

IN THE GAME

The impact of Table Stakes training on 16 major metros, 2016-2019

A report for Knight Foundation and Lenfest Institute for Journalism

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The impact of Table Stakes training on 16 major metros, 2016-2019

AUTHOR NOTE: This report commissioned by the Knight Foundation and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism describes the progress made by the 16 metro newspapers that participated in the Table Stakes project between 2016 and 2019. The results detailed here are based on documents and presentations made during in-person program sessions, self-assessments and questionnaires and interviews with participants. Except for the Executive Summary, the information in this report should be considered confidential under the “Las Vegas rules” that Table Stakes participants and other program stakeholders have agreed to abide by.

Executive Summary

Within 24 hours of posting an investigative story in November that detailed sexual abuse allegations against a [Hialeah police officer](#), the Miami Herald gained 18 new digital subscribers.

At Newsday, a [pop-up newsletter](#) with things to do for Halloween last year led to nine new subscriptions.

In Charlotte, nine readers signed up for digital subscriptions to the Observer last fall after watching [a video](#) describing reporters’ efforts to investigate a local school superintendent.

The acquisition of these new paying customers, and the variety of content and calls-to-action newsrooms used to influence them to subscribe, reflect the slow but steady progress made by major metropolitan newspapers that participated in the Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation project, a change-management program also known as Table Stakes.

Launched in 2015-16 by the Knight Foundation and Temple University, Table Stakes was initially designed to help four major metros accelerate the shift to digital from print. In 2017, building on earlier successes, the program expanded to include smaller newspapers, radio and TV stations at coaching programs based at the Poynter Institute, University of North Carolina and Arizona State University. At the same time, Knight and the Lenfest Institute for Journalism together funded participation by a dozen more major metros.

Through 2019, 16 major metropolitan newspapers have trained with change-management experts to improve their organizations’ capabilities to identify and serve targeted audiences, increase the number of digital subscribers and diversify their revenue streams. Their progress is the focus of this report.

Most of the teams that participated in the formal one-year program in 2016, 2017 or 2018 continued their involvement through alumni sessions and/or conversations with coaches into 2019. Some set new goals or benchmarks along the way. The participating organizations were:

- **Cohort 1, 2016:** Dallas Morning News, Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald, Minneapolis Star Tribune, Philadelphia Inquirer
- **Cohort 2, 2017:** Bay Area News Group (BANG), Houston Chronicle, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, Seattle Times (Philadelphia repeated its participation in the program this year)
- **Cohort 3, 2018:** Detroit Free Press, Omaha World-Herald, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Sacramento Bee
- **Cohort 4, 2019:** Charlotte Observer, Indianapolis Star, Newsday, Los Angeles Times

Based on information gleaned from participant presentations, self-assessments, survey information and interviews, the organizations have made progress in several ways, most notably:

Growth in digital subscriptions: A top goal for 15 of the 16 participating news organizations was increasing digital-only subscriptions. By fall 2019, all 15 made progress on this goal. Overall, they grew digital subscriptions by 56 percent, from 365,882 to 571,097.

Not surprising, the growth rate was the most consistent among the newspapers with the longest experience in the program. The four Cohort 1 papers grew their digital-only subscriptions by 96 percent to 116 percent between 2016 and fall 2019. By comparison, the increases among the Cohort 3 newspapers, which trained in 2018, ranged by fall 2019 from 33 percent to 189 percent.

Producing targeted content and digital enterprise: Newspapers in all four cohorts made progress on at least six of the seven core Table Stakes competencies, according to self-assessments used to identify and close shortfalls. Those assessments were available from 14 of the 16 newspapers. Teams took these so-called “gap quizzes” at the start of their training and again nine to 29 months later.

Their capability improvements—including more sophisticated use of audience data and improved collaboration between news and business staffs—were driven in large part by content initiatives that required them to identify and serve targeted audiences.

To achieve their performance goals, several newspapers developed new products related to passion topics such as sports and food where they felt they already had a competitive advantage in their markets. Some papers focused on improving coverage of defining issues in their communities such as housing shortages, real estate prices, environmental matters and politics.

Their targeted content engaged audiences on a variety of platforms, driving web and social media traffic, subscriptions and/or advertising revenues. The Detroit Free Press created [Woodward 248](#), a digital newsletter focused on a thriving suburban community. The

Indianapolis Star developed “[Friday Night Live](#),” a sports highlight show for streaming on its website and social media. The Los Angeles Times expanded its food content for multiple platforms and even created “[Coast to Coast](#),” a tasting event with celebrity chefs at Union Square Park in New York to expose their coverage to potential advertisers.

Newspapers’ increased audience-and-digital-first focus also had a significant impact on the development of watchdog projects and other enterprise journalism. Investigative projects by the Minneapolis Star Tribune and the Philadelphia Inquirer that became [Pulitzer Prize finalists](#) last year were among many enterprise projects conceived and structured by the metros to capitalize on digital audiences, including mobile users.

Improved use of digital and social platforms: As the table below shows, the newspapers collectively made the most progress on Table Stakes #2, the ability to publish on platforms used by their targeted audiences, according to averages of gap quiz scores. Improvement in Table Stakes #3, involving their ability to plan and publish online content more consistently, ranked fourth overall but was highest or second highest in average scores for two of the four cohorts.

Table 1. Gap Quiz Progress Rankings

Newspapers’ ability to publish on platforms used by their target audiences showed most improvement of seven Table Stakes

Tables Stakes	RANK
1. Serve targeted audiences with targeted content	2
2. Publish on the platforms used by your targeted audiences	1
3. Produce and publish continuously to match your audiences’ lives	4
4. Funnel occasional users into habitual, valuable and paying loyalists	3
5. Mobilize your entire enterprise around growing and diversifying revenue from the audiences you build	5
6. Partner to expand your capacity and capabilities at lower and more flexible cost	6
7. Use the “mini-publisher” concept to drive audience growth, revenue and profitability within targeted audiences and platforms	7

Ranked by averaging the differences in scores of gap quiz self-assessments that 14 metros took at the start of the program and in fall 2019. (See Appendix page 42 for full explanation of gap quiz methodology and page 39 scores from individual newspapers.)

Capability improvements were reflected anecdotally as well. All 16 news organizations reported developing new skill sets and workflows to help them increasingly prioritize digital over print. Among the changes: They recast jobs, upgraded digital skills through hiring and training, reorganized teams and beats, refocused editorial meetings on digital-first coverage, adopted new tech tools and increased their use of analytics to be able to create, deliver and promote content for websites, social media and other platforms including newsletters, video and podcasts.

One editor described the degree of change in her news organization this way:

“We’re not digital-first. We’re digital.”

