



Journalist Fellowship Paper

Change-Centric Journalism: reframing the value proposition of news for the AI age

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Introduction

The perfect storm sweeping through newsrooms this century has resulted in dual crises of trust and sustainability in journalism. Nothing illustrates this better than “news avoidance”: a growing trend of actively rejecting journalistic content.

In a saturated information environment shaped by Big Tech’s unchecked power and stifled by deteriorating levels of press freedom, how can journalism break through?

It’s the question preoccupying media leaders, and the one that inspired this project. Over the next pages, I will argue that, while it is true that platforms have risen to dominance through opaque algorithms and extractive surveillance practices, their influence also reflects a profound disconnect between users and news outlets. Over the past decade, people have [increasingly turned to social media and messenger apps](#) to access news – not just out of habit, but because these platforms offer immediacy, convenience, and relevance.¹

In response, newsrooms have worked to adapt, [hiring teams](#) with the skills to produce more and more content optimised for this ecosystem.² And while those efforts should be commended, journalism risks deeper failure if it does not adopt a sharper vision of purpose.

Far too often, the response to the question, “Why should journalism be saved?” is some variation of “Because it is inherently valuable”. It’s a vague and frequently immeasurable assertion that fuels an ever-increasing stream of content to compete in a market that rewards volume over value.

Framing our mission solely as the mass production and sale of content means we risk trading quality for quantity, adding noise instead of clarity, and making it harder for people to distinguish us from the rest. Ultimately, it limits journalism’s ability to reach its full potential in a modern information era.

Worst of all, it distracts newsrooms from the widely known but often disregarded reason they stay afloat in the face of unspeakable difficulties: change.

¹ Reuters Institute. (2024). Overview and key findings of the 2024 Digital News Report. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/dnr-executive-summary>

² Reuters Institute. (2025). Journalism, media and technology trends and predictions 2025. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/journalism-media-and-technology-trends-and-predictions-2025>

Ask almost any journalist what drew them to this profession and you will hear one commonality among their varied accounts: the desire to facilitate *change*.

I believe it is time to reclaim this call, reset our purpose and redirect our efforts to measuring how we equip individuals, communities, and societies to thrive. Journalism has a place in the future if it embraces a change-centric approach.

What does a change-centric approach look like? And what happens to the role of journalism as watchdog or first drafter of history? This project hopes to answer these questions by proposing a new framework for *Change-Centric Journalism*.

The approach is laid out in detail over the pages that follow, with concepts, methodologies and case studies that prove a focus on change need not undermine the role of newsrooms in holding power to account or providing unbiased information. These tools help to tie every editorial decision – from formats to outreach strategies – to a clear vision of impact that drives change.

While *Change-Centric Journalism* draws on the practical experience of small-to-medium digital outlets with a preference for local and investigative work, its insights and methods hold practical value for the wider news ecosystem.

Change-Centric Journalism adds a layer of intentionality to our work that is deeply aware – and committed to – the context in which it plays out. It is rooted in the pursuit of impact that improves the lives of people through care-based reporting and purposeful engagement with them. At its core, it aims to revitalise the kind of public life that sustains democracies.

Reclaiming ‘change’ as purpose

Journalism as we know – at its best – can spark shifts, make connections, enable movements, and inspire action, through narrative reframing, dialogue with grassroots organisation, demands for accountability, pushes for policy reform, and more. These are all examples of impacts that lead to some form of change.

At the heart of *Change-Centric Journalism* is the choice to own change as intent: change is no longer a by-product of our work – it is its purpose.

“I became a journalist because I want to make the world a better place. If people have a problem with that, that’s absolutely fine, but actually the disconnect is with them, not with me, because that’s probably why they became a journalist but [they] never got to do that in the system.” – Shirish Kulkarni, Welsh journalist and community organiser

Many of us came into journalism with the desire to make things better. Over time, that language has been replaced by a softer word: impact. Framed as a safer, more fundable goal, “impact” became the stand-in for change – a buzzword to fend off ill-informed accusations of bias or advocacy. (More on this in the chapter *Reassessing the ethics of journalism*.)

Impact as a value metric

In different disciplines, from the social sciences to media studies, there have been major advances in our understanding and documentation of how journalism’s impact plays out. One major contribution has come from Dr. Anya Schiffrin, director of the Technology, Media and Communications specialization at Columbia University’s School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA). Building on the work of academics such as Phil Napoli and Lindsay Green-Barber, she and a team of experts have come up with a comprehensive taxonomy for understanding how media affect society.⁵

⁵ Schiffrin, Anya, et al. (2023). Understanding journalism impact: A multi-dimensional taxonomy for professional, organizational, and societal change. *Journal of Applied Journalism and Media Studies*, 12, 1-26.

The taxonomy recognises that media can influence the beliefs and attitudes of individuals, policies and behaviours of governments and organisations, or shape institutions and culture. It also incorporates an internal orientation of impact: how the work affects the journalists, newsrooms, and the journalistic community itself.

Efforts to articulate the value of journalism have not been limited to academia. In 2012, ProPublica’s former president, Richard Toefl, published [a white paper](#) explaining how their news outlet measured the success of its work with impact metrics.⁴ This might sound obvious in 2025 – how else would journalists measure their success? – but it has not been common wisdom in an industry that still ranks “size of readership” as the number one indicator of value.

Seeing this gap, Jennifer Brandel co-founded [Hearken](#), a consultancy focused on addressing the disconnect between organisations, like news outlets, and the people they want to serve.⁵ A key area of their work has been on audience engagement through listening techniques to achieve more impactful results.

Tina Rosenberg, former *New York Times* columnist and Pulitzer Prize winner, co-founded the [Solutions Journalism Network](#) in 2013 with the intent of shifting the industry’s spotlight from rote recitation of bad news to how people and communities are working to solve their issues. “By revealing what has worked,” they said, “stories have led to meaningful change.”⁶

[Impact Architects](#), founded by political scientist Lindsay Green-Barber, developed an impact tracker that has served as a model for several newsrooms, including my own.⁷ Meanwhile, the Impact Network, an initiative that [Miriam Wells](#) started in 2020 when she was working at The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, facilitates conversation and collaboration between journalists and [impact editors](#) about the positive impact of journalism.

Finally, [a joint study](#) by Report for the World (RFW) and Dr. Anya Schiffrin and her team at SIPA, offers insights into the types of impact derived from the work of

⁴ Toefl, R. (2012). Non-profit journalism. Issues around impact. Retrieved from <https://www.propublica.org/impact>

⁵ Hearken. (2025). Hearken. Retrieved from <https://wearehearken.com/>

⁶ Solutions Journalism Network. (2025). What Is Solutions Journalism?. Retrieved from <https://www.solutionsjournalism.org/who-we-are/solutions-journalism>

⁷ Impact Architects. (2025). Impact Tracker. Retrieved from <https://www.theimpactarchitects.com/impact-tracker>

RFW's partners in Global Majority countries.⁸ Among other findings, the study suggests their journalism increased the knowledge of audiences, shifted perceptions, and that advocacy groups took their coverage and acted on it.

There are several reasons for the convergence of academia, media development organisations and news outlets on the topic of impact. A key driver has been an increasingly competitive donor-funding landscape, where funders want to know how their investment will yield real-world effects beyond sustaining the projects and operations of their grantees.

Unlike advocacy groups, newsrooms are not adept at explaining how their work will yield positive outcomes. Page views and video streams are not enough, and this has driven a need to create concepts and tools that offer a more comprehensive understanding of impact – and an ability to track and report it.

None of the work around measuring impact is easy, which is another reason why this area has earned more attention in recent years. Researchers and news outlets who are looking at it are careful not to draw a straight line between a publication and its effects precisely because they know it is more complex than that.

Impact alone is not enough

As important as it is to get impact measurement right, it is still only part of a greater whole. Knowing what impact looks like is fundamental to defending the role and value of journalism, but it is just as crucial to explore and learn *how* to get there.

Euphemisms can be limiting: impact is measurable, but often reductive; change is messier – but also more honest. In this sense, change is impact in motion: a living, dynamic process rather than a static result.

In a rapidly evolving information landscape, viewing journalism through a change-centric lens allows for more productive, grounded discussions about how to evolve our practice for relevance in the 21st century.

