

PARSONS | TKO



Reflecting on content impact

An exploration into nonprofit perspectives on content and data

Data Innovation Studio | December 2021





Table of Contents

Introduction

- Content Impact Study

Content Impact Report

- Content
- Complicated Impact
- Website Engagement
- Data

About the Studio

- Data Innovation Studio
- Next Steps



Introduction

Content Impact Study

The Studio's first study is a look into content impact — what it means to an organization, its relevance in mission-driven work, and the role of data in content development.

Looking into content impact, nuanced understanding of how content is used allows an organization's staff members make more informed decisions in their work. The Content Impact Study is an exploration into how mission-driven organizations currently and historically utilize content — and what can be done to improve and innovate content development in the sector.

The Data Innovation Studio believes that data can be a powerful tool to understand the content an organization is strategizing, producing, and distributing. And that data can be used across the content lifecycle to better inform the process.

The content lifecycle encompasses the content process in five core stages:

1. **Strategy:** Using data to meet audiences where they are and match to their content
2. **Creation:** Identifying most popular content formats for audience and optimize content accordingly
3. **Promotion:** Tracking content during promotion period and identify target audience engagement
4. **Measurement:** Defining and locating response metrics to design new tools and frameworks
5. **Refinement:** Reporting on the content impact to effect internal strategies and behaviors

This exploration into content impact began in June 2021, and since its conception has developed into connections with 28 individuals from the sector. These connections have provided introductions into different content related roles in the field. From these 28 leads, the Studio has had the pleasure of conducting 16 interviews on the topic of content impact, which inform the insights of this report.

THE FIVE **CONTENT** STAGES





Content Impact Report

Content



Content can be defined generally as pieces of communication output. In its most vague definitions are stories and messages that communicate something to some audience. Organizations tend to define content by its format, whether analog or digital, by how it's made and for who. And much of the content in modern organizations takes the form of digital content. Examples include websites, emails, social media, and video.

These are content outputs that take a tremendous amount of effort to produce and it is central to many organizations' strategy. However, the content produced from organization to organization can vary greatly, and the variability in what is considered to be content can range from huge reports to short social media posts. The shape and form of content is dependent on a number of factors that are determined by the organization's goals with the content they produce. Some common factors are organization size, audience size, resources available, and audience type.

Content can be pieces of knowledge and messaging in and of themselves for a specific audience, such as a news article for a general audience or summary report explaining the month's outcomes. But content can also be pieces of metacommunication, providing messaging about other content that exists independent of it, such as an email newsletter sharing about a series of newsletters, or a Tweet with a quote from last month's report.

All these output variations can all be considered content, but these slight variations and differences in usage can require different levels of attention — from the strategy behind its creation to the metrics that need to be identified to most effectively understand that content output's impact and affect on an audience and following repercussions on an organization.

Considering the variability in what is considered content, **it is imperative to collect perspectives and experiences around content work that allows for a more whole understanding of the spectrum of content, the strategy and messaging**, the factors that determine those messages, and the intended influence of different content types on an audience.

A more holistic and unified model of impact for content can empower organizations to better account for the lifetime value and return on their investments in content creation, and to guide budget requests and internal expectations accordingly.



Responses to “What is the role of content?”

Translate information from an organization into accessible outputs, from long-form reports to short-form outputs.

Spread the word about what the organization is doing, and as a result, get people to do something (donate, volunteer)

Storytelling to provide context about what the organization is up to. As the organization does good work, share that story with people who need to know.

Strengthen the organization's brand; content shapes that unified brand narrative. Elevate the brand on key topics and conversations.

Communication and messages crafted to build trust, report, and belief in the company. Consider what resonates with audience members and entice them to go deeper into a relationship with the cause and organization.

Ultimate goal dependent on the needs of the business. **Content used to support business goals** by providing customers/constituents/audiences with information that's relevant to them.