Increase in innovation and marketing by newsrooms: The encouragement and freedom to experiment and the discipline to measure results boosted the confidence and wherewithal of participating newsrooms to become centers of change in their organizations.

Editors and reporters proposed and developed new products, services, partnerships and events to increase audience engagement, drive digital subscriptions and add revenue. In one participating newsroom, the top editor has been put in charge of his company’s events strategy with the goal of building a \$5 million events business by 2024.

Along with other general management capabilities, reporters and editors in these newsrooms improved their marketing and other audience development skills to drive digital subscriptions and revenue. Gains often came slowly; one or two new digital subscriptions influenced by a story or newsletter and associated subscription promotions can be considered a lot. But as the examples at the beginning of this Executive Summary show, many efforts to convert occasional readers to paying customers yielded better payoffs.

Occasionally, papers attracted dozens or even hundreds of new digital subscribers with sustained, high-profile coverage and calls to action. The Seattle Times, for example, reported getting hundreds of new digital subscriptions in 2018 from changing its publishing strategy for a [major enterprise project on orca whales](#). Through 2019, continued reporting on the topic influenced more than 2,200 new digital and print subscriptions, according Danny Gawlowski, assistant managing editor.

Rick Hirsch, the Miami Herald’s managing editor, said his paper got a “massive” boost in digital subscriptions tied to last year’s coverage of the Jeffrey Epstein scandal:

“The newsroom heavily pushed a subscription offer tied to reporter Julie K. Brown, used a background card to explain the reporting and asked people to support the investigative work.”

The paper also promoted subscriptions on email and social sites.

Collaboration and broader impacts: Table Stakes jump-started peer-to-peer learning and collaborations in content sharing and other new initiatives.

The Star Tribune helped the Inquirer develop a [Sunday print good news section](#) patterned after

the Star Tribune's section. Content from both sections has proved popular with online readers and sparked product extensions including speaker series. Philadelphia has created numerous other national and local content partnerships to expand its capacity and capabilities.

In northern California, the Sacramento Bee and BANG began sharing political and sports coverage. Traditionally competitors, the papers [cited as a catalyst](#) Table Stakes #6: "Partner to expand your capacity and capabilities at lower and more flexible costs." BANG also partnered with the Seattle Times on Pac-12 coverage.

The sharing of performance data and other insights by BetterNews.org, Poynter Institute and others has helped accelerate the pace of digital change throughout the news industry. Lessons learned by the metros, as well as by news organizations in other iterations of the program, have influenced the strategies and work of Gannett, McClatchy, Gatehouse and other media companies. The growing emphasis of digital subscriptions over page views is an example.

"The sharing of actionable data seems to be at an all-time high, particularly as it relates to the collective push for digital subscriptions. The sharing of analytics tied to digital subscription conversion strategies is a sterling example of the value of Table Stakes collaboration."—Stan Wischnowski, executive editor and senior vice president, Philadelphia Inquirer

Table Stakes training was never envisioned to be "the solution" or the only means for the participating metros to counter the turbulence in the industry caused by steep declines in print revenues, changing news habits and other factors. Its purpose has been to accelerate digital transformation in these legacy newsrooms and by extension to help boost the financial health of their companies and, ideally, the industry. As this Executive Summary seeks to emphasize, the performance and capability gains at these large local newspapers have been considerable and important.

"Table Stakes gave us the opportunity and confidence to identify problems, set about to map out goals and strategies and then to lead through change. In just a few years, we have developed more sophistication and more confidence about our ability to approach these challenges. Yet with the humility required in such a disruptive environment."—Suki Dardarian, managing editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

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Introduction

The Knight Foundation and Temple University's School of Media and Communication launched the Table Stakes change-management project in 2015-2016 with a \$1.3 million investment from Knight and four metro newspapers participating.

In 2017, the [Lenfest Institute for Journalism teamed with Knight](#) to provide \$4.8 million in new funding to expand the program to 12 more major metros. The expansion included research and development of a digital hub by the American Press Institute (API) to document and spread best practices. The expansion also added guidance to participants by Lenfest in areas such as audience development and digital subscriptions.

By the end of 2019, teams from 16 major metros received coaching from project director Douglas K. Smith and his team to help them accelerate their shift from print to digital through the execution of performance challenges centered on the seven core Table Stakes.

Table 2. The Seven Core Table Stakes

1. Serve targeted audiences with targeted content
2. Publish on the platforms used by your targeted audiences
3. Produce and publish continuously to match your audiences' lives
4. Funnel occasional users into habitual, valuable and paying loyalists
5. Mobilize your entire enterprise around growing and diversifying revenue from the audiences you build
6. Partner to expand your capacity and capabilities at lower and more flexible cost
7. Use the "mini-publisher" concept to drive audience growth, revenue and profitability within targeted audiences and platforms

As requested by the funders, this report focuses on the following questions about the impact of the program:

- **What were the performance challenges undertaken by the metro newspapers, and how did they perform?**
- **Have the concepts of performance-driven change and digital-first publication permeated the organizations?**
- **Were there broader field impacts from the “major metros” program?**

The answers to these questions are based on information provided in presentations by each newspaper during their program year and in alumni sessions in 2018 and 2019; a questionnaire and interviews developed for this report; and coverage from API’s BetterNews.org, the Poynter Institute’s Kristin Hare, the Lenfest Institute’s Solutions Set and other industry news sources.

In keeping with the “Las Vegas rules” agreements by program participants, information in this report should be treated as confidential. The exception is the Executive Summary, which may be made publicly available.

It is also important to note that certain revenue and other business-related data that may have provided a fuller picture of the program’s impact were not available for this report. The reasons vary. The project was largely newsroom centric. In program sessions, participants generally reported metrics related to their specific performance goals but not on a uniform set of revenue and other financial metrics. When asked for additional data for this report, some news leaders had to rely on their business-side colleagues to supply the data and either didn’t ask for or receive the data, or were told it could not be released. Also, self-assessment “gap quizzes,” used to help teams measure their progress on the seven Table Stakes, were not taken at consistent intervals or necessarily by the same team members. As a result, they should be considered as general indications of the organizations’ progress.

Since its launch, Table Stakes has morphed and expanded to include more than 80 newsrooms and more than 300 leaders at newspapers, TV, radio and digital-only sites in the United States and abroad. The scope of this report is limited to the 16 major metros, but it’s clear their successes and learning have contributed to the continued expansion of the program and digital transformation throughout the news industry.

Performance Goals

“The goals are the doorway through which you build capabilities.”—Doug Smith, Table Stakes architect and project director

Teams from each of the 16 newspapers created at least three initiatives, or “performance challenges,” with specific measurable goals to help their organizations build the capabilities to get the seven Table Stakes in place. The teams provided progress updates in cohort meetings throughout their program year and in follow-up alumni meetings for teams from multiple cohorts. The meetings created accountability and a valuable opportunity for participants to learn from one another.