Change-Centric Journalism may require that newsrooms adopt new skills, new workflows and new roles. It needs leadership buy-in and resources – time, money,

⁸ Nallu, P. & Schiffrin, A. (2025). *The Path to Impact: Insights from Global Majority Newsrooms*. Report for the World and Columbia University [SIPA].

methods. Most importantly, these efforts will only be successful if they sit atop a strong foundation of principles and practices, which I aim to describe in this work.

Change as mission: forged in the Global South

Change-Centric Journalism is a proposition strongly informed by the practice of journalism in some of the most hostile and resource-deprived nations in the Global South. Journalism's intense struggle to survive here has grounded it an implicit awareness of its role in democratization, social justice and development.

Outlets in Global Majority communities had to navigate the changemaking space because, in many cases, there was no alternative. Some journalists have operated in closed regimes where the very act of doing journalism turns them into human rights defenders. Maria Ressa, journalist and Nobel Peace Prize winner from the Philippines, stands as a prominent example.

In places where regime change has taken place, as in South Africa with the fall of apartheid, outlets have become deeply involved in the transitional justice process. Their accounts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission helped stir national conversations about past atrocities and, in doing so, forged new social contracts.

Change is also ingrained in the DNA of some of the best journalism in Latin America, where large majorities have lived too often under the mandates of strongmen, oligarchies and mafias. This, coupled with its ranking as the deadliest region to be a journalist, has shaped a strong sense of mission among colleagues.⁹

Journalism in the Global South has evolved not despite inequality, but because of it. In contexts where citizens cannot rely on the state for protection or welfare, access to credible, local information becomes a matter of survival. In these settings, the value of journalism can *only* be understood in relation to the urgent needs of audiences. The right information may be the difference between health and illness, stability and eviction. In remote areas, reporting harassment during land disputes via community radio might be the only way to deter forced displacement.

This deep awareness of journalism's civic function has led many digital outlets in the Global South to state their explicitly. Ecuadorian outlet GK says [on its website](#) that their goal is to “change society, set the media agenda and make the world a better place”.¹⁰ [Mutante](#), from Colombia, sees their participatory journalism “as a

⁹ CPJ. (2024). Latin America was the deadliest region for journalists in 2022. Retrieved from <https://cpj.org/2023/01/latin-america-was-the-deadliest-region-for-journalists-in-2022/>

¹⁰ GK. (2025). Qué es GK?. Retrieved from <https://gk.city/que-es/>

tool for social change”, in the same way that [Agencia Mural](#) from Brazil wants their stories about underserved neighbourhoods of Sao Paulo to be “relevant, useful, so that everyone can feel part of the same reality and capable of transforming it”.^{11,12}

In the Global North, news outlets that are adopting a conscious and strategic mindset around impact do not shy away from the goal of driving change either. [The Bureau of Investigative Journalism](#) identifies itself as a mission-driven organisation with a role in changemaking.¹³ The mission statement reads:

“We think a lot about the role that our journalism plays in society, and how it contributes to social change. Journalism doesn’t change anything on its own – but it is often a key part of a much bigger array of people, organisations and action that does.”

My personal experience with change

Much of *Change-Centric Journalism* is informed by my own experience as the co-founder and editorial director of Paraguayan digital news outlet, [El Surtidor](#). Known fondly to our audience as *El Surti*, we have managed to earn a place in a media space captured by economic and political interests over the past 10 years.

We broke through barriers with our [award-winning visual journalism](#) – a mix of reporting with images that drive attention, such as memes.¹⁴ Our work has been praised locally and internationally as a prime example of how newsrooms can make information more accessible and shareable to new audiences.

Our tagline at El Surti is “Information for action”. Over the past two years we have been fine-tuning our workflows to ensure that action is realised. As our workflows have evolved, so has our mission: we are starting to see ourselves as facilitators of connections around information that drive change.

¹¹ Mutante. (2025). Somos Mutante. Retrieved from <https://mutante.org/somos-mutante/>

¹² Agencia Mural. (2025). Nasce a Agência Mural de Jornalismo das Periferias. Retrieved from <https://agenciamural.org.br/institucional/nossa-historia/>

¹³ The Bureau of Investigative Journalism. (2025). Impact. Retrieved from <https://www.thebureauinvestigates.com/about-us/impact>

¹⁴ Global Investigative Journalism Network. (2023). Thriving on change: El Surtidor’s Groundbreaking Multi-Platform Visual Journalism. Retrieved from <https://gijn.org/stories/thriving-on-change-el-surtidors-groundbreaking-multi-platform-visual-journalism/> (Accessed: 15 July 2025).

But as El Surti has advanced, so has my sense that a fundamental discussion is missing: one that the hype around formats will not address. I started to question where we are all heading in this race for attention.

My disquiet has unfolded against a backdrop already discussed: [plummeting referral traffic](#), an issue that will only worsen with the disruption of AI.¹⁵ More recently, the realignment of Big Tech to Trump’s explicit contempt toward journalism – evident in Meta’s [suspension of its fact-checking](#) programme days before inauguration – has been a watershed moment for the industry.¹⁶

It brought into focus the troubled relationship journalism has built with the most powerful elite. The situation not only raises ethical concerns, but leaves us with the question of whether we can continue relying at all on platforms to reach people.

Over the past five years, I have encountered a growing network of editors, journalists, impact producers, researchers, media consultants and other practitioners who are discussing, collaborating and testing potential solutions to the above challenges.¹⁷

At the [International Press Institute](#) World Congress & Media Innovation Festival in 2023, I was on a panel with colleagues from Botswana and the UK, discussing ways to make journalism more engaging and more impactful.¹⁸

Among the reflections was the need to shift away from breaking news and towards sensemaking. There was also a call to take audiences more seriously and listen to them. My co-panellist Kulkarni summarised: “Journalism might be the only industry where the customer is always wrong.”

¹⁵ Jaźwińska, K. (2025) A new report takes on the future of news and search. Columbia Journalism Review. Available at: https://www.cjr.org/the_media_today/new-report-future-ai-search-google-openai-altman-perplexity-gemini-apple-llm-artificial.php (Accessed: 15 July 2025).

¹⁶ Chequeado. (2025). Fact-checking is not censorship: it’s a tool that empowers citizens. Retrieved from <https://chequeado.com/el-fact-checking-no-es-censura-es-una-herramienta-que-empodera-ciudadanos/>

¹⁷ Three initiatives that are worth checking out: the lessons from the [Membership Puzzle Project](#) by Ariel Zirulnick; ICFJ fellow [Mattia Peretti](#) and his unrelenting search for the purpose of journalism in his newsletter [News Alchemists](#); and [News Futures](#), a US-based community of practice where journalists, organisers, educators and more are thinking how to make journalism more participatory, service-oriented and reparative.

¹⁸ International Press Institute. (2023). Making journalism more engaging and more impactful for people. Retrieved from <https://ipi.media/ipiwoco-recap-making-journalism-more-engaging-and-impactful-for-more-people/>

But is it advocacy?

For some, this kind of language raises concerns about journalistic objectivity, and the fear that this approach sounds like it crosses the line into advocacy work. But Toefl's 2012 white paper draws an important distinction: "There are profound differences between journalism and advocacy. The most profound of these may begin with process, but culminate in much more: journalism begins with questions and [it] progresses, as facts are determined, to answers. Advocacy begins with answers – with the facts already assumed to be established."¹⁹

This is a critical difference: *Change-Centric Journalism* does not propose that journalists dictate outcomes. Rather, it insists that journalism must become deeply aware of the context in which it operates, and effectively incorporate the needs of the communities it serves.

I also suggest that change can serve as a more grounded organising concept than impact, which has become overused – across metrics, fundraising, strategy and marketing – to the point of confusion. Change reframes the work as relational, dynamic, and ongoing. It shifts our attention from proving that journalism has value to exploring how it generates value – and for whom.

Let me be clear: the pursuit of impact is key, but alone it is not enough and can lead to unexpected harm. Reporting that doesn't account for power dynamics or local context can oversimplify complex problems, or trigger consequences no one intended. Consider the example of a newsroom that uncovers evidence of child labour. It might frame the enforcement of anti-child labour laws as proof of impact. But the affected community could find this detrimental if the enforcement does not come with better wages for adult workers.

This is why impact must be pursued in tandem with other principles and practices – like purposeful engagement, care-based reporting, and a commitment to revitalising public life. These are the pillars of *Change-Centric Journalism* that I outline in the next chapter.