Nonprofits tend to create for donors and for-profits for clients. Strong push for impact data to confirm or support outcomes of a program (change or progress of a program).

Make sure information about what the organization is doing is available for grant givers, funders.

Give a platform to people who are doing innovative stuff and bring perspective that aligns with the organization. Expand leadership into a bigger space and audience.

The role of content in the mission-driven space varies from person to person, and considering the variety of roles that strategize, develop, market, and analyze all the content pushed out by these organizations, those variations are very much expected.

From our 16 interviews conducted with people from the mission-driven space, the study found two major, interconnected roles content plays in these organizations:

1. **Content as a unifier:** Content exists to strengthen an organization's brand, messaging, and image. It is a cultivated presentation of the organization that is shared to various audiences to align their image of the organization. It reinforces the mission of the mission-driven organization.
2. **Content as a translator:** Content translates the information and messages shared by the organization. It varies in form and a singular piece of information can have multiplicitous outputs.

From those two roles, there are two types of content types based on the audience the content is designed to interact with.

1. **Expert Content:** Content is highly technical and made for a specific technical audience where the expertise of the audience and the technicality of the content matches up
2. **Public Content:** Content could be highly technical in topic or not, but made for an audience that are non-experts in that content's topic

The combinations of the role of the content with the content type are not mutually exclusive, and content pieces that unify a message could both appeal to an expert and a public audience. These are not hard categories to define a content piece, but rather descriptors of how content interacts with audiences in the context of an organization. The complex theory work of understanding audiences and the terminology around it will not be developed in this report, but it is important to acknowledge that the targeting of audiences does not imply that the targeted audience will be the same audience receiving and engaging with your content. There are variables that are hard to account for in a regular organizational context, thus strategy should seek to inform trends but allow room for flexibility and space for evaluating content performance post-publication.

The following tables (“Examples of content types” and “Summary of digital content types”) visualize the complex categorization of content outputs based from conversations with interviewees..

Examples of content types

	Expert Content	Public Content
Content to Unify	Research Reports, Theoretical Frameworks, Policy Memos	Social Media, Creative Pieces, Video
Content to Translate	Articles, Blog Posts	Workshops, Toolkits/Guides

Summary of digital content types

	Teams Responsible	Digital Content Types	Audience	Goal of Content
Expert Content: Content is highly technical and made for a specific technical audience where the expertise of the audience and the technicality of the content matches up	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research • Policy • Program • Fellows 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research reports • Articles • Frameworks/Toolsets • Visualizations 	Policy Makers/Other Technical Experts	Share expert findings among experts. Shift ideas and approaches (attitudes) within an in-group to facilitate changes (behaviors)
Public Content: Content could be highly technical in topic or not, but made for an audience that are non-experts in that content's topic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications • Content • Publication • Campaign/Advocacy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social Media • Creative pieces (quizzes, interactives) • Videos • Articles/Blog • Public outreach • Virtual events • Media appearances • Talking points • Tools/products for advocacy • Newsletter/Email 	Non-expert, general public audience Targeted audiences dependent on content itself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Translate technical topics for a non-technical audience. Create on-ramps and entryways for people to understand the content (Inform) • Strengthen the audience's support/interest in a topic (Change attitudes) • Strengthen the organization's brand and support of the topic (marketing/brand image) • Call to act on a topic: advocacy, policy change, donations (Change behaviors)



Complicated Impact



There is incredible complexity when it comes to defining content. So, why do all these forms exist? We can understand implicitly that different forms of content serve different goals and affect audiences in different ways, for different purposes, to meet different ends. The most baseline result of putting out a piece of content for an organization is to create, influence, or amplify a message, with the intention of making an impact. But what is “impact?” **How does an organization agree on what is considered impactful, and how do those standards of impact hold up against real-world benchmarks of creating positive change in the world?**

There are basic definitions readily available for the term, yet organizations are asked for differing metrics from various stakeholders — making “impact” hard to benchmark and impact reporting to be an inefficient task. Accordingly, impact reporting is often unsatisfactory in its inability to show that the energy put into the content lifecycle is proportional to its resulting effect on the organization and the broader world.