Table 3. Performance Challenges at a Glance

Dallas Morning News	Increase digital talent	Improve technology and workflow	Grow digital subscriptions
Miami Herald and El Nuevo Herald	Reinvent Miami.com entertainment site	Launch real estate vertical	Develop gateway Miami site for Spanish speakers
Minneapolis Star Tribune	Grow digital subscriptions	Grow social/mobile traffic	Improve technology and workflows
Philadelphia Inquirer	Merge/reorganize newsrooms	Grow digital subscriptions	Increase native advertising
Bay Area News Group (BANG)	Grow digital subscriptions	Define and focus on key topics	Launch niche products
Houston Chronicle	Grow digital subscriptions	Improve use of newsroom analytics	Grow newsletter portfolio and verticals
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	Grow digital subscriptions	Increase engagement through digital content	Expand revenue sources
Seattle	Grow digital and Sunday print subscriptions	Develop digital-first news flow	Produce content that increases audience engagement
Detroit	Grow digital "footprint"	Develop new geographic product	Increase newsroom revenue generation
Omaha	Grow digital subscriptions	Increase unique visitors via data-driven content	Develop topical verticals
Pittsburgh	Grow digital subscriptions	Develop targeted content to increase unique visitors	Develop events and outreach to build engagement
Sacramento	Grow digital subscriptions	Increase regional collaboration	Develop targeted content
Charlotte	Our best journalism will be core to our business future	Grow digital subscriptions	Reconnect news and advertising to leverage content
Indianapolis	Grow digital subscriptions	Improve mobile to grow loyal readers and subscribers	Expand audience reach and revenue via original content
Los Angeles	Grow digital subscriptions	Use Food to generate digital subscriptions and revenue	Cover housing, homeless issues and environment
Newsday	Increase revenue diversification	Improve perception and experiences by audiences	Grow engagement and digital subscriptions

As Table 3 shows, their initiatives focused heavily on developing targeted content to drive audience growth and revenues. All but one of the 16 newspapers aimed to increase the number of digital subscriptions. (The Detroit Free Press is in a joint operating agreement and does not promote digital subscriptions.)

Note: Summaries of each newspaper's progress begin on page 22

Key Outcomes

Growth in digital subscriptions: A top goal for 15 of the 16 participating news organizations was increasing digital-only subscriptions. By fall 2019, all 15 showed progress on this goal. Not surprising, the growth rate was the most consistent among the newspapers with the longest experience in the program.

Table 4. Digital-only subscriptions

Organization	Before Participation	As of Fall 2019	% Change
Cohort 1 (2016)			
Dallas*	17,490	34,229	95.7%
Miami	11,029	23,112	109.6%
Minneapolis	20,511	46,723	127.8%
Philadelphia	15,981	32,594	104.0%
<i>*Dallas "before" # is from 2017</i>			
Cohort 2 (2017)			
BANG (San Jose)	2,300	18,400	700.0%
Houston	14,000	26,000	85.7%
Milwaukee	13,773	40,275	192.4%
Seattle	33,000	44,000	33.3%
Cohort 3 (2018)			
Detroit*	4,578	4,440	-3.0%
Omaha	6,028	17,408	188.8%
Pittsburgh**	12,000	16,000	33.3%
Sacramento	12,766	23,608	84.9%
<i>*Detroit does not promote digital-only subscriptions</i>			
<i>**Pittsburgh's second figure is from July 2019</i>			
Cohort 4 (2019)			
Charlotte Observer	10,794	14,504	34.4%
Indianapolis Star	20,912	31,478	50.5%
Los Angeles Times	156,295	180,080	15.2%
Newsday	14,425	18,246	26.5%
TOTAL	365,882	571,097	56.1%

As Table 4 shows, the four Cohort 1 papers each grew their digital-only subscriptions ranging from 99 percent to 128 percent by fall 2019. By comparison, the percent increases among Cohort 3 newspapers, trained in 2018, ranged from 33 percent to 188 percent by fall 2019.

Overall, the number of digital-only subscriptions for the 15 newspapers grew by 56 percent, from 365,882 to 571,097.

Increases in unique visitors: Newspapers relied on quality content, search engine optimization and promotion to increase the number of unique visitors to their websites and to create larger audiences to convert to subscribers and for ad sales.

Numbers available for 14 of the newspapers showed they collectively grew average monthly unique visitors by 13 percent from 115.6 million to 129.4 million by fall 2019. Newspapers from Cohorts 1-3, with more than a full year of training under their belts, showed an increase of 25.4 percent.

Table 5. Average Monthly Unique Visitors

Organization	Cohort	Average in the 12 months preceding Table Stakes	Average monthly, fall 2019	Total change	% change
Dallas	2016	9,219,527	9,552,520	332,993	3.6%
Miami	2016	6,786,409	10,966,643	4,180,234	61.6%
Minneapolis	2016	7,800,000	9,600,000	1,800,000	23.1%
Philadelphia	2016	7,590,859	7,892,580	301,721	4.0%
BANG (San Jose)	2017	8,500,000	12,500,000	4,000,000	47.1%
Houston	2017	1,000,000	3,500,000	2,500,000	250.0%
Milwaukee	2017	3,994,340	4,423,123	428,783	10.7%
Seattle	2017	8,204,962	8,900,000	695,038	8.5%
Detroit	2018	6,900,000	8,800,000	1,900,000	27.5%
Sacramento	2018	5,750,000	6,320,000	570,000	9.9%
Charlotte Observer	2019	6,200,000	4,500,000	-1,700,000	-27.4%
Indianapolis	2019	4,409,434	3,973,647	-435,787	-9.9%
Los Angeles Times	2019	35,235,633	35,973,781	738,148	2.1%
Newsday	2019	4,657,332	4,471,008	-186,324	-4.0%
TOTAL for respondents		116,248,496	131,373,302	15,124,806	13.0%

Fourteen participants provided figures for all average monthly visitors before Table Stakes and in fall 2019.

As Table 6 shows, several of the papers increased unique visitors from within their local markets, which can be important to driving digital subscription growth.