Ultimately, this framework is a call to build momentum for the idea that journalism, done with integrity, can distinguish itself not by volume or virality, but by the quality of change it facilitates.

¹⁹ Toefl, R. (2012). Non-profit journalism. Issues around impact. Retrieved from <https://www.propublica.org/impact>

The elements of Change-Centric Journalism

The simplest way to explain what *Change-Centric Journalism* proposes is to compare it to an approach that most of us are already deeply familiar with: the content-centric model.

A comparative analysis of two models of journalism

A content-centric approach to journalism	A change-centric approach to journalism
The end goal is publication	The end goal is impact
Focus is on outputs	Focus is on outcomes and long-term impact
Volume	Value
Primacy of “the story”	Primacy of audience needs
Publishing is the finish line	Publishing is part of a larger process
Purpose is to set the agenda	Purpose is to facilitate change
The relationship with audiences is driven by the search for growth	The relationship with audiences is about purposeful engagement
Transactional	Relational
One-way communication	Feedback loops
Reach and traffic	Meaningful interactions
Multi-platform distribution	Intentional outreach
Form-over-function	Form-follows-function
The guiding principles of reporting are neutrality and objectivity	The guiding principles of reporting are founded in an ethic of care
Deepens unequal power dynamics	Levels the field
Extractive	Collaborative
Distant and unresponsive	Close and accountable
Journalists are subject experts	Journalists are information-based facilitators
The unit for experience design is the lone user	The unit for experience design is community
Readers are treated as entities in isolation	Understanding that learning is a shared experience
Seeks personalization of content	Offers opportunities for connection and belonging
Drives further fragmentation of public discourse	Sustains critical conversations
Often stays in the digital realm	Convenes common grounds for face-to-face interactions

This comparative analysis examines both models of journalism from four perspectives: the end goal of newsroom work; the relationship with audiences; the guiding values of reporting; and the unit of experience design.

Together, these dimensions shape not just how journalism is practised, but what journalism is for.

The analysis draws out a mixture of principles and practices. Some are complementary; others are in tension. None are fixed. These are not intended as rigid binaries, but as reference points: starting places for reflection, debate, and redesign. Importantly, these characteristics are not immutable truths, but snapshots within a media ecosystem undergoing rapid change.

Why this framework?

This framework offers a practical tool to reframe journalism's value in a changing media ecosystem. It brings together lessons from academia, media development, and frontline newsrooms — particularly in the Global South — to support experimentation and recalibration.

Rather than focusing solely on how to measure impact, it helps newsrooms think through how to design for it. It challenges assumptions, clarifies purpose, and identifies areas for growth — whether in leadership strategy, editorial process, or audience relationships.

Who might find it useful?

- *Editors and media leaders*, especially in small to mid-sized digital outlets, who are seeking clarity of mission, better use of limited resources, and tools to inspire teams facing burnout or stagnation.
- *Subscription, membership, or public-service models*, where the case for continued support must go beyond reach and towards demonstrable social value.
- *Donors, funders, and media development practitioners* looking to assess, support, or invest in journalism with a clear changemaking orientation.

Ultimately, the framework is a compass: not a checklist, but a guide to purpose, priorities and partnership in a complex, evolving media landscape.

The audacity of planning for impact

Technology has given rise to some of the [best investigative reporting](#) the industry has ever seen, enabling an ease of collaboration between outlets that was unthinkable before the digital age.²⁰ At the same time, the concentration of technological power – coupled with a rise in autocratic governance – has produced existential challenges for journalism, including declining referral traffic and the increasing ability of powerful actors to evade accountability.²¹

A content-centric approach to journalism does little to overcome these mounting limitations. *Change-Centric Journalism* proposes transforming how we conceive our mission by rejecting the long-held notion that publication is the finish line of our work. This may have held merit before the internet diluted our power to have an agenda-setting impact.

Today, putting the story as the unit at the centre of all our efforts risks missing other equally important areas of work to meet the information needs of audiences, which could otherwise increase the impact potential.

In a content-driven approach, when stories fail to draw traffic, newsrooms often blame a lack of attention and scramble to produce more. The result is burnout, abandoned reporting, and a deepening sense of futility.

Change-Centric Journalism reorients publishing as only one part of a larger process to achieve impact. Newsrooms prioritise staying on the story because there is a shared understanding that change requires time. They proactively seek opportunities to facilitate it, which may even involve delaying the publication step to coincide with other agenda-setting moments. Grace Murray, impact producer at The Bureau of Investigative Journalism, calls these opportunities “pressure points”.

“Is there a piece of legislation that is coming through? Is there a high-level event like a G7 or a climate negotiation or a New York Climate action week? We try to get

²⁰ International Consortium of Investigative Journalists. (2016). The Panama Papers. About the investigation. Retrieved from <https://www.icij.org/investigations/panama-papers/about-the-investigation/>

²¹ Reuters Institute. (2024). What do we know about the rise of alternative voices and news influencers in social and video networks?. Retrieved from <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2024/rise-alternative-voices-and-news-influencers-social-and-video-networks>

that planning in early on to have stories out ahead of these calendar events,” she explained in an interview for this project.

The shift toward impact also discourages the instinct to increase output or test formats without asking: what outcomes are we working toward? By anchoring decisions in purpose, newsrooms regain a sense of orientation and, with it, renewed commitment and motivation.

Embracing impact starts at the planning stage. Some newsrooms now embed impact planning and design in their editorial processes. At Lighthouse Reports, for example, they have [built a template](#) to organise this work.²²

“It’s planning that drives reporting. It’s planning that drives audience engagement and defines the outcomes that we are striving for [...] such as changing narratives, changing law, changing attitudes.” – Ariadne Papagapitos, impact director at Lighthouse Reports

Similarly, the Pulitzer Center uses a [theory of change](#) approach with its partners, according to Flora Pereira, chief of Education and Engagement.²³ This helps identify target audiences and distinguish between outputs, short-term outcomes, and long-term impact.

La Memetodología: three planning tools for change

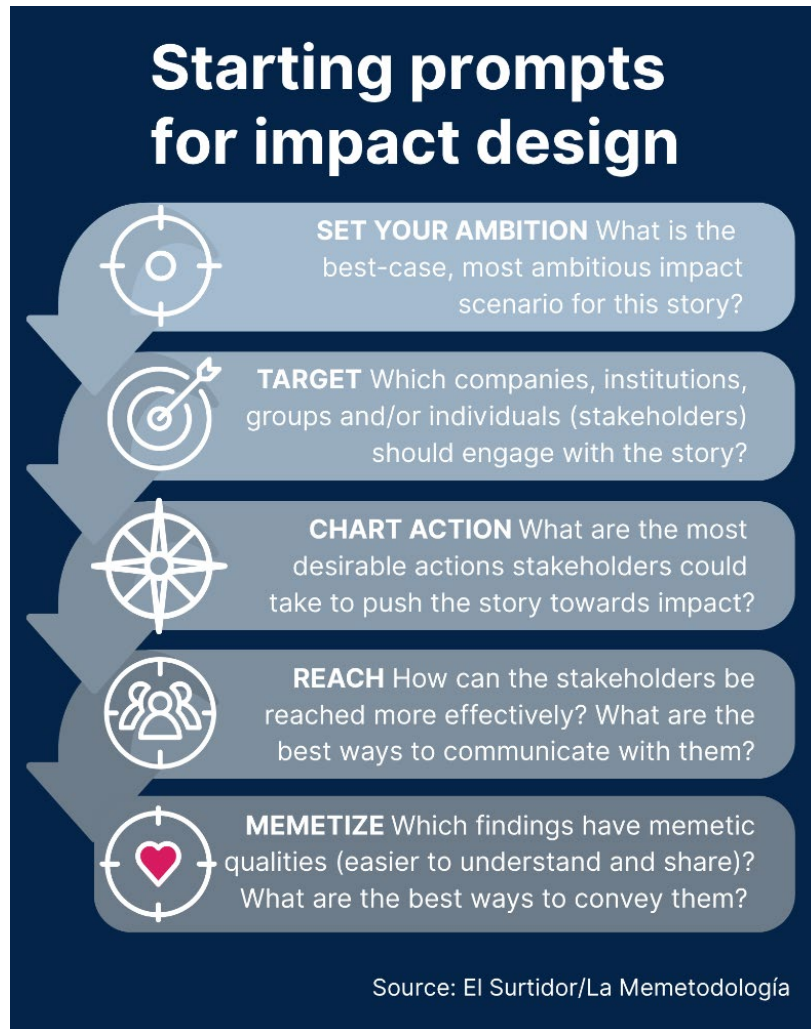
At El Surti, we have borrowed from meme theory, agile design, product thinking and other frameworks to develop our own impact-planning framework. It’s what we call *La Memetodología* (Memethodology), and it informs how we work to realise our tagline – “information for action” – in the digital era.