While we struggle to understand the ambiguous impact of the work, content is still implicitly understood to be important, necessary, and capable of influence. Metrics can standardize the creative outputs of content and resulting engagement with the content. But those metrics tend to extrapolate from the broader goals associated with the content. It breaks down the organization’s narrative and mission, the goals associated with the content, and the creative strategy related to content creation into quantifiable pieces that may not capture the full story about the content — how it fits into the context of other content pieces, how it affects the real-world, and its resulting effects on an organization.

The next table (“Measuring and refining content data”) summarizes the different ways that organizations assess and report on the impact of their digital content. The path content data takes after it is measured for tends to lend towards a reporting or refining function.

Measuring and refining content data

What are we measuring for?	Teams responsible for metrics	Types/Form of Metric Outputs What do we want from those metrics?	Audience (of resulting content metrics)	Goal of metrics
<p>What is success? How do you feel "good" about the content you put out?</p> <p>We can measure for:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audience reach & engagement by subset of content • Responsiveness metrics: Reply rate and speed • Deliverability & open rate • Clicks & goal completion • Keyword & trend analysis • View depth • Event visibility & loyalty • PR sentiment • Service awareness • ROI of effort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communications, Data/IT • Each department has their own "data person," • Data and Analytics Manager/Management • External Consultancy 	<p>Reporting: Create outputs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Performance reports • Documentation of content data + insights/analysis of data 	<p>Funders, Executive Team Members, Teams Responsible</p> <p>External Audiences</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share results of the content with a group of individuals that have the ability to influence resources (fundings, resources to teams, capacity, etc.) • Document data collected in an organized way (data infrastructure) • Be able to compare the results of content (metrics gathered) with real-world impacts/contextualize ongoing goals around a topic/issue area
<p>How do we measure for?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attitude changes • Behavioral changes • Quality of Content 		<p>Refining: Refine recurring measurement tools/dashboards</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find what measurements are most useful (Ongoing QA: can be used to add/eliminate metrics) • Reviewing goals/KPIs over period of time 	<p>Teams Responsible, Other teams within the organization</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share results of the content with a group of individuals who are actively minding the content/creating the content. • Data used to refine the content process (to what formats, topics are getting more engagement, is getting viewed, etc.)
		<p>Note: Reporting and Refining elements can inform each other (not mutually exclusive outputs)</p>		

Website Engagement



Of all the digital content created, one output is particularly relevant to reevaluate for organizations: the classic website.

Websites are a tried and true element of an organization. The number of websites on the Internet have grown exponentially since the early '90s, and the trend continues. It's an essential part of most organizations, fulfilling functions such as organizing information on an organization, directing donations, and establishing an organization's credibility. Business functions occur heavily online, and well-designed websites are critical in engaging users to interact with the site and take actions as defined by the organization.

Website engagement is broadly defined as the interactions a visitor to a website takes, literally engaging with different elements of a website from clicking through, sharing pages, or donating money. However, this **vague understanding of website engagement fails to capture the complex journey a user takes while on a website and the difficult to quantify motivations behind those actions.**

Website engagement can be understood through various engagement metrics, quantified measurements of the visitor's interactions with the website's elements. The metrics collected provide data on the engagement, and the collection of visitor data over time creates a clearer image of the (un)effectiveness of elements and the paths visitors take while on the website.

Understanding engagement with your website allows organizations to make informed and practical decisions about what to change, to keep the same, or to boost on the website. Those data-driven decisions take part of the guesswork away from website management.

Website data has been used forever by organizations, but what has the data been used for? How have the metrics collected been used to improve, change, affect the website — and more importantly how has the website been able to affect larger organizational practices?