Table 6. Average Monthly In-Market Unique Visitors

Unique visitors from direct market area

Organization	Cohort	Average in the 12 months preceding Table Stakes	Average monthly, fall 2019	Total change	% change
Miami	2016	1,229,289	1,725,000	495,711	40.3%
Minneapolis	2016	3,094,683	3,275,355	180,672	5.8%
Philadelphia	2016	2,755,817	2,623,120	-132,697	-4.8%
BANG (San Jose)	2017	2,300,000	2,500,000	200,000	8.7%
Houston	2017	366,000	1,100,000	734,000	200.5%
Milwaukee	2017	947,706	1,244,964	297,258	31.4%
Seattle	2017	2,803,624	3,170,038	366,414	13.1%
Detroit	2018	2,000,000	2,400,000	400,000	20.0%
Omaha	2018	861,762	881,166	19,404	2.3%
Sacramento	2018	1,400,000	1,200,383	-199,617	-14.3%
Charlotte Observer	2019	1,300,000	1,200,000	-100,000	-7.7%
Los Angeles Times	2019	7,187,950	9,234,032	2,046,082	28.5%
Newsday	2019	1,863,155	1,941,122	77,967	4.2%
TOTAL for respondents		28,369,303	33,347,825	4,978,522	17.5%

Thirteen participants provided figures for all average monthly visitors before Table Stakes and in fall 2019. Omaha's second figure is as of January 2019.

Revenue Diversification: In addition to increasing revenues from new digital subscriptions, several newspapers reported bringing in new advertising dollars from their Table Stakes–related initiatives:

- Indianapolis generated \$99,000 in new advertising last year from three new products, including its [“Friday Night Live”](#) sports show.
- Los Angeles’ [“Coast to Coast”](#) a tasting event with celebrity chefs at Union Square Park in New York last year received \$200,000 from a sponsor and generated added revenue of \$100,000.
- Miami’s real estate newsletter, [Re/Source Miami](#), generated more than \$100,000 in new ad dollars last year.
- Minneapolis grew its events revenue from \$330,000 in 2016 to \$1.5 million by fall 2019.
- Newsday attracted \$455,000 in new ad revenue from five new initiatives in 2019 including a [50PlusExpo](#) focused on finance, health and other wellness needs.
- Philadelphia tripled annual revenue from branded content and grew the number of native advertising accounts from 13 in 2016 to 95 in 2019.

Newspapers also benefited from new philanthropic dollars. Six papers reported successfully increasing revenue from foundations to support their journalism. One of them, the Seattle

Times, has raised more than \$700,000 from foundations and local citizens for its [Investigative Journalism Fund](#).

Capability Shifts

Targeting content and digital enterprise: Gains in capabilities, including better use of audience data to guide work and improved collaboration between news and business staffs, were driven in large part by Table Stakes #1, the challenge to segment and serve multiple audiences with targeted content.

For their performance goals, several newspapers developed new products and events related to passion topics such as sports and food where they felt they already had a competitive advantage. Others focused on improving coverage of defining issues in their communities such as housing shortages, real estate prices, environmental issues and politics.

The Los Angeles Times, for example, built a performance challenge around increasing coverage of two high-interest topics in their state—climate and environment, and housing and homelessness—and expanded their digital subscriptions by more than double the number they hoped to grow.

“...the traditional idea of a ‘successful’ piece of journalism is changing. It’s no longer just something that wins a Pulitzer or gets on A1. There are many different types of stories that matter.”—Kimi Yoshino, senior deputy managing editor, Los Angeles Times.

The Milwaukee Sentinel newsroom redefined itself from “a newsroom based on newspaper sections to mini sites within our enterprise focused on audience groups and led by an accountable CEO.” One beat changed from “Covering startups and their funders” to “How young people are interacting with the economy.”

Increased audience and digital-first focus also had a significant impact on watchdog projects and other enterprise coverage. Editors see their ability to produce in-depth coverage on serious issues as a key competitive advantage in their markets and an important catalyst for gaining digital subscribers.

The Charlotte Observer designed one of its performance challenges specifically to build its capability to produce high-impact stories that could drive the company’s business goals.

Investigative projects by the Star Tribune and the Philadelphia Inquirer that became [Pulitzer Prize finalists](#) last year were conceived and structured to capitalize on digital audiences, including mobile users. The same was true of Newsday’s [Long Island Divided](#) project that investigated racial discrimination by real estate agents. The project attracted 250 new digital subscribers.

To focus on high-value coverage, many newspapers reduced the number of routine or obligatory stories they produced. The Milwaukee Sentinel gained widespread attention for its [“stop doing”](#) list, which includes a guiding set of questions to help ensure its news staff is devoted to work that audiences value. Editors said the list “came out of a knock-down, drag-out Table Stakes

team meeting. In order to accomplish most of the Table Stakes, we needed more capacity.”

Improved Use of Digital and Social Platforms: Newspapers in all four cohorts reported progress on at least six of the seven core Table Stakes competencies, according to self-assessments available for 14 of the 16 newspapers used to identify and close shortfalls. Teams took the self-assessments called “gap quizzes” at the start of their training and again nine to 29 months later. The complete gap quiz questionnaire is in the Appendix of this report.

Collectively, as Table 7 shows, the newspapers made the most progress on Table Stakes #2, the ability to publish on platforms used by their targeted audiences, according to averages of gap quiz scores for the 14 newspapers.

Improvement in Table Stakes #3, involving the ability to plan and publish online content continuously, ranked fourth in the same chart but highest or second highest in averages of gap scores for two of the four cohorts, as seen in Table 8.

These results were reflected anecdotally as well.

Table 7. Gap quiz progress rankings

Newspapers’ ability to publish on platforms used by their target audiences showed most improvement of seven Table Stakes

Tables Stakes #	RANK
1. Serve targeted audiences with targeted content	2
2. Publish on the platforms used by your targeted audiences	1
3. Produce and publish continuously to match your audiences’ lives	4
4. Funnel occasional users into habitual, valuable and paying loyalists	3
5. Mobilize your entire enterprise around growing and diversifying revenue from the audiences you build	5
6. Partner to expand your capacity and capabilities at lower and more flexible cost	6
7. Use the “mini-publisher” concept to drive audience growth, revenue and profitability within targeted audiences and platforms	7

Ranked by averaging the differences in scores of gap quiz self-assessments that 14 metros took at the start of the program and in fall 2019. (See Appendix page 42 for full explanation of gap quiz methodology and page 39 scores from individual newspapers.) Note: This table is a duplicate of Table 1 in the Executive Summary.

Table 8. Gap quiz progress rankings, by cohort

Table Stakes #	Cohort 1	Cohort 2	Cohort 3	Cohort 4
1. Serve targeted audiences with targeted content	1	2	4	2
2. Publish on the platforms used by your targeted audiences	3	1	5	4
3. Produce and publish continuously to match your audiences' lives	2	4	1	5
4. Funnel occasional users into habitual, valuable and paying loyalists	4	3	7	1
5. Mobilize your entire enterprise around growing and diversifying revenue from the audiences you build	6	5	3	3
6. Partner to expand your capacity and capabilities at lower and more flexible cost	5	7	2	7
7. Use the "mini-publisher" concept to drive audience growth, revenue and profitability within targeted audiences and platforms	7	6	6	6

Ranked by averaging across each cohort the difference in scores of gap quiz self-assessments that 14 metros took at the start of the program and in fall 2019. (See Appendix page 42 for full explanation of gap quiz methodology and page 39 scores from individual newspapers.)