When *La Memetodología* is applied, we have seen how impact prospects grow. The process begins once a journalist has gathered early story findings. Instead of rushing to publish, we use a set of starting prompt questions that guide a conversation in the newsroom and facilitate the impact design of the story.

²² International Journalism Festival. (2025). What is the impact of journalism and how to measure it?. Retrieved from <https://www.journalismfestival.com/programme/2025/what-is-the-impact-of-journalism-and-how-to-measure-it>

²³ Ibid.

Each question allows us to reflect on what our strengths and limitations are. The answers align every decision – from graphic design aspects to distribution strategies – behind a common vision of change.



The first question, about the best-case impact scenario of a story, views the early findings through the lens of our impact tracker, which accounts for both quantitative and qualitative indicators.

The next three questions define the potential stakeholders of a story. They help us think about who we know and what virtuous connections we can stimulate. This usually includes the usual expert sources, but might also include people who have registered and attended one of our public events, or are simply loyal followers of our work. We maintain a customer database to facilitate that work. It includes profiles from academia, media, civil society, advocacy groups, private sector and public officials.

Finally, we turn to our memetic checklist to decide which findings to focus on for outreach work. Inspired by AX Mina’s book *Memes to Movements*, this framework reminds us of what makes memes powerful units of information and how to emulate them. It helps our team make story findings easier to relate to, understand, share, and adapt.

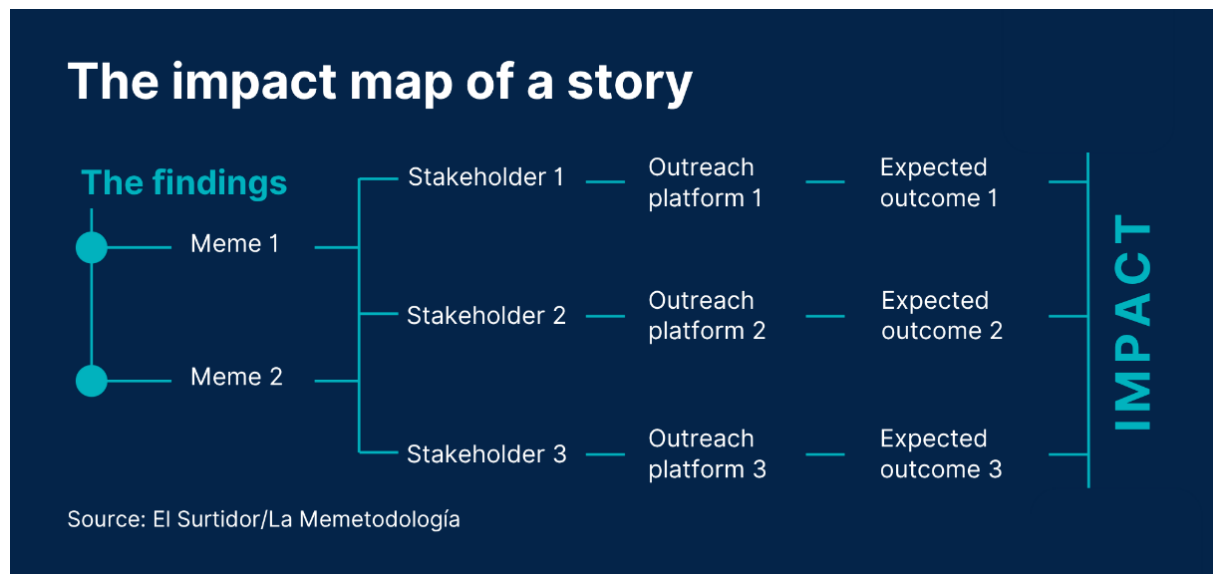
The memetic checklist

Questions	What to look for	Check
Is it relatable?	Find those elements that people can be more familiar with and highlight them.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Search for the angles that can resonate to stimulate interest and empathy.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Explain how the story connects or affects members of your audience.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Use images that can synthesize and reinforce the findings.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Is it easy to understand?	Articulate the findings in a concise and clear manner.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Avoid using jargon if simpler alternatives are available.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Search for equivalents or parallels that facilitate comprehension of data.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Choose graphs when justified. Minimize their use if they add unnecessary complexity.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Is it shareable?	Ensure that findings are easy to access.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Package them in formats that stimulate sharing across different platforms.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
Is it remixable	Allow people to reproduce and repurpose your work.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
	Minimize the requirements for republication or adaptation. Attribution should be enough.	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>

Source: Adaptation of Internet meme theory and AX Mina’s book *Memes to Movements*

With the answers to all of these questions, a story’s impact journey comes into focus. Now our impact map helps us list key stakeholders, outlines how they might engage with the story, and anticipates potential outcomes.

These may range from short-term effects like awareness, amplification, or grassroots mobilisation, to more systemic shifts in power — like official investigations (such as a parliamentary inquiry), accountability hearings, policy reform (such as new safety laws), or the adoption of new legal or ethical frameworks (such as environmental protections).



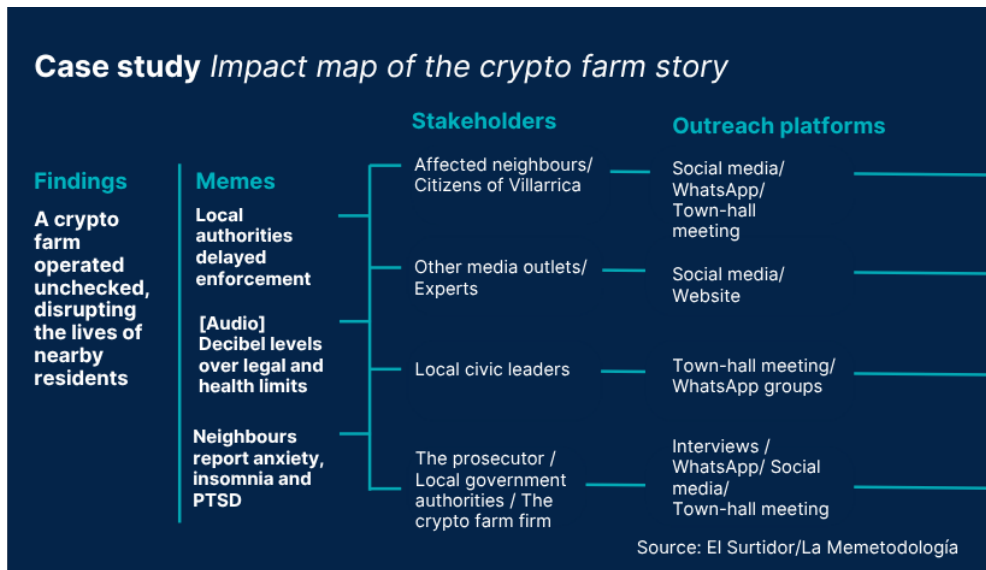
La Memetodología in action: case study

To show how impact planning works in practice, I draw on a story about a crypto farm in Paraguay, and the group of neighbours who rebelled against it.

It all started with a message from one of the neighbours to the team in 2024, complaining that a Canadian Bitcoin farm located in the city of Villarrica was emitting noises 24/7. Those noises, she claimed, were affecting the quality of life of several families because they had not been able to sleep well for months.

We knew Paraguay’s cheap energy had been attracting crypto investors, and reports of environmental and social disruption due their activities on our territory were starting to mount.

Reporter Josué Congo got to work and found evidence of negligence and complicity from the local government. Decibel levels from the crypto farm exceeded legal and health limits, but local authorities had delayed measures to put a stop to the nuisance. As a result, the neighbours showed symptoms of anxiety, depression, and even PTSD. With this and other findings, the team sketched out the impact map of the story.



