

Research Designs For Assessing The Impact of Media Training Programs

By

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Before conducting an evaluation of any training program, including a media training program, the researcher must make two very important decisions. The researcher must decide (1) what to evaluate and the researcher must decide (2) how to evaluate.

Deciding what to evaluate often means differentiating (1) the various levels of impact and differentiating (2) the various types of impact.

Deciding how to evaluate often is a matter of establishing meaningful comparisons.

I'll elaborate on these points below, and I'll illustrate the application of them by talking about three different evaluation projects I have completed or am conducting at present. The first of these is an evaluation completed in 1999 of the Knight International Press Fellowship Program, which sends American journalists abroad to work with foreign journalists. The second is an evaluation underway of two midcareer training programs operated in the United States and funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, which also funds the Knight International Press Fellowship Program. The third is a more general assessment of the role of the media in the process of democratization.

The decision about what to evaluate is crucial. At least four levels of potential impact of a given training program exist. These are: (1) effects on the individual; (2) effects on the organization for which the individual works; (3) effects on the practice of journalism generally, and (4) effects on the society.

Individual level impact of journalism training programs can be of three types. First, the impact can be on the reactions of the participants. Second, the impact can be on learning by the participants. Third, the impact can be on the behavior of the participants in the training program.

Examples of reactions are: (1) satisfaction with program, (2) motivation, such as the motivation to cover or write a type of story, commitment to a particular type of journalism, such as investigative journalism, or commitment to the field of journalism generally.

Examples of learning include (1) changes in attitudes toward something, such as a willingness to share knowledge with others, (2) increased or improved knowledge of a topic (such as use of open

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records laws), or (3) increased skills (such as how to use the computer to organize data).

Examples of individual level impact on behaviors include (1) changes in quantity of stories produced as a result of a training program and (2) changes in the quality of those stories produced. Quality could be assessed by changes in the types of news sources used, the writing of stories with more background, perspective or sophistication, an increase in the production of enterprise pieces, or the use of more integrative reporting. Quality also might be indexed by the number of prizes won. Another area of behavioral impact might be (3) on the level of leadership shown in the field. This could be assessed by more involvement in professional associations and more leadership within those professional associations.

In addition to assessing impact on the individual level, as noted, the evaluator can assess impact at the level of the journalistic organization. Such impact would be indicated by (1) a change in the quantity of stories produced by an organization or a groups of organizations or (2) a change in the quality of stories produced by the organization or organizations. If organizational activity has improved as a result of training, the organization as a whole might employ new sources for its stories, provide more background, perspective or sophistication in the stories written, or demonstrate more enterprise in the stories appearing in the paper or newscasts. Improved quality also could be assessed by more integrative reporting or by an increase in the number of prizes won by the organization as a whole or by individuals in the organization. Organizational impact also could be in terms (3) of changed structure or use of resources. For example, a news organization might introduce or change its beat structure, add additional reporters in areas covered by the training program, or even seek out more training in the area of the initial training. A final indicant of organization impact (4) could be the promotion within the news organization of participants in the training.

The evaluator also may want to assess the impact of the training for the field of journalism as a whole. To achieve this, the researcher could assess again (1) the amount of coverage and (2) the quality of coverage. The evaluator also might look at (3) the level of commitment of resources to the area of the

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training. For example, one could look for evidence of an increase in the number of media organizations with beats in a specialty covered by the training initiative. Impact on the field could be measured (4) by the development of professional associations dealing with the topic of the training. The emergence of a journalistic association dealing with investigative journalism, for example, could be an indicant of the impact of a training initiative in that area. Additional evidence of impact on the field of journalism would come from (5) the proliferation of number of media outlets in the community or society or (6) from indicants of the improved viability or sustainability of those media outlets.

Impact on society could be measured by (1) increased knowledge of citizenry in a topic area covered by the training. For example, if the journalistic training focused on coverage of health and medicine, the society should show improved level of knowledge of these topics. Societal impact also could be assessed by (2) increased satisfaction with media performance, (3) increased participation by the public in societal decision making, and (4) improvement in democratic behaviors generally.