All 16 news organizations reported developing at least some new skill sets and workflows to help them increasingly prioritize digital content over print. Among the changes: They recast jobs, upgraded digital skills through hiring and training, reorganized teams and workflows, refocused editorial meetings on digital-first coverage, adopted new tech tools and increased their use of analytics to be able to create, deliver and promote content for websites, social media and other platforms including newsletters, video and podcasts.

To engage new audiences and revenue they used a variety of platforms: The Detroit Free Press created [Woodward 248](#), a digital newsletter aimed at a suburban community. Indianapolis developed ["Friday Night Live,"](#) sports show that streams on Facebook, YouTube and Twitter as well as on its website. Newsday created [Island Ice](#) a podcast for fans of the Islanders hockey team.

Increase in Innovation and Marketing by Newsrooms: The encouragement and freedom to test new ideas and the discipline to measure results boosted the confidence and wherewithal of participating newsrooms to become centers of change in their organizations.

Editors and reporters proposed and developed new products, services, partnerships and events

to increase audience engagement, drive digital subscriptions and add revenue. At the Philadelphia Inquirer, the top editor has been put in charge of his company's events strategy with the goal of building a \$5 million events business by 2024.

Along with other general management capabilities, reporters and editors in these newsrooms improved their marketing and other audience development skills to drive digital subscriptions and necessary revenue. Gains often came slowly; one or two new digital subscriptions influenced by a story or newsletter and associated subscription promotions can be considered a lot.

Occasionally, papers attracted dozens or even hundreds of new digital subscribers with sustained, high-profile coverage and calls to action.

The Seattle Times, for example, reported getting hundreds of new digital subscriptions in 2018 from changing its publishing strategy for a [major enterprise project on orca whales](#). Through 2019, continued reporting on the topic influenced more than 2,200 new digital and print subscriptions, according Danny Gawlowski, assistant managing editor.

Rick Hirsch, the Miami Herald's managing editor, said his paper got a "massive" boost in digital subscriptions tied to last year's coverage of the Jeffrey Epstein scandal:

"The newsroom heavily pushed a subscription offer tied to reporter Julie K. Brown, used a background card to explain the reporting and asked people to support the investigative work."

The paper also promoted subscriptions on email and social sites.

Charlotte developed a "playbook" providing a rundown of how to promote its major enterprise stories on multiple platforms including newsletters, in the newscast of its TV partner and in Facebook ads.

"We created a 'playbook' to follow on each piece that we'll adapt for shorter-term enterprise, too—pulling together audience/marketing resources and assistance from the social media team to put our best work in front of potential readers. The playbook gives us a road map to maximize reach. As a result our subscription conversions from our best journalism generally outweigh the revenue of page views. In addition, all of our best work is now marketed and shaped by an interdivisional team instead of one reporter, one editor."—Sherry Chisenhall, Charlotte Observer executive editor

Shifts in Culture: Table Stakes provided the newspapers with a methodology and structure to increase their commitment to becoming outcome-focused, digital-first and collaborative across their organizations. By the end of their formal year in the program, more than half of the papers had already built digital capabilities among a critical mass of staff and had news and business staff members working together on performance goals, according to reflections by coaches Smith, Quentin Hope and Charlie Baum. (See Appendix page 40.) Since then, the commitment to the seven core Table Stakes has continued to grow.

Following are excerpts from their responses to the question:

Has the Table Stakes' focus on performance-driven change and digital-first permeated through your organization and, if so, how?

Cohort 1

Dallas: “Yes and no. Everyone in the organization is on the same page when it comes to an audience-first strategy; data-informed decision-making is baked into our culture, and the full newsroom is comfortable with audience metrics. There are still resource struggles with the demands of print that at times keep us from our full digital potential—but that is not necessarily the wrong course given our print audience demands and revenue, as long as we keep up the digital innovation and growth that we need. And it is certainly expected that all goals will be SMART goals, that our experiments will be focus[ed] on outcomes rather than activities—but that does not mean that everyone is creating these goals for themselves.”

Minnesota: “Acceptance around those concepts has permeated much of the newsroom. But actual performance is and will be a constant challenge—as we move people into new roles or set new goals, we coach for change. As departments grapple with things like headlines and workflow, we are providing them one-on-one counseling. And we are hiring new people, most of whom are digitally savvy but need to find a way to integrate with our newsroom digital culture. As a result, more of our staff is PUSHING us to be more digital than ever before. Which means the culture is changing.”

Philadelphia: “Much work remains on the business side, but the cohesive approach to change management yielded through TS has allowed us to become much more performance driven than many of our non-TS peers. We are much more disciplined at measuring our performance and aggressively altering our collective strategies when targeted outcomes become challenged.”

Miami: “Yes—not on all things, but on many things. We worked hand-in-hand with advertising on building Re/Source Miami. It's played a crucial role in our approach to our investigative lab.”

Cohort 2

BANG: “The newsroom has responded quite well to our goal-setting process.”

Houston: “Our organization nearly completely turned over (leadership and members of the core Table Stakes team) since our session, but the new leadership team and newsroom stakeholders are being versed in performance-driven challenges/goals and SMART goals. In early 2019, we set a goal of 101,000 digital subscribers by the end of 2021 and other audience goals.”

Milwaukee: “Digital-first, in both timing and format, continues to be our focus in Milwaukee. Every morning we have discussions around who our audience is (including where in the funnel they are), how they're finding the story, where they're finding the story, what time it makes sense to publish, etc. We use the Table Stakes framework when we set digital goals for the newsroom and our updated challenge statement guides much of our digital strategy. We also apply the tools of Table Stakes—challenge statement, from/to, assumptions, power/opinion matrix, SMART goals, focusing on outcomes not processes—when we launch new initiatives.”

Seattle: “Yes. We have developed a new focus throughout the newsroom and company, a drive towards digital subscriptions and a sustainable business model. We have continued to build on the foundation built by Table Stakes to make continuous progress towards this goal.”

Cohort 3

Detroit: “Table Stakes helped us to move faster and plan better for digital. We set output and outcome goals and plan digital (especially mobile) before anything. The seven core table stakes are permeating throughout the newsroom. The fewer-things mission is part of our ethos now. The performance-driven change strategies are taking more time, as we apply them to new projects across the newsroom.”