Some impact indicators materialised even before we had published the story. Shortly after our interviews with local authorities who had dismissed complaints against the Bitcoin farm, the mayor of the city overruled their decision and ordered a new investigation into the matter. And, after the reporter approached the firm’s representatives with questions, the company included the risk of sound pollution in their yearly reports – something they had not acknowledged in previous years.

Both moves are measures of accountability according to our impact map and our impact tracker.

After [publication](#), the story went viral.²⁴ Through our social media channels, we received reports of similar cases in other parts of the country, including a source working in a crypto farm. The [collaboration](#) with El País’ America Futura from Spain amplified our reach.²⁵ Local and international outlets echoed the findings and did follow-up stories. The case was framed as a prime example of the impact that techno-financial investments from the North impose on communities in the Global South.

As part of our civic engagement strategy, El Surti managed to convene two town-hall meetings: [one in our newsroom](#) and another in [a cultural centre](#) in Villarrica. The protagonists of the story, members of our audience and other community leaders showed up at those meetings. The team screened a documentary about the

²⁴ Congo, J. (2025) Rebelión contra la criptogranja. El Surtidor. Retrieved from <https://elsurti.com/rebelion-contra-la-criptogranja/>

²⁵ Congo, J. (2025, June 10). The town that rebelled against a crypto farm that left them unable to sleep for six months. El País. Retrieved from <https://elpais.com/america-futura/2025-06-10/el-pueblo-que-se-rebelo-contra-una-criptogranja-que-los-dejo-seis-meses-sin-dormir.html>

story, presenting their findings and the reporting process. Afterwards, the lead reporter facilitated a conversation with the participants. The affected neighbours had a chance to give their testimonies and shared a deep sense of gratitude and relief for the coverage and the space to be heard.



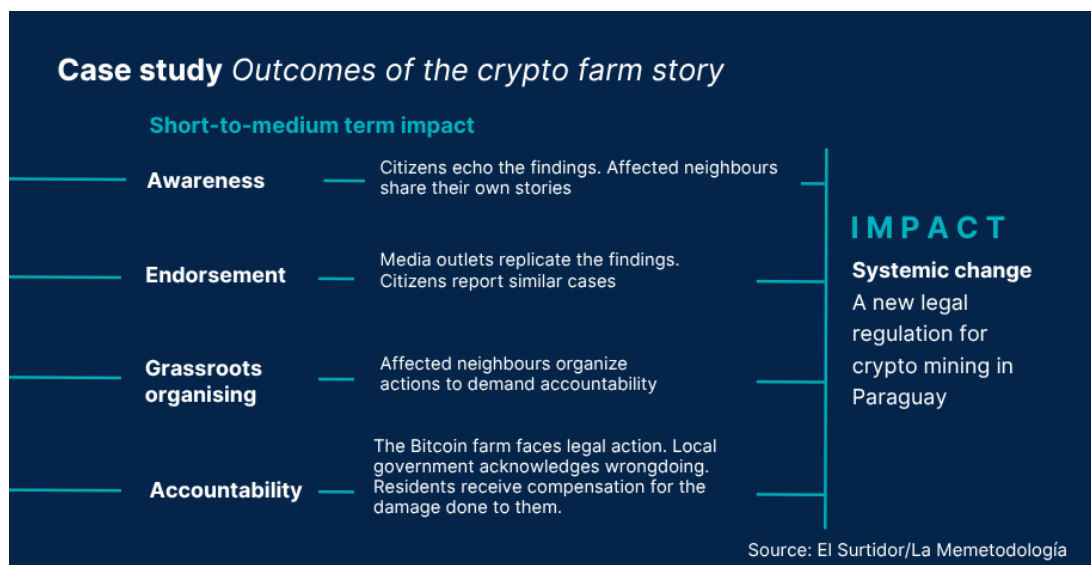
Villarrica community watches a documentary about how El Surti reported their story. Credit: El Surtidor

One of them said: “I celebrate the free press that sheds light over darkness. I celebrate these journalists that embed themselves in the communities [...] Thanks to you, this story was told – is told – and will be told to never happen again”. Other residents made calls to build a civic platform to fight crypto mining in the city.



Neighbours present El Surti with a certificate of appreciation. Credit: El Surtidor

A key component of the outreach strategy’s success was the active involvement of the affected neighbours. For instance, they handed a copy of our publication to the prosecutor in charge of the case. A month and a half after publishing, the prosecutor fought the crypto firm’s attempt to settle the case outside of court, arguing the compensation offered was not enough for the damage done. A judge agreed, and said the case would be heard in open court given its relevance. It will be the first trial in the country against a crypto farm for sound pollution. The neighbours now prepare to tell their stories in court.



What it takes to plan for impact: tips for the audacious

1. There’s no one-size-fits-all Impact planning varies by newsroom. What works for one story might not work for another. Time constraints and available resources will differ between outlets. “A lot of them do not have the capacity to plan for impact while they are also planning for the story. They are very small newsrooms,” said Rania Itani, Programs and Impact manager at Report for the World. Still, even the smallest organisations can do this work with the right mindset. The key is to build a consistent approach that aligns with your mission and team capacity.

2. Tools don’t replace culture An impact tracker can be useful it can only do so much. It won’t transform your newsroom on its own. The real shift is cultural — embracing impact as a core value.

“At Impact Architects, organisations come to us all the time saying: ‘We need an impact tracker. We heard you are the people that have an impact tracker’,” said Lindsay Green-Barber, founder of Impact Architects. “That often means they think we have some magic software platform which, once they get it, will solve all their problems. That is 100% not what we are selling, and that is not our approach. Often, the IA Impact Tracker is a ‘Trojan horse’ for culture change. The organisations that are successful in this work don’t just build an Impact Tracker, they foster a culture of impact.”

Where the impact tracker has helped us is in sharing a common language within the newsroom, learning to identify impact and documenting progress. It has facilitated drafting reports for donors and investors and most importantly, telling our audience how our work has contributed to positive change.

3. Celebrate small (and big) wins Impact tracking has also kept the team engaged in the process. We celebrate every indicator of impact that comes in after stories are published. This mindset has boosted the morale and confidence of journalists in so many ways.

4. Tech can help, but it won't replace the work Technology can simplify some aspects of this work or speed it up. For example, AI technologies can assist with impact tracking, as is the case with Agencia Publica's [Public IQ](#).²⁶

But meaningful outcomes often emerge through human connection – conversations with sources, communities, and collaborators. It's hard to draw a straight line between a report and systemic changes with automation.

5. Iteration is essential It all gets better with experimentation, repetition, and evaluation. It has been important for us to build in time to reflect, document lessons, and evolve the approach.

Bottom line: there are no tricks or shortcuts. Impact work requires planning, structure, mindset and leadership support. But the biggest transformation begins with this question: what is your newsroom really here to do?

²⁶ JournalismAI. (2025). Using genAI to understand impact of journalism: The Agencia Pública story. Retrieved from <https://www.journalismai.info/blog/using-genai-to-understand-impact-of-journalism-the-agncia-pblica-story>

Audience engagement for change

Under the content-based model of journalism, much of the relationship with audiences is shaped around the pursuit of growth metrics.

Engagement often means distributing content across third-party platforms to maximise visibility, with the hope that greater reach will drive more website visits and, eventually, convert readers into subscribers. Despite today's technology, the one-way broadcast model still sticks.

Paradoxically, in the age of hyper-connectivity, many newsrooms have never held a conversation with the people that follow them. "I had no idea a majority of the journalists that I have previously spoken with have never communicated with their audience," said Carmen Nicoara, Researcher and Impact Manager at [Syli](#). "I'm talking here about real interactions with real people."

As the Pulitzer Center's [Pereira put it](#): organisations often end up speaking to no one when they try to talk to everyone.²⁷

Change-Centric Journalism approaches audience growth through the lens of purposeful engagement. Instead of chasing visibility, it plans for meaningful interactions. It prioritises showing that audience voices resonate in the newsroom and that their participation matters. It meets the human need for recognition, acceptance, and dialogue – made more profound in the age of AI.

A 2024 [Vox Media survey](#) found that 60% of respondents view social media negatively, calling it, "a place of never-ending product placements".²⁸ What's rising in its place? Smaller, more intentional spaces where people feel seen.