After deciding what is to be used to measure the impact of the training, the evaluator must determine how to actually do the evaluation. The evaluator needs a research design, that is, a plan for gathering data about impact. All designs should include at least one comparison. Designs are evaluated, in the end, in terms of their ability to provide unambiguous information about impact. No design is going to be perfect.

For example, if the researcher is interested in determining if a training initiative had an impact on the reactions of individuals, he or she conduct (1) a survey of a sample of participants in the workshop to assess reactions, or (2) a survey of a sample of newsroom managers from the newsrooms where the participants worked following the training. The data from these surveys would have to be compared with data from cohorts of journalists who were similar to the participating journalists in every way possible except for participation. To create this cohort, the evaluator might look at applicants who were not accepted for the workshop even though they applied or who were accepted but did not attend. Or the evaluator might create a “matched-pair” cohort made up of journalists identified by the participants as

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identical to them except for the participation.

If the evaluator wanted to examine the impact of the training program on individual level behaviors, she or he could (1) compare participants pre- and post-participation. The researcher could actually measure behavior prior to the training, or she or he could ask the participant to offer a self-report on change. The former is better than the latter, but both can be used. Impact on behavior also could come from (2) a comparison of participants who completed program with other journalists generally, or other applicants who were not accepted into the program, or with a cohort of journalists created using the “matched-pair” strategy discussed above.

Appropriate designs for assessing organizational level impact include (1) comparing organizations pre- and post-participation and (2) comparing organizations with participants with other organizations generally, or with the organizations of rejected applicants, or with matched organizations.

The impact of training of the field of journalism can be assessed by tracking coverage of selected types of topics across time and comparing this coverage with coverage of areas not dealt with in the training programs.

Designs appropriate for measuring the impact of the training initiative on society include (1) tracking knowledge of the public on topics covered by programs, perhaps using archived survey data to determine what the state of knowledge had been in the past, and (2) tracking the evaluation of the public of the performance of the media in areas covered by training programs. Again, it would ideal if it were possible to use archived survey data to determine what the public’s evaluation of the media had been before the training was undertaken. A third example would be a design that examined the legislative activity of the local, regional or national government to see if the legislation changed after introduction of related journalism training programs.

Often time, the evaluator will want to compare the impact of different types of training programs. For example, she or he might want to compare long-term vs. short-term programs in terms of the

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effectiveness. Or the evaluator might want to compare the program of a client with programs funded or operated by others. The key is the comparison. Impact always is determined in comparison with something else.

As I said initially, these basic points can be illustrated through a discussion of three different evaluation activities undertaken in the Cox Center in recent years. The first was an assessment of the impact of the Knight International Press Fellowship Program. The second is an ongoing evaluation of the Knight CDC Fellowship and an ongoing evaluation of the Salzburg Seminar. The third is an assessment of the role played by the mass media in democratization. This project is in the pilot stage, during which we are attempting to assess the feasibility of undertaking a larger project.

The evaluation of the Knight International Press Fellowship Evaluation program began in 1994. The Knight Fellowship Program is operated by the International Center for Journalists (ICFJ) in Washington and funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation in Miami. Each year, ICFJ sends a group of journalists from the United States to assignments around the world for periods of up to nine months.

The scope of the evaluation was from the program's inception in 1994 until 1998, by which time 84 working journalists had completed 89 different Knight Fellowships. The study examined the work of the Knight Fellows in Central and Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, and Latin America. The 11 countries studied were the Czech Republic, Hungary, Moldova, Poland, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Ukraine, Chile, Ecuador and Peru.

The study design had several components. In the first half of 1999, we attempted to find as many of those who worked with the Knight Fellows in the 11 countries as possible and to conduct interviews with them. We used two interview techniques. First, we asked those we contacted to complete a self-administered questionnaire, generally with an interviewer in close proximity.

Next, we asked most of those we contacted to answer follow-up questions via a personal interview.

The first questionnaire contained clusters of items designed to measure the perceived impact of

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the interaction with the Knight Fellow. The personal interview included a variety of questions designed to obtain both discrete indications of impact and examples of that impact.

We interviewed at least 31 people in each of the 11 countries we visited. The 531 completed interviews included 269 with individuals on the original lists of possible contacts provided by the Knight Fellows themselves and 262 with individuals whom we identified in the field. In the end, we completed interviews with 44.6% of those whose names were on our original lists and with 61.4% of those persons whose names we ultimately listed in our database.