There are many ways that website engagement has been researched and discussed in the past. What elements of the website can we identify and determine engagement metrics to support better user experiences and interactions, and what can that process look like for an organization?

The following table summarizes five website engagement considerations in brief. These considerations hit on the variety of ways content exists on a website.



Five website engagement considerations

Call-to-Actions (CTAs)	CTAs are typically some of the most explicit and high-value actions an audience member can take on a website , and sites are usually designed expressly around them and with purpose-built features and integrations to facilitate them.
User Experience	User experience data is invaluable for organizations that are planning enhancements or a redesign for their website. Having information about how your audiences use your site should be a principal input to any changes you make. There are a number of purpose built tools that can offer detailed information about user experience.
Written Content	Even as the world becomes more digital, the written word still represents a huge fraction of what organizations produce and how audiences prefer to consume their content. Most of the metrics that measure reading require customization of your data, and these are some of the hardest to build because they require a clear understanding of exactly what aspects of your content you are trying to manage and what types of “reading” matter enough to measure.
Rich Media and Interactives	Whether it’s video, data visualization, maps, or dynamic content like quizzes, rich media can either stand alone or weave into text to vary the experience of long-form content. While it can greatly improve your on-site experience, this type of content can represent a big investment in time and/or money, so should be used intentionally and measured for its performance to validate and guide whether ongoing investments are worthwhile.
Data Naming	Data names can typically be sorted into top level buckets, such as: Lead with type of data; Group by category of engagement; or Group by segment and “Level of engagement.” Grouping your data by goal and audience segment bakes more of your organization’s strategic context directly into the data, which can make it more intuitive and interpretable right at the source, but can also make your data less flexible in its ability to answer unanticipated questions.



Data



To begin answering the questions posed in the previous section , there needs to be an agreement on how “data” and “data strategy” should be defined.

Data are the metrics, or measurements, collected about a piece of content post-publishing. These metrics are related to the performance of the content, and more specifically, what effect did the content have on the world. That’s generally all the metrics can be collected, but what we’re interested in is more closely examining all the data collected to point to metrics that can be picked from the overall data to support an argument that the content actually effected the world in a particular way.

This level of specificity is necessary to effectively compare results with established goals. **Determining whether a piece of content has the resulting data that meets the previously set goals builds a standard and expectation for performance and allows more creative, innovative strategies for measuring impact.**