Even AI is drawn into this shift: some users turn to chatbots for companionship, therapy, or private conversation. Shorenstein Fellow Shuwei Fang [calls this](#) "the

²⁷ International Journalism Festival. (2025). What is the impact of journalism and how to measure it?. Retrieved from <https://www.journalismfestival.com/programme/2025/what-is-the-impact-of-journalism-and-how-to-measure-it>

²⁸ The Verge. (2025). The future of the Internet is likely smaller communities, with a focus on curated experiences. Retrieved from <https://www.theverge.com/press-room/617654/internet-community-future-research>

intimacy dividend”: a quiet retreat from public hostility toward something more personal, more human – “intimate conversations without social consequences”.²⁹

This should prompt a rethink for journalism. News outlets cannot afford to focus solely on how people consume their work when those people are looking for everything but content.

The problem with an audience-growth mindset is not ambition, but misalignment. To stay relevant, newsrooms must shift the question from “How do people engage with our work?” to “How do we engage with them?”

A wide range of actions can help shift the focus: from how you respond to comments, to the planning of in-person events. At the root of success for all of these actions is active listening. Purposeful engagement means treating your audience as participants, not users or consumers.

Designing engagement with purpose

In the Change-Centric model, platforms aren’t just distribution channels — they’re tools for strategic connections. Every engagement effort should clarify two things: what is this story for, and who is it for? When platforms are used with intention, engagement efforts create feedback loops that reveal what audiences find valuable, and why.

This reflects a classic design principle: form follows function. Or, in journalistic terms, format should serve purpose and not just aesthetics or trends. The latter has become a trap in digital journalism that can lead to wasted resources and team efforts that are not rewarded with the expected outcomes.

At El Surti, the “form follows function” principle reshaped how we reached our core audience: young people in urban Paraguay. After Facebook’s pivot to video in 2017 failed to deliver results – partly due to limited bandwidth – we created a lighter, more accessible format: [scrollytelling](#).³⁰ It preserved our visual journalism style, but gave readers more depth without sacrificing usability.

²⁹ Fang, S. (2025). The Intimacy Dividend: How AI Might Transform News Media Consumption. Retrieved from <https://shorensteincenter.org/commentary/intimacy-dividend-ai-might-transform-news-media-consumption/>

³⁰ Fundación Gabo. (2020). El Surtidor: scrollytelling for in-depth journalism. Retrieved from <https://fundaciongabo.org/es/blog/laboratorios-periodismo-innovador/el-surtidor-scrollytelling-depth-journalism>

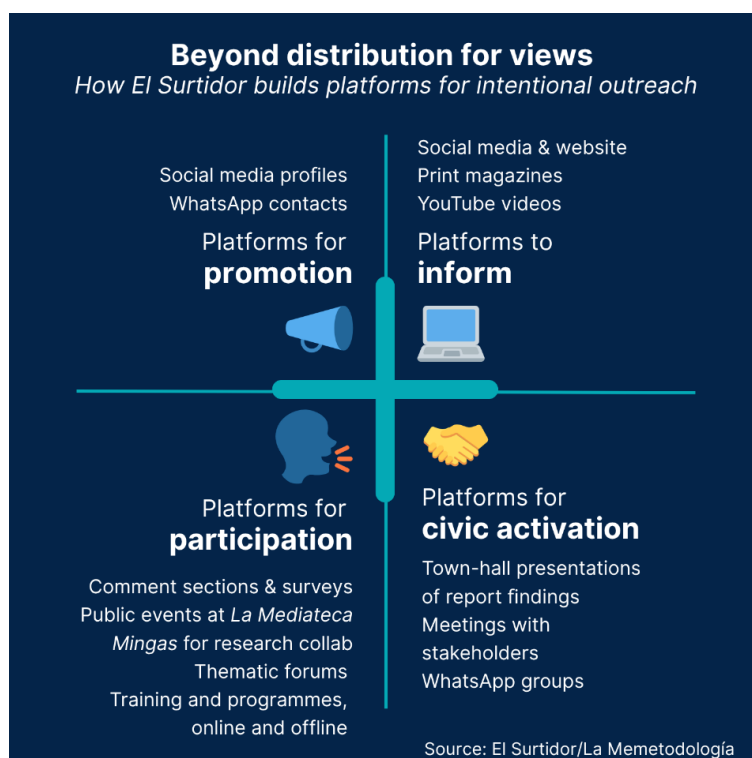
Sometimes, engagement is a pathway to greater impact. Other times, it's the impact itself.³¹ In Portugal, Catarina Carvalho's *Mensagem de Lisboa* is openly committed to improving life in the capital city. Beyond publishing, they host public gatherings and artistic interventions in the city. "It's about proximity," Carvalho explained. "We want to share with people."

La Memetodología: how El Surtidor approaches engagement

At El Surti, meaningful audience engagement is embedded in our culture. We've experimented with multiple channels, from WhatsApp for distribution and feedback, to Discourse for climate forums, to offering online training on disinformation.

Not every tool has scaled. When WhatsApp introduced stricter limits on bulk messaging, distribution became time-consuming. And as the pandemic eased, audiences began craving in-person connection over digital discussion spaces.

We've learned that the most impactful forms of engagement are physical and participatory: our *mingas informativas* (research collaboration sessions) and town-hall-style presentations yield the strongest results. The diagram below illustrates how we structure our outreach: not just for reach, but for relationship.



El Surtidor uses platforms to build strategic connections

³¹ Napoli, P. (2014). Measuring media impact. An overview of the field. The Lear Center.

Whether digital or in person, we can't imagine a relationship with our audience that doesn't make space for conversation. At El Surti, engagement is part of our identity, and a core driver of impact. One example comes from our work on disinformation during Paraguay's 2023 general elections.

The team predicted that disinformation could be a major issue, as it had already surfaced during the primaries. As the country's only fact-checking operation, we chose to dedicate all our resources to monitoring it. That choice proved critical.

After months of work and analysis, we identified coordinated network of social media profiles and pro-government outlets spreading false narratives about opposition candidates. Their message was often spread through paid ads, evading campaign finance regulations.

Once we had the evidence, we asked: who most needs to understand this? We identified key actors shaping public discourse and policy: public officials, researchers, policy specialists, civil society representatives and colleagues with a genuine concern about disinformation. Some had already approached us for advice after being victims of malicious campaigns. They understood the stakes, but often lacked the know-how to respond effectively.

Some underestimated the problem, unaware of how unchecked digital ad spending could distort political debate. Others reacted with moral panic, calling for regulation that might do more harm than good. We saw an opportunity to raise awareness and deepen understanding – not through alarm, but with clarity.

We compiled the [findings in a book](#) and released it at an invitation-only launch.³² Why a book? Because in this case, the medium was also the message. Unlike the digital environment we monitored for months, the book would require attention and invite reflection and sensemaking.

It also signalled seriousness. A book raises the perceived value of journalism among policymakers and stakeholders. And crucially, distributing it meant creating a moment of face-to-face connection.

The [book launch](#) was a success in terms of engagement and impact. The turnout exceeded expectations, with more than 100 attendees. They shared pictures of the

³² El Surtidor. (2023). Hicimos un libro. El medio también es el mensaje. Retrieved from <https://elsurti.com/blog/2023/08/18/ruido-desinformacion-elecciones-paraguay/>

event and screenshots with findings of the book on their social media accounts. The team received an outpouring of congratulatory messages.



A collage of images from the launch of Ruido (Noise). Credit: El Surtidor

The response went beyond likes and reposts. Our findings were cited in public interviews, parliamentary debates, and even a draft congressional declaration. The president of the Electoral Court publicly praised the work and referenced it during a seminar on electoral transparency. Since then, our profile has grown within expert and policy circles. We’ve been invited to speak on TV programmes, at national and international seminars, and to deliver training on disinformation.

This was never just a book launch. It was a platform for validation – of our reporting, our approach, and our long-term commitment to democratic transparency. It also created a space for dialogue, where key actors found common ground in shared concern for the integrity of public discourse.



Left: an attendee with their copy of the book, Right: more than 100 people attended the launch of Ruido. Credit: El Surtidor

The potential to restore value through community-building

In discussions about how news consumption is changing, the loss of collective rituals around it is often overlooked. In Paraguay, newspapers used to arrive every Sunday and were read and passed around the family. Whatever was in their pages became part of the conversations of the free hours of the weekend. To this day, the print paper is an artifact I associate with family reunions. Others can surely relate.