Sacramento: “We now know how much traffic from stories comes from within our market and from subscribers, and whether a particular story helped lead a reader to subscribe. Reporters have access to their individual data and increasingly are comfortable with measuring their success that way, even as they continue to reach for overall page view goals. Data and discussion of audience interests drive story selection much of the time. An increasing number of foundation-supported journalists now work in our newsroom, affiliated with ProPublica, Report for America and others.”

Cohort 4

Charlotte: “I wouldn't say ‘permeated’ yet through the organization, but certainly through the newsroom leadership team. This is a learning process that will stretch well beyond a year, but the right senior leaders are far more versed in outcome-based goals and how they drive top-level mission and objectives.”

Newsday: “We have made large strides but not permeated throughout.”

Los Angeles: “Managers are more focused on setting goals and asking questions about how we measure success. It hasn't fully permeated, but we are on our way. We have also started putting up dashboards throughout the newsroom showing our digital subscription goals—as well as daily top converting stories.”

Collaboration and Broader Impacts

Collaboration and peer-to-peer learning have been key components of the Table Stakes program. The sharing of performance data and other insights has helped accelerate the pace of digital change for participants and other news organizations throughout the industry.

The Star Tribune helped the Inquirer develop a [Sunday print good news section](#) patterned after its own section. Content from both sections has proved popular with online readers and sparked product extensions including speaker series. In northern California, the Sacramento Bee and Bay Area News Group began sharing political and sports coverage. Traditionally competitors, the two papers [cited as a catalyst](#) Table Stakes #6: “Partner to expand your capacity and capabilities at lower and more flexible costs.” In North Carolina, the Charlotte Observer has become part of a 22-newspaper collaborative producing [watchdog coverage](#).

Lessons learned by the metro newspapers, as well as by news organizations in other iterations of the program, have been shared throughout the industry, influencing the strategies and work of Gannett, McClatchy, Gatehouse and other media companies. The growing emphasis on digital subscriptions over page views is an example.

“The sharing of actionable data seems to be at an all-time high, particularly as it relates to the collective push for digital subscriptions. The sharing of analytics tied to digital subscription conversion strategies is a sterling example of the value of Table Stakes collaboration.” —Stan Wischnowski, executive editor and senior vice president, Philadelphia Inquirer

Funding for the Knight-Lenfest Local News Transformation project has supported creation of a [paperback Table Stakes manual](#), the creation and operation of [BetterNews.org](#), coverage by Kristin Hare at Poynter and other means to increase attention to best practices emanating from the program. Newspapers from Dallas, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, Philadelphia, Seattle and elsewhere have been showcased nationally as leaders in various aspects of digital transformation.

Table Stakes introduced a generation of news leaders to the traditional marketing “[funnel](#)” to describe how to convert occasional readers into paying subscribers. Last year, the Table Stakes lexicon started formally spreading overseas with a new [version of the program](#) for newspapers in Europe.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The performance and capability gains at these 16 papers have been considerable and important. The organizations have grown local audiences, launched new products, improved their journalism for multiple platforms and increased their digital subscriptions and revenues. They’ve developed new capabilities, brought audience data into routine use, improved digital skills, developed an “audience funnel” mindset and established collaborative teams to manage product development. It hasn’t been all smooth sailing. Some efforts didn’t yield the hoped-for results. But by using the program methodology participants gained the knowhow to retool initiatives and goals and reshape the efforts of their staffs to try to achieve them. The individual skills and organizational capabilities they’ve developed have given them a pathway forward.

“TS gave us the opportunity and confidence to identify problems, set about to map out goals and strategies and then to lead through change. In just a few years, we have developed more sophistication and more confidence about our ability to approach these challenges. Yet with the humility required in such a disruptive environment.”—Suki Dardarian, managing editor, Minneapolis Star Tribune

Recommendations

Funders and implementers may want to address the following aspects of the program in the future:

Get buy-in from the top to ensure core team consistency: Heavy turnover, open positions and other factors have led to inconsistent participation by core team members at some newspapers, particularly by business-side leaders. Seek commitments from publishers that at least one senior business-side leader will maintain active participation and share responsibility for progress on the performance goals. The participation and outcomes may still be largely newsroom centric, but the changes sought should be of organization-wide import.

Develop a small set of metrics and collect them at regular intervals: As noted at the beginning of this report, some standardized reporting of digital engagement, subscriptions and revenues would make it easier for funders, coaches and other stakeholders to evaluate the program's impact at individual sites and across cohorts, and perhaps allow for deeper analysis that could yield valuable learnings. Perhaps partner with API's Metrics for News to develop a database that could be used for evaluation and other research.

Similarly, have participants take the gap quizzes at regular intervals: Ideally, these capability quizzes would be taken no fewer than two times, once at the start of the program year and again at the end. This would help the organizations assess their progress and needs, and also provide coaches with more insight about capabilities gained or otherwise. These quizzes could also be built into alumni gatherings for continued assessment both for the organizations and for funders and implementers.

Have the coaches provide a progress evaluation at the end of each cohort year: This would be similar to the coaches' assessment on pages 40-41 of this report but would be based on the small set of baseline metrics recommended above, gap quiz progress results and coaches' knowledge of the organizations.

Set and share expectations for the metros about continuity/alumni activities/resources: Will the organizations be expected/encouraged to continue setting or refining performance challenges after the formal program year ends? What can they expect from coaches/API/Lenfest/others in terms of guidance and resources? What help do they need/want to continue peer-to-peer learning/collaborations, etc.?

Appendix

The 16 Metros at a Glance

The following 16 pages summarize each newspaper's challenges and results.

Cohort 1, 2016

Dallas Morning News

Vision

“The Dallas Morning News will transform from a newspaper company into builders of valued and valuable audiences. We will meet them where they are and be responsive to their interests and needs. We will work together to maximize the value of each audience member to our company.”

Performance Challenges

- Increase digital talent.
- Improve technology and workflow.
- Grow digital subscriptions and revenues. (Specific goals rebooted from “audience” to “subscriptions” in 2018.)

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Reorganized teams and workflows; increased analytics use in content decisions; introduced A/B headline testing and other feedback tools; filled gaps with training and hiring; defined audience growth goals for reporters and others.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Grew digital subscriptions from 7,000 after meter launch in 2016 to more than 34,000 by fall 2019.
- Grew digital revenues by 220 percent since 2016.
- Grew newsletter subscribers to 450,000, with average open rate of 34 percent.