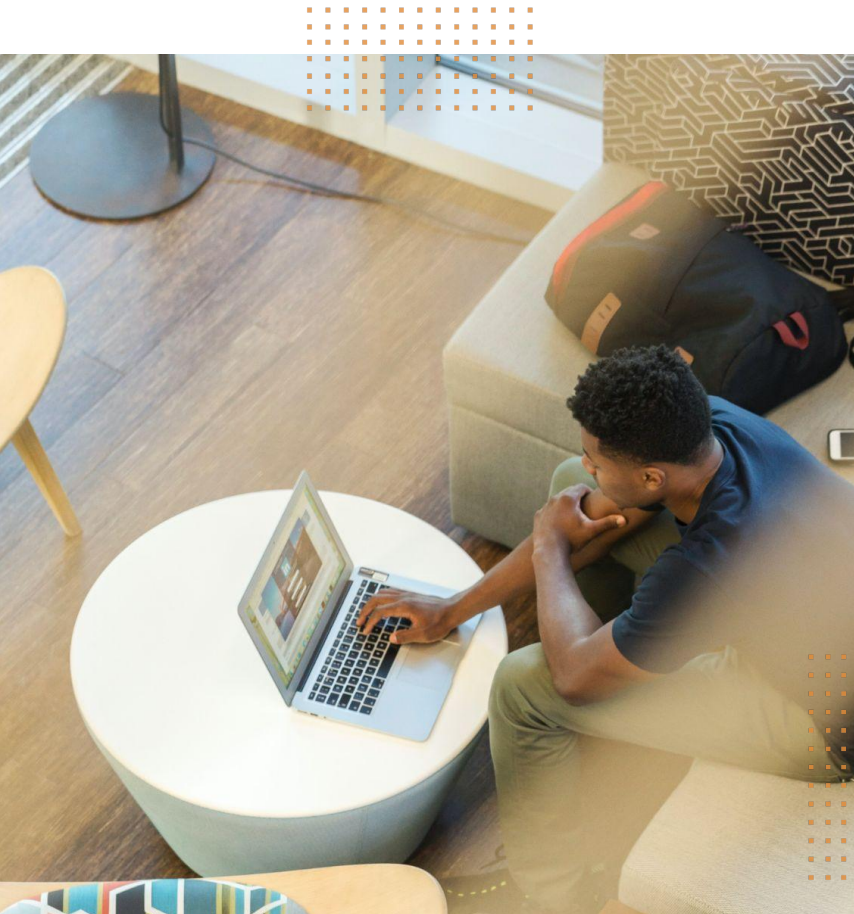


Anatomy of data strategy

Engagement Architecture is the PTKO philosophy and methodology. It's a model that addresses outreach platforms as a holistic ecosystem — an interconnected set of people and systems that work together to advance an organization's mission.

To understand the role of data in content impact, it's most important to acknowledge there is a flow of data throughout the content lifecycle. As a content output is created, data is used in its development and through the process more data is collected as a response. There is movement and transformation of what “data” is focused on depending on the person and team, the stage the content is on, and the goals for what the data may be used for.

Content impact tends to focus primarily on the data collected from content outputs — the responses, results, and ever invaluable impact of the output. Developing a more specific content impact strategy begins with a basic understanding of the anatomy of data strategy.



The anatomy of data strategy can be simply broken down into four parts:

1. **Strategy:** Defining the goals of the plan; defining a “Theory of Change” that connects actions to mission outcomes. Creating a hypothesis that can be verified or invalidated with data.
2. **Tracking:** Collecting and accessing data necessary to answering the strategized hypothesis.
3. **Reporting:** Conducting analysis and turning the data into curated outputs and into insights. Creating a story that is relevant to stakeholders.
4. **Adoption and Optimization:** Driving business processes with data and using the collected data in practice to develop identifiable changes.

Value of data strategy in content impact

Content generates a lot of data, both quantifiable metrics and qualitative responses. There is a fine line between relying too heavily on one method of determining the impact of a content output.

There's a necessity for content professionals to establish strategies to determine what data to collect and access and why that data would be important for understanding a piece of content throughout the content development process. **Strategy is necessary for determining impact, and a holistic approach to data as part of a complex ecosystem provides a model for tracking and weighing different elements of quantitative and qualitative responses.**

The current perceptions about the role of data in content development focuses on individual stages of development and data existing distinctly in each stage. In reality, data transforms from stage to stage and can inform development, next steps in what to collect, and answer the question of "impact" as the piece progresses. This can range from understanding the value of resources spent between stages to the relationships between teams across a content output's lifecycle. From the conversations on content impact, here were a few elements of data in the content lifecycle that are not acknowledged as often.

The following table shows a summary of responses from interviewees about what they want to do with content and what they could imagine they could do with data.



Responses to “What do you want to know about your content? What could you imagine you could do with data in an ideal world?”

Share data across organizations in a protected way. Create infrastructures to be more transparent about data collected amongst peers.

There is currently a lack of sharing, especially amongst smaller organizations, and it is difficult to know what people have done with content before. Structures need to be developed to understand what are the benchmarks and standards for what has been done with content data before. Data should be shared and evaluated across the sector; it's been done in other disciplines, such as peer review standards in academia, but what would be realistic for nonprofits?