Today, those shared moments are harder to find. Phones and platforms pull us into our own feeds, guided by algorithms that know what we like but not what we share.³³ Journalism has become a solo experience. The habits that once brought people together – to talk, argue, or laugh at a headline – have quietly fallen away. I believe there’s an opportunity to rebuild them.

While the early web made unprecedented levels of information exchange possible – and allowed the existence of news outlets like mine – the rise of algorithmic platforms came at a cost. Some of the deeper roles that communication once played were gradually eroded. James W. Carey captured this idea in a powerful 1989 essay, where he distinguished between communication as information transfer and communication as ritual:³⁴

“In a ritual definition, communication is linked to terms such as sharing, participation, association, fellowship, and the possession of a common faith. This definition exploits the ancient identity and common roots of the terms commonness, communion, community, and communication.”

What Carey was saying is that people do not communicate only to pass on information; they do it to recognise one another and shape society together. His call was to move beyond a purely instrumental approach and rebuild communication as something with “restorative value”.

³³ Kleis Nielsen, R. & Ganter, S. (2022). *The Power of Platforms: Shaping Media and Society*. Oxford University Press.

³⁴ Carey, J. (2008). *Communication as Culture, Revised Edition: Essays on Media and Society*. Taylor & Francis Group.

Content-centric journalism opts for a narrow focus, continuing to deliver news as information – the antithesis of what Carey proposed.

Nowhere is this clearer than in the latest trend toward more personalised content. The intention (meeting user needs) is understandable. But in the process, we've lost the touchpoints where shared conversations begin. We've drifted further into individualised experiences, compounding the isolation and disconnection already heightened [by the pandemic](#).³⁵

What's missing is the shared dimension of processing, learning, and engaging with information. Journalism can and should help rebuild that layer of common understanding and civic values that sustains public life and underpins democracy.

Media research also often treats readers as entities in isolation. In a 2014 study on how to measure media impact, Philip Napoli observed most research has a strong micro-orientation: "The unit of analysis is typically the individual media user."³⁶

But as Napoli noted, we know that news can impact communities, processes, and systems too. That kind of collective impact at a macro level just doesn't happen overnight. It emerges slowly, across many touchpoints and players. It is a collective, not a lone user journey.

Newsrooms as information gathering grounds

Journalism's current best solution to these systemic challenges has been... more content. Take the example of the sustained belief that disinformation will be solved with more information. This does nothing to address the powerful emotional elements at play in the disinformation space.

"One of the most important things about fake news is that it allows people to participate in democracy, in public conversations, in politics," Natalia Viana, founder and director of Brazil's Agencia Pública, told me in a 2022 interview.³⁷ But while networks of disinformation are participatory in nature, journalistic debunking still works in unilateral ways.

Professor Jeff Jarvis, author of *The Gutenberg Parenthesis* and long-time observer of how news outlets deal with technological disruption, suggests that when people

³⁵ The University of Edinburgh. (2024). Anxiety and depression due to the pandemic could remain for years. Retrieved from <https://genscot.ed.ac.uk/our-impact/latest-results/pandemic-mental-health>

³⁶ Napoli, P. (2014). Measuring media impact. An overview of the field. The Lear Center.

³⁷ Latinográficas. (2022). Natalia Viana: periodismo contra el populismo digital. Retrieved from <https://latinograficas.com/blog/2022/12/29/natalia-viana-periodismo-contra-el-populismo-digital/>

stick to disinformation, even after being confronted with the facts, they are not showing a lack of understanding; they are displaying loyalty to the networks of belonging that Viana hints at.³⁸

The response, then, must be journalism that nurtures belonging, and not just truth. Instead of adding to the fragmentation of public discourse, news outlets have a chance to sustain critical conversations by cultivating connections in and beyond digital spaces.

The theory of information grounds is useful to understand the crucial importance and the benefits that face-to-face interactions with audiences can offer journalism. In a study about conflict-resolution in Indonesia among Christians and Muslims, researchers Rohman and Pang found that coffee shops served as information grounds, “arenas where people, place, and information complement each other and construct the meaning of information”.³⁹

The authors draw on Robert Putnam’s influential work on the importance of social capital to argue that information grounds are valuable neutral points, an escape from tensions, helping to create networks conducive to trust – often with people from the opposing group.

“Although coffee could be made at home, a coffee place offered more than just caffeine. It was a daily habit. Ordering a coffee, having a cigar, talking with the workers, the owner, or other visitors was part of their everyday ritual. A sense of loss was experienced when this ritual was not performed.”

Coffee shops were once part of British journalism rituals. According to Jarvis: “There, in the 17th and 18th centuries [...] varied constituencies and classes gathered to drink the exciting, imported brew as they discussed what they read in newspapers, newsletters, and books.”⁴⁰

³⁸ Seminar interview

³⁹ Rohman, A. & Pang, N. (2015). Seeking common ground: Coffee shops as information grounds in the context of conflict. *Proceedings of the Association for Information Science and Technology*, 52(1), 1-10

⁴⁰ Jarvis, Jeff. (2023). *The Gutenberg Parenthesis: The Age of Print and Its Lessons for the Age of the Internet*. Bloomsbury.

Can news outlets recapture habits that give people a chance to make sense of the world with others, network and find respite and joy in community building? Newsrooms are [already experimenting](#) with storytelling events, listening clubs, and series of concerts.⁴¹ In Texas, the weekly newspaper *Big Bend Sentinel* has a coffee shop and a bar. And, at the International Journalism Festival, a panel discussed a new wave of [houses of journalism](#) that borrow from the experience of cultural spaces and which “are planting a flag in city centres”.⁴² The cases of *Centro Gabo* in Cartagena and *Casa Pública* in Rio de Janeiro were among the highlights.

El Surti’s newsroom is housed in *La Mediateca*, a refurbished building in downtown Asuncion, Paraguay’s capital. We have opened our space countless times to meet our audiences in person for research collaboration, training programmes and presentations. Our readers have also found playful entertainment in this place.

As societies experience the loss of civic spaces – a phenomenon Jennifer Brandel captures in [a powerful essay](#) about the U.S. that reflects a global trend – journalism can step in. This is an opportunity to help regenerate the fabric that ties people together and sustains democracies.⁴³

With *Change-Centric Journalism*, newsrooms can become physical destinations that restore the relevance and trust we lost while chasing algorithms we don’t control. There are mental, social, cultural, and even financial benefits for all to be reaped.

⁴¹American Press Institute. (2024). Journalism has many roles. It’s time to embrace the role of convener. Retrieved from <https://americanpressinstitute.org/journalism-has-many-roles-its-time-to-embrace-the-role-of-convener/>

⁴² International Journalism Festival. (2025). Bricks and mortar: The new wave of houses of journalism. Retrieved from <https://www.journalismfestival.com/programme/2025/bricks-and-mortar-the-new-wave-of-houses-of-journalism>

⁴³ Brandel, J. (2025). Civic space is closing: How local journalism can open it up. Retrieved from <https://medium.com/we-are-hearken/civic-space-is-closing-how-local-journalism-can-open-it-up-e7ad032affb9>

Reassessing the ethics of journalism

A question I'm commonly asked when explaining El Surti's visual journalism approach – with its memes, flashy characters, and eye-catching graphics – is how we ensure objectivity and neutrality. The same concern arises whenever I talk about how we interact with audiences.

Since our inception, my co-founders and I have held a critical view of these principles, especially when treated as universal and immutable within the industry. We grew up witnessing the harm legacy media inflicted under the guise of impartiality on some of the country's most vulnerable: landless *campesinos*, Indigenous communities, and poor young migrants. Instead of challenging unequal power dynamics, many outlets reinforced them.

Some of these media organisations historically portrayed essential struggles for basic, constitutionally protected rights as irrational at best and criminal at worst. In some cases, owners leveraged their platforms to blur the line between public interest and their own political or economic agendas, manufacturing consensus where dissent existed, or fuelling polarisation where understanding was needed.

At El Surti, we prioritise transparency and fairness over neutrality and objectivity. We back every claim with data, expert sources, and first-hand testimonies – and we are also upfront about our perspective.