Impact on organization

“Having the Table Stakes program help guide us and keep us focused on narrowly focused SMART goals that help drive meaningful results has been a real boon in our digital transformation over the past four years. The initial program helped a team of leaders level up quickly and drive change throughout the organization; looking back at where we were in 2014, you almost don't recognize it as the same newsroom. Having the continuity program has helped a new generation of digital change agents here become familiar with best practices and meet like-minded peers throughout the industry—a critical ingredient to the kind of cooperation we need to help one another grow.”—Nicole Stockdale, digital strategy editor

In the News

[The Dallas Morning News found a loyal audience when it started covering – wait for it – the weather](#)

[How the Dallas Morning News turned a traffic afterthought into a digital subscription conversion opportunity](#)

[Can your whole newsroom work together on headlines?](#)

[How the Dallas Morning News uses push notifications to grow audience](#)

Miami Herald

Vision for Miami.com

“Miami.com will transform itself from a declining “pedestrian” entertainment website into a vibrant community for locals and tourists who want to stay socially fit in Miami through content that connects them and unique experiences that empower them. The culture of Miami.com—from its brand manager to its content producers—will be encompassed by entrepreneurship.”

Performance Challenges

- Reinvent Miami.com entertainment site.
- Launch a mini-publisher approach to a food vertical (pivoted to a real estate vertical in 2019, called Re/Source Miami).
- Create a Spanglish sports franchise to grow/serve out-of-market traffic.
- Start gateway Miami site for Spanish speakers acclimating to South Florida. (Rebooted goal to create Acceso Miami channel on ElnuevoHerald.com.)

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Created mini-publisher teams; added digital team for breaking news; rewrote job descriptions for online producers to create “growth editors”; increased use of analytics; set digital performance goals; provided training in search engine optimization, headlines and other skills.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Grew digital-only subscriptions from 11,000 in 2016 to 23,000 by fall 2019. (Includes Sports Pass.)
- Grew average monthly unique visitors by 4.1 million during that same period, with in-market uniques increasing by 496,000.
- Grew Miami.com page views from 175,000 per month to as much as 1 million per month.
- [Re/Source Miami](#) real estate newsletter generated more than \$100,000 in new ad dollars in 2019.
- Acceso Miami has evolved as a successful channel on ElnuevoHerald.com and a big traffic driver, growing from zero to regularly getting 500,000 page views per month.

Impact on Organization

“These challenges—and entire Table Stakes process—have given our newsroom many of the project management and accountability tools we lacked in order to do real experimentation in digital news—creating measurable goals, creating accountability for meeting them. It’s given us a common language and methodology for working internally and externally in our own organization and with partners. It gave us the building blocks we needed to launch (as we did this week) fund raising for an investigative reporting lab—in partnership with marketing and audience.”—Rick Hirsch, managing editor

In the News

[How The Miami Herald is getting to know its audience again](#)

[How recasting the “online producer” job helped the Miami Herald focus on audience and mission](#)

Minneapolis Star Tribune

Vision

“The Star Tribune newsroom will transform its structures, practices and capabilities to serve and engage our audience. We will be Minnesota’s go-to source of news and information on every platform, driving more people and businesses to pay for our journalism.”

Performance Challenges

- Grow audience engagement (in 2018 rebooted to explicit focus on digital subscriptions incorporating social and mobile engagement goals).
- Grow social and mobile engagement.
- Improve technology and workflows.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

New set of digital goals for the newsroom; new beats and teams; changes in workflows/practices/Increased use of analytic/measurement tools; digital focus in meetings; new tech and audience-development positions including social leaders in each news department; creation of digital story forms wiki.

Notable Results

- Doubled digital-only subscriptions to 46,723 by fall 2019 from 20,511 in 2016. Added about 21,000 Sunday print-plus-digital subscribers.
- Grew average number of monthly unique visitors by 420,000 during that same period.
- Increased events revenue from \$330,000 to more than \$1.4 million.

Impact on Organization

“We helped prepare the newsroom and the company to see its way to take on an ambitious digital subscription goal for the company. And more than ever, the staff is invested in that goal and committed to achieving it. In so many ways, it has energized our newsroom to provide critical momentum to achieve those goals. It has united us with a sense of mission that is appropriately focused on our audience and on our company, not just a race for eyeballs or thin metrics. Table Stakes gave us the opportunity and confidence to identify problems, set about to map out goals and strategies and then to lead through change. In just a few years, we have developed more sophistication and more confidence about our ability to approach these challenges. Yet with the humility required in such a disruptive environment.” —Suki Dardarian, managing editor

In the News

[At the Minneapolis Star Tribune, a newsroom that’s gone from surviving to thriving](#)

Philadelphia Inquirer (also participated in Cohort 2)

Vision

“To be the indispensable, self-sustaining source for news, information and connectedness in Philadelphia and the region with great journalism that serves, reflects and engages diverse audiences on all platforms.”

Performance Challenges

- Merge newsrooms to increase digital transformation.
- Increase digital subscriptions.
- Increase native advertising.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Totally reorganized with new, performance-driven teams and workflows; upgraded digital skill sets through training and hiring; added and subtracted coverage beats; increased data use in decision-making; increased collaboration with advertising. Fall 2019 began integrating 29 non-journalists from company product and technology department into newsroom.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Grew digital-only subscriptions from about 16,000 before Table Stakes participation to 33,000 by fall 2019.
- Increased the average number of print subscribers with digital access from 59,000 to 112,000 during the same period.
- Grew digital circulation monthly revenue by 89 percent during the same period.
- Tripled annual revenue from branded content; grew from 13 native advertising accounts in 2016 to 95 accounts in 2019.

Impact on Organization

“At a time when it is critical for news organizations to transform their business models, the impacts of these three have been profound. Our one-newsroom strategy has allowed us to become more nimble, entrepreneurial and innovative. With a laser-focus on reader revenue, our 225-plus journalists are more focused on helping our company reach its subscription goals. One newsroom has allowed us to make a critical pivot to a primary brand (the Inquirer) providing a high degree of brand clarity and less confusion in the marketplace of readers and advertisers alike. Our digital subscription and native advertising challenges allowed us to pivot more aggressively toward much-needed revenue streams at a time that print advertising has shown faster than expected decline. Perhaps most importantly the combination of these three challenges has put our company in a much stronger position to transform into a digital-first news organization much more aligned with our audiences and their changing news consumption needs.” —Stan Wischnowski, executive editor and senior vice president

In the News

[How The Philadelphia Inquirer launched a newsroom team to grow its audience](#)

[Three years into nonprofit ownership, The Philadelphia Inquirer is still trying to chart its future](#)

Cohort 2, 2017

Bay Area News Group (BANG)

Vision

“The Bay Area News Group will transform from a fragmented group of newsrooms and other departments focusing separately on legacy products to a unified news organization, producing content and products to engage valuable, targeted audiences and replace lost revenue.”