What kinds of evidence of impact did we use? We were seeking evidence of impact of the Knight International Press Fellowship program (1) on the journalists and on others in the country with whom the Knight Fellows came into contact, (2) on the practice of journalism in the countries visited by the Knight Fellows, (3) on the media and media-related institutions in the countries visited by the Knight Fellows, and (4) and on the countries themselves.

Here's an example of a question from the self-administered questionnaire:

QUESTION. How much impact, if any, did the Knight Fellow(s) have on the following (lot, little, some, none):

- A. Your career goals and ambitions
- B. Your understanding of the basics of journalism
- C. Your understanding of the audiences of the mass media
- D. Your understanding of the economics of journalism
- E. The way you think about news
- F. Your understanding of the possible roles of the press in a democratic society
- G. The ways you carry out your job
- H. Your knowledge of tactics and strategies to use in carrying out your job
- I. Your knowledge about how to work with other people

Here's an example of an open-ended question from the self-administered questionnaire:

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QUESTION. In the space below, please provide specific examples of the impact of the Knight Fellow on you and your work.

(If you want to provide us samples of work you have done that was influenced by the Knight Fellow, please attach them.)

Here's an example of a question from personal interview:

QUESTION. Do you think the Knight Fellow has had impact on the types of stories written by journalists here in this country?

No

Yes

If so: Please describe this impact.

These elaborated reports of impact proved quite informative. Half of those we interviewed said the types of stories written by journalists had changed as a result of the work of the Knight Fellows. Seven in 10 said the quality of stories had changed. Only one in five of the respondents did not report evidence of impact of the work of the Knight Fellows on the journalistic product in the country.

The persons we interviewed also gave clear examples of the impact of the Knight Fellow on themselves and specific assessments of the impact of the program. The Knight Fellows taught a "fact-based" style of journalism--not one that was based on opinions--we were told very frequently. This was seen as a major change in all of the countries visited. The Knight Fellows said news should be written for the general audience, not for elites and not for other journalists. Many of those we interviewed found this to be a revolutionary idea, but many said it was one they adopted after the contact with the fellows.

We attempted to assess the impact of the Knight program on journalistic institutions in the countries we visited. We observed dramatic impact of the work of the Fellows on journalism training centers in many countries. In Moldova, a Fellow was credited with having made the idea of such a media center a reality. We wrote in our report: "The Moldovan center is now staffed by Moldovans, has an active

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program that serves the needs of journalists in the country and has even hosted a successful visit of another Knight Fellow." Fellows also had identifiable impact on the programs offered by media centers in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Hungary and Romania and made important contributions to the work of centers in Russia. A Fellow also laid the groundwork for an operating center in Ukraine. In Poland and Chile, we saw clearly how Fellows influenced the curricula of host universities.

Finally, we attempted to determine if the Knight Program had any impact on the larger societies in which the journalists operated. Many of those we interviewed were doubtful the Knight Fellows had much impact on the broader society. We asked specifically if the work of the Knight Fellows had impact on "the functioning of democracy in this country." Three in 10 said there was no impact, and two in 10 said they did not know if there had been impact. Half, however, said the Fellows had such impact. Some of the things said by those who answered positively suggest the impact could become even greater across time. A television journalist in Moldova said the environment in his newsroom became more democratic as a result of the work of the Knight Fellow. "Reporters are trained now to express their opinions," he said. "I listen to them and take that into consideration." That was not the old way, he made clear, and it was at least a small step in the creation of democracy in his country.

Our design included a number of internal comparisons to help us link the change observed or reported with the actual training by the Knight Fellow. We found evidence that the Knight Fellows had relatively more impact on the learning of specific skills and on some basic attitudes about journalism, and relatively less impact on more fundamental attitudes, such as those about the role of journalism in a society. This was consistent with the general expectation. We also found that the impact of the training varied among the countries. Hungary, Romania, Moldova, Ukraine and Ecuador were countries with generally high levels of impact. Impact was smaller in the Czech Republic, Poland and Slovakia. The more time the Fellow spent with those with whom she or he worked, the more likely there was to be impact. The more varied the types of interaction between the Fellow and the persons with whom she or he worked, the greater the reported levels of impact. We also found that programs outside the Capital

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were more likely to be effective than those in the Capital. We found that those individuals who participated voluntarily were more accepting of what was taught than those who were required to do so by their bosses. All of these comparisons made sense and bolstered our confidence in our findings.