Develop methods that fully utilize available resources related to data and technology. Educate about accessible tools to build capacity. Ideally there would be more comprehensive data reporting; there's an overwhelming amount of data available that isn't always collected, organized, or analyzed closely. Consistent reporting across platforms should be a goal, especially for teams where not everyone has the same level of digital literacy.

Have more **“data ambassadors” that are embedded within teams to advocate for data**. Data is collected and utilized across organizations, but there may be difficulty making connections across teams,

In an ideal world, **people shouldn't be overly afraid of the content they are receiving** and have the ability to access real, verified information through content outputs. Online spaces can be confusing and lack trustability. It would be interesting to better understand the role of platforms' algorithms.

Strategy is necessary for determining impact. In particular, we observed that:

- Content professionals benefit when they establish proactive strategies to determine which data to collect (based on what's most important for understanding a piece of content throughout the content development process)
- Quantitative and qualitative data both have value as part of a holistic data approach
- It can be helpful to measure resources spent in creating and promoting digital content across the content lifecycle (to provide deeper context to output and outcome measures, informing future decisions on resource allocation)
- Content development often involves relationships and collaboration across different teams and departments. Sometimes it can be helpful to capture information on how this collaboration works (and doesn't work) to identify potential process improvements.



Some considerations around developing the strategy is being able to report and communicate content metrics throughout the organization, to democratize content data for uses at each stage of the content lifecycle. This includes creating reporting standards that even nontechnical team members can access and evaluate for insights, collaboration between technical and nontechnical teams, and reporting that spans across the organization not only vertically but also horizontally across teams.

The responses point to a more open, integrated model of content impact that takes into account data from different steps of the content development process, transparency across an organization (and between organizations), and a more intentional strategy that connects the quality of content with the organization's mission. There are many variables and details to content impact, and using data to determine that impact can be unfulfilling if the strategy behind that data lacks a holistic view on how the data is connected to real-life affects of the output.

The content lifecycle is a robust story where the role and form of data transforms across stages. The key is to be able to show the wins, but also effectively the losses; the goal is to develop a strategy that connects content metrics with context around the content development itself.

Overall, our interviews with experts suggested the need to move to a more open, integrated model of content impact that takes into account data from different steps of the content development process, transparency across an organization (and between organizations), and a more intentional strategy that connects the quality of content with the organization's mission.



About the Studio

Data Innovation Studio

The Data Innovation Studio is an initiative with ParsonsTKO dedicated to understanding the stories and experiences of people in the mission-driven space in relation to data and technology.

The potential for how organizations utilize digital tools, data, and technologies has changed, increased, and diversified. But the adoption of more innovative and creative approaches to these tools has lacked actionable momentum. While people are aware of this potential, there are real barriers and concerns around adopting new approaches.



The Data Innovation Studio is an evolution of ParsonsTKO's experience with that ongoing tension between innovation and convention. From when ParsonsTKO started nearly a decade ago, the landscape around data, digital marketing, and nonprofit operations has rapidly changed. The way people approach technology has changed across sectors, and broadly across society. ParsonsTKO has been involved with nonprofits and the mission-driven sector for years and has built rapport with thoughtful individuals across organizations — these are leaders that have insights to share with the sector and stories that inspire a deeper investigation into what is considered the status quo for data and technology for nonprofits.

The goal of the Data Innovation Studio is to shed light on the commonalities between organizations and develop a diverse community of data practitioners across the sector that are ready to explore a more innovative and strategic approach to data — and to share that knowledge and practical outputs for the entire sector and beyond. **What does excellence in data look like in the mission-driven sector?** The Data Innovation Studio wants to take the steps forwards to develop that vision and create that future.



Next steps

If you're interested in learning more, schedule a call with PTKO Chief Analytics Officer, **Stefan Byrd-Krueger** to learn more about your role in understanding the impact of your digital content.

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- <https://parsonstko.com/team-member/stefan-byrd-krueger/>
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Schedule a Call

- <https://calendly.com/stefan-ptko/dis-conversation?a1=Overview>



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