Audiences can easily tell where we stand on the climate crisis, what we make of the government's fundamentalist position regarding reproductive rights, or our concern about the unchecked influence of bad actors that spread disinformation.

We have not refrained from embracing emotion either. The beauty, humour, and suspense our readers encounter in our stories has helped them navigate these complex issues. The best of our work has broken down prejudice, stirred empathy, and ignited a sense of shared responsibility. Our view and approach are not unique.

Most news outlets are familiar with accusations that their reporting relies on extractive practices. And media scholars affirm that there can be no application of traditional values without scrutiny. To paraphrase Dr Sue Robinson's observation in

How Journalists Engage: “Mainstream journalists have used [traditional values as an] identity construct to prop up problematic status quos.”⁴⁴

It’s also worth remembering that impartiality as a core value in journalism is a relatively recent invention. In the U.S., significant social, economic, and cultural shifts were required before impartiality replaced the partisanship that defined 19th-century newspapers.⁴⁵ Back then, journalism was widely seen as a tool for stimulating affiliation and civic participation of protected classes.

Another overlooked truth is that, for many, as Coda’s editor-in-chief [Natalia Antelava wrote](#), “neutrality is a luxury”.⁴⁶ She offers the example of Black journalists in the U.S. whose work cannot reasonably be separated from their existence in a society where systemic prejudice exists.

The same may be true for how many audiences relate to the media. A recent study examining preferences for impartial news across 40 countries – including several in the Global South such as Mexico, South Africa, Malaysia, and Brazil – found that, beyond the politically and ideologically engaged, young people, women, and less socioeconomically advantaged groups are consistently less likely to prioritise objectivity in news.⁴⁷ Another study found extremely negative views of public service journalism among marginalised groups in the UK.⁴⁸ They told report authors that, as of now, news is not contributing to solve any of their most crucial problems:

“By definition, marginalised people and communities need systemic change so they’re not marginalised. So, unless journalism provides a route to action or change – if it doesn’t help us live better or easier lives – then for many people it will continue to be an empty product with little value.”

⁴⁴ Robinson, S. (2023). *How Journalists Engage. A Theory of Trust-Building, Identities and Care*. Oxford University Press.

⁴⁵ Ryfe, D. (2006). News, Culture and Public Life. *Journalism Studies*, 7(1), 60-77.

⁴⁶ Coda Story (2025). The capture of journalism and the illusion of objectivity. Retrieved from <https://www.codastory.com/authoritarian-tech/the-capture-of-journalism-and-the-illusion-of-objectivity/>

⁴⁷ Mont’Alverne, C et al. (2025). Who Wants Impartial News? Investigating Determinants of Preferences for Impartiality in 40 Countries. *International Journal of Communication*, 19, 1581-1603.

⁴⁸ Hayat, A. et al. (2025). News for All. The Story so Far: Participatory Research Report. Media Cymru.

The centrality of care to restoring trust

By its nature, journalism that is intentional in its pursuit of impact and engages meaningfully with sources and audiences does not – cannot – abandon due diligence. However, this journalism may require reporters to practice genuine, active concern for others.

The same is echoed in [research into growing scepticism](#) around impartiality, where the authors suggest exploring a practice more grounded in trust-building and engagement.⁴⁹ And Dr Robinson also makes this point in her book by proposing an ethic of care as the centre of the gravity: “Through caregiving and care receiving, journalists could set aside the mantle of objectivity and mandated critical distance, that I believed inhibited true connection to communities, in favour of offering of a moral voice that is highly aware and appreciative of identities as well as the explicit expression of desire to help communities solve problems and have productive discourse.”

What does care-based reporting look like? Robinson studied various sub-movements of journalism in the U.S. that depart from tradition, such as community-based or citizen journalism. She identified a set of values and skills that journalists need in order to respond adequately to the “affective kinds of trust” people demand.

Emerging roles and skills for journalists

Roles	Skills
Relationship-builder	Radical transparency
Community collaborator	Power dynamic accounting
Conversation facilitator	Mediation
Professional network-builder	Reciprocity
	Media literacies
	Community offline work
	Needs, assets, and solution analyses
	Collaborative production

Source: Sue Robinson, *How journalists engage*

⁴⁹ Downie, L. & Heyward, A. (2023). Beyond objectivity. Retrieved from <https://cronkitenewslab.com/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/Beyond-Objectivity-Report-2.pdf>

In my own exploration of digital newsrooms that show a strong commitment to seeing individuals, communities and societies thrive, *Mensagem's* Carvalho in Portugal perfectly summed up what care-based reporting could mean:

“You see yourself not only as a journalist, but as a neighbour.”

And Izabela Moi, co-founder and executive director of *Agencia Mural* in Brazil, explained how the news outlets in her network embody the mission of local journalism about and for people living in underserved neighbourhoods of Sao Paulo:

“100% of our organisation is made up of young people that live in those areas.”

Through *Clube Mural*, they also train and build a network of local correspondents that can pitch to the news outlet and, in doing so, bring their own stories.⁵⁰

This is how journalists put aside the top-down mindset that still pervades newsrooms and more effectively level the playing field: not extracting information but collaborating through their craft in the overall welfare of the people they serve.

Although subject-expertise remains key, it's not what will ultimately earn news organisations enduring trust; it's understanding that interpersonal relationships are at the heart of it, as Kulkarni said. It is the fact that reporters and editors can be held accountable because there are clear pathways to reach them.

A study by the [Pew Research Center](#) found only 7% of U.S. citizens feel empowered by news.⁵¹ In a journalistic landscape that leaves people with more negative than positive emotions, I believe journalists who step up to act as facilitators and guides, who spark dialogues and who help people make fruitful connections will provide a way forward for our field.

⁵⁰Agencia Mural. (2025). Programa correspondentes locais. Retrieved from

<https://agenciamural.org.br/institucional/clube-mural/correspondentes-locais/>

⁵¹Eddy, K. et al. (2025). What is News? How Americans decide what 'news' means to them - and how it fits into their lives in the digital era. Retrieved from

<https://www.pewresearch.org/journalism/2025/05/13/what-is-news/>

Conclusion

The existential risks that journalism faces in the digital era demand answers that go beyond the familiar refrain that “what we do is inherently valuable”. This project argues that such a belief may be prolonging the crisis of trust and sustainability that newsrooms continue to grapple with.

It is a mindset that puts us under the stress of producing more and more “content”, limiting our ability to recognise the opportunities that arise when we align our purpose with people’s needs. As a way forward, I’ve proposed that we reclaim journalism’s sense of mission and embrace our role in driving social change.

To illustrate what a *Change-Centric Journalism* model looks like, I’ve developed a framework that brings together principles and practices that distinguish it from a content-driven model. And I have shown that this is not only theoretical thinking; the work is already being done.

Despite their diversity, newsrooms in Portugal, Brazil, the UK, and my own in Paraguay share a deep commitment to seeing individuals, communities, and societies thrive. For these organisations, publication is not the end goal – it’s the starting point.

They are intentional about the positive impact they want to make with journalism, whether it’s improving life in the city, challenging class, and racial prejudice, bringing wrongdoers to justice, or revitalizing civic action.

Many have strong systems in place – workflows, roles, skills – that increase the potential impact of their coverage. They also measure this impact through indicators that go far beyond conventional metrics like clicks or reach.

But what makes them truly distinct is a culture of impact: a mindset that permeates these newsrooms and puts all efforts behind the goal of facilitating change. What that change is will be different for each story and will unquestioningly depend on each context and audience. But underpinning those efforts is a shared desire to serve, and to be a force for good.

In this project I have described other key features that distinguish this approach: purposeful engagement, not audience growth, is what defines the relationship with people; care, just as much as rigour, fairness, and balance, is what restores trust with them.

These newsrooms tap into the power of communication not only to deliver information, but to build a shared layer of understanding. And there is a growing conviction among media practitioners that outlets have a major opportunity to breathe new life into the civic space. Some are already doing so.

These outlets convene, host, and cultivate safe spaces for connections and belonging. Physical, not just digital ones.

From *mingas informativas*, storytelling events, listening clubs, coffee shops to “houses of journalism”, newsrooms are trying to give people a chance to make sense of the world with others, network, and find joy in community.

I believe these values and practices are not only better suited to the challenges of our time – from AI and disinformation to populist attacks on journalism – but also offer a more sustainable and purposeful model for the future.

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