Though it wasn't a part of the main evaluation, we also attempted to learn of any impact of training experience on the Knight Fellows themselves. We asked Fellows if the experience had had any impact on them. All said it did, but the kinds of impact varied. The younger trainers learned about themselves. The older trainers learned about the countries in which they worked. Again, these comparisons made sense, both in terms of common expectation but also in terms of the research literature on the impact of international exchange experiences.

Now I'll turn to my second example. The John S. and James L. Knight Foundation also funds, at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the Knight Public Health Journalism Fellowships. We are currently surveying those who participated in the Program in 2002-2003, using the elaborated answer procedure. Questions ask about new story ideas resulting from participation in the program and about the development of new sources. The program actually has two parts. In one, journalists participated in a four-month, intensive training program during which they actually become epidemiologists, or scientists concerned with the study and control of diseases. In the other, the journalists get an intensive, two-week training program on coverage of public health journalism. We are comparing the impact of these two different components of the program to get relative assessments of their impact. We also are surveying the editors of those who participated, to get a second assessment of impact and to learn about the impact of the program on the newsroom. We also are obtaining copies of stories written by the participants before and after the program from electronic data archives. We'll compare these, and ask experts and lay readers to compare them, to see which stories are better.

The Knight Foundation also funds the Knight Salzburg Seminar Fellowships. Through this program, journalists can join participants from all over the world at seminars on a variety of topics in Salzburg, Austria. The seminars have the potential to give the American journalists an international

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perspective and international contacts. We are surveying those who participated in the seminar, using the elaborated answer procedure to learn if this has, indeed, happened. We also are surveying the editors of the participants. And we are obtaining copies of stories written before and after the seminar. The ability of the seminar participants to supply us with examples of work produced after the seminar is an indicant of impact. We also will look at those stories to see what types of international elements they contain.

Although these are designed as separate evaluations, they are being conducted at the same time and they, therefore, provide a meaningful comparison of two different types of training initiatives. One is a lengthy program; one is short. One is more expensive; one is relatively inexpensive.

One is focused on very specific skills; one is focused on broad experiences. Knowing about the different impact should be of considerable value to the Knight Foundation and to others interested in journalism training programs in the U.S. and elsewhere.

Finally, I'll say a few words about another project, which is in the formative stage. This project also is funded in part by the Knight Foundation, and is an outgrowth of the evaluation of the Knight International Press Fellowship Program. This project focuses more generally on the role of media in bringing about democratization. One element involves some case studies of the order of change or reform in countries moving toward democratization. Another phase looks at indices of investments in change and of outcomes.

Tracking the development of media reform and of other types of democratic reform in those same countries will help us understand what comes first. The goal is to establish the time order.

The second stage, and this is the stage funded by the Knight Foundation, involves the development of indices of input, such as the amount of money spent, the type of investment made, and the nature of participants. We'll link these investments with indicators of the "health" of media system and of the "health" of democracy in the society. At present, we're doing an assessment of the feasibility of gathering the first type of data—on investment—and evaluating the measures of media and societal health already being used by others. If the project goes well, we hope to actually undertake an assessment of

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the role of investment in media reform and its outcome across the period of the 1990s through today. This will include all countries in which donor countries make these investments throughout the world.

These examples, as well as the general statement of principles, offer some advice for those interested in evaluating media training programs. First, evaluation involves decisions about what to measure. Second, evaluation involves decisions about what to compare. Third, findings are more likely to be suggestive than definitive. And finally, best guesses based on systematic observation and analysis are better than simple best guesses.

More detail on these projects can be found on the Cox Center web site, at www.grady.uga.edu/coxcenter. An executive summary of the evaluation of the Knight International Press Fellowship Program is available at www.grady.uga.edu/coxcenter/knight2000word4.htm. The full report of the evaluation of the Knight International Press Fellowship is available at www.grady.uga.edu/coxcenter/knightreport2000-download.htm.