Performance Challenges

- Reorganize to engage and serve audiences/grow engagement and digital subscriptions goal.
- Define and focus on key topics.
- Launch niche products.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Reorganized newsroom beats and workflows; adopted new metrics; set engagement and conversion goals for reporters; collaborated with other news organizations; built content guides and checklists for staff.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Grew digital subs by 700 percent from 2,300 before Table Stakes to 18,400 by fall 2019.
- Focus on housing, pets, entertainment, crime and other key topics helped drive page views and monthly users.
- Collaborated with the Seattle Times on Pac 12 coverage and with Sacramento Bee on 49ers and Statehouse news.

Impact on Organization

“From top to bottom the focus has shifted from driving audience to driving audience that is likely to subscribe by focusing our efforts on content that attracts readers to the top of the funnel, engages them and provides ongoing value they are willing to pay for.”—Randall Keith, managing editor

In the News

[How the Bay Area News Group built content guides and checklists to train staff and reach new audiences](#)

[Forget competition: How two traditional competitors are working together to grow audience](#)

Houston Chronicle

Vision

“Increasing paid digital subscribers and encouraging existing subscribers to use their digital platforms is a top priority for the Hearst Newspaper Group.”

Performance Challenges

- Grow digital subscriptions.
- Grow newsletter portfolio and verticals.
- Expand use of analytics and audience.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Staff realignment including development of a newsletter team; new workflows; audience goals for teams; better use of metrics; improved newsletter functionality; training in packaging, social listening and daily content creation and posting; restructuring at corporate level to focus on digital subscriber engagement and acquisition and retention.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Increased digital subscriptions from 14,000 before Table Stakes to 26,000 by Fall 2019.
- Grew unique visitors from 1 million to 3.5 million and tripled monthly local unique users to 1.1 million during that same period.
- Grew the number of newsletters from 10 in Nov. 2017 to 19 by Fall 2019. A morning report newsletter grew from 1,000 subscribers in January 2018 to 20,000 in August 2018.

Impact on Organization

“The newsletter goal helped Hearst realize the potential of newsletters as a platform and invest in a newsletter product manager, new platform, strategies, metrics and local resources and teams. In early 2019 Hearst invested in a digital subscription consumer revenue/marketing team.” —Rachael Gleason, senior manager of audience/engagement for Hearst newspapers in Texas

In the News

[‘The key is ... getting them addicted to our content’: At ASNE, sharing lessons from Table Stakes](#)

Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Vision

“The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel will transform into a digital storytelling powerhouse that reaches audiences where they are and develops new ones, offering a rich multimedia experience that is the rule rather than the exception, and engenders loyalty and new revenue opportunities.”

: Performance Challenges

- Double digital only subscriptions—rebooted in 2018
- Increase engagement through better content
- Expand revenue sources

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Introduced audience-first concepts, made digital the focus of news discussions; increased use of analytics; increased use of alternative story formats; created coaching sessions to improve digital literacy and production skills; made “stop doing” a priority.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Tripled digital-only subscriptions from 13,773 before Table Stakes program to 40,275 by fall 2019.
- Grew average monthly uniques by 400,000 to 4.4 million in the same period.
- Increased revenue from non-traditional sources (fellowships, grants, foundation-funded internships, content sharing, etc.) from \$188,200 before Table Stakes to more than \$350,000 in the first three quarters of 2019.

Impact on organization

“We continue to be a leader in Gannett on digital subscriptions with just over 40K. Our closest rivals are at 34K (Phoenix) and 29K (Indy). In addition to helping us reach our digital subscription goals, it has spurred other Gannett sites to focus on growing digital subscriptions, too. When we began in Table Stakes, page views was still the key metric across Gannett. Our team leader worked hard to get Gannett’s news leaders to pay attention to digital subscriptions and to get the support we needed from other departments outside the newsroom. Growing digital subscriptions is now a major goal for all of Gannett’s sites. Recognizing that we can’t succeed if we’re all siloed off, we now have much better collaboration across the enterprise, including a monthly meeting that brings together the newsroom, marketing, digital sub and local circulation teams. We make sure our goals are aligned and look for ways to help one another. Other Gannett newsrooms are also looking to grow their capacity through fellowships and grants.”—Emily Ristow, director of loyalty and engagement

In the News

[The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel stopped putting every single story on social media and tripled its following](#)

[How the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel focused on prioritizing with a “Stop Doing” list](#)

[How the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel grew Facebook reach 6x in a year](#)

Seattle Times

Vision

“The Seattle Times will dramatically grow subscription revenue by maniacally focusing on audiences, so that we shift our dependence from print-motivated subscribers to digitally motivated subscribers and ultimately mitigate impacts to erosion of our 7-day print business.”

Performance Challenges

- Move to digital-first workflow.
- Increase digital-and-Sunday print subscriptions (retooled in 2018 to absorb third challenge below).
- Produce deeply engaging content.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Developed new digital planning tool and analytics hub; changed workflows; created new roles for staff; created mini-publisher teams; made better use of social, mobile and engagement tools, experiments; created diversity action plan.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Increased digital subscriptions from 33,000 to 44,000 from before Table Stakes to fall 2019. (About 95,000 receive digital-and-Sunday print combo.)
- 96 percent of stories posted first online; posting continually throughout the day on big, breaking stories while preparing enterprise.
- Grew digital-related audience revenue by 50 percent since 2017.
- Increased average monthly uniques by about 700,000 per month from 2017 to 2019.

Impact on Organization

“We are now aligned across the newsroom and the company in our goal of digital subscription growth. We are working more closely and more in sync now than ever before. We have experienced major cultural and operational shifts. This success is evident by our sustained growth in digital subscriptions.” Danny Gawlowski, assistant managing editor

In the News

[How the Seattle Times used a breaking news approach on enterprise reporting](#)

[The Seattle Times is making it everyone’s job to grow digital subscribers](#)

[How the Seattle Times is empowering reporters to drive subscriber growth](#)

Cohort 3, 2018

Detroit Free Press

Vision

“The Detroit Free Press will dramatically shift its newsroom resources, workflow, planning process and culture to ensure our content is targeted toward identified audiences, to reach them where they are, when they want it, with the end goal of growing the Free Press’ digital footprint.”

Performance Challenges

- Develop new geographic product.
- Grow digital “footprint.”
- Develop new revenues.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Audience/digital-first planning; more experimentation/spaces for design-do; trained for better digital storytelling, better use of data; changed approach to major projects; set output and outcome goals; cultivated a “fewer things” mission/approach.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Grew average monthly unique visitors from 6.9 million to 8.8 million, a 28 percent increase from 2017 to fall 2019.
- Created newsletter and other content for populous Woodward community. Newsletter had 6,200 subscribers by fall 2019, an open rate of 36 percent and a click-through rate of 14.5 percent.
- Increased philanthropic and sponsorship revenue from \$25,000 in 2017 to more than \$140,000 in 2019.

Impact on