S.-based staff through international collaborations and by giving its content away. ICIJ's success depends on other organizations publishing its work and adding local context. In other words, ICIJ attempts to do something different than mainstream journalism, but its symbiotic relationship with traditional news outlets means it cannot stray significantly from norms and practices of mainstream journalism. This reliance limits how ICIJ can conceive of its work, requiring the organization to balance its attempt to produce content that will be picked up by journalists and mass audiences with an effort to improve journalism's place in a democracy and outwardly discuss impact – if not directly in its news stories, then at least when addressing its readers.

Through this lens, we can make better sense of Ryle's comments on public radio that: "I don't think it's our job to comment or to get involved. Once we've published we need to walk away and allow authorities and the public to decide what should happen next" (Moss-Coane, 2015) and Boland-Rudder's statement that "We don't like to dictate what result we'd like to get because we're journalists, we're not activists" (personal communication, 4 March 2015). These statements seem to echo what a *Philadelphia Inquirer* reporter told Ettema and Glasser: "It's not part of the process to go out there and lobby for reform" (1998: 9) – even though in many other ways, ICIJ staffers were much more open about discussing impact.

For both the *Inquirer* reporter and ICIJ staff, lobbying for a particular change is out of bounds. Both organizations follow journalistic norms that prohibit such overt support for specific

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outcomes. Indeed, an ICIJ employee told us that when there is conflict between orientation toward impact and a push for being disinterested,

> we will always fall back on our journalistic values and our journalist ethics whereby the story comes first and we are there to explore the issue, to shine a light in a dark place and open it up to public discussion, not to necessarily focus on any particular agenda.
>
> *(Boland-Rudder, personal communication, 4 March 2015)*

This, then, is the line. ICIJ discusses its impact openly, while other investigative journalists may hesitate to do so, but open advocacy or ignoring journalistic norms would mean going too far.

Toward a new theory of democracy

This evolution in the notion of journalistic impact presents an opportunity for scholars to reopen a discussion about the role of journalism in democracy – an opportunity we should take seriously given the troubles facing journalism and modern democracy. In the journalistic theory of democracy described (and critiqued) by Gans, journalists' responsibility ends with informing the public – an approach that *enables* journalists to ignore the consequences of their work. In the new theory being forged by ICIJ and others, journalists take part in every step along the way.

Our study identified the four aforementioned ways ICIJ understands the impact of its projects, offering this path for how journalism can help build a stronger democracy:

1 Informing the public;
2 Spurring conversation in media outlets and among the general public;
3 Changing opinions; and, ultimately
4 Changing policy.

This new theory makes concrete the notion that the responsibility of journalists to uphold and strengthen democracy does not end at publishing or broadcasting stories. Journalists should instead work to ensure their reporting reaches a wide audience. Spurring conversation also requires journalists to engage the public directly through social media and other platforms. While journalistic norms understandably prevent many journalists from calling for specific changes in public opinion or prescribing policy changes, tracking this type of change when it comes about alongside their reporting should not raise ethical concerns. We suggest that carefully tracking and informing the public about the impact of a story is less self-promotion than it is part of journalists' duties to report on the lifecycle of an investigation. This theory may promise to build stronger and more citizen-oriented communities and to bring new direction to the journalistic profession, which has become unmoored from its democratic mission.

At ICIJ it seems these steps are a means to measure success rather than to make recommendations about journalistic behavior on a broad scale – a place where scholars, rather than journalists, can contribute. Still, while there is work to be done in fleshing out these steps (and we suggest some possible research directions later), ICIJ's approach to impact suggests an emergent new theory of journalistic democracy – one that is slowly being embraced by other organizations (see, e.g., Keller and Abelson, 2015).

Finally, we agree with Merritt's argument that journalists may spur positive change by openly acknowledging their values, perhaps regaining lost standing with the public and becoming "more effective in our role in the democratic process" (1998: 12). Those suggestions are particularly pertinent given ICIJ's unusual newsroom processes. The broad interest in ICIJ's stories means that traditional news organizations, on one hand eager to distance themselves from the impact of their

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work and on the other eager to snap up the free, quality work offered by ICIJ, are publishing stories that originated from a newsroom that does not necessarily share their orientation toward impact. Given this tension, it may well be that journalistic transparency and outcomes would be better served by traditional news organizations owning up to the impact-oriented nature of what they do – or at least of the ICIJ stories they carry.

While we found ICIJ's explanations of its work insightful, questions remain. Does this orientation toward impact exist at other nonprofit news organizations and, indeed, at the mainstream, commercial news organizations that reach the broadest audiences? How do foundations and other funders of investigative journalism define impact and want it to be measured? Are these entities pushing a revised understanding of the role of journalism in democracy?

As these empirical studies mount, we will also need serious normative arguments that attempt to flesh out the journalistic theory of democracy. These will come not from observation of journalists at work but rather from an examination and understanding of what democracy needs and what journalists can do to support it.

Further reading

Work about citizens' roles in democracy can help make sense of why journalists need to think more about the impact of their work. Harry Boyte writes about reinventing citizenship as "public work," done "by publics, for public purposes, in public." This suggests citizenship is larger than membership and instead sees citizens as creative agents and co-creators of the worlds they inhabit, an orientation that helps us understand why it is important for journalists to focus on impact. That piece, published in 2013, was titled "Reinventing Citizenship as Public Work: Citizen-Centered Democracy and the Empowerment Gap" and was published by the Kettering Foundation.

Note

1 This study is described in greater detail in Konieczna and Powers (2017).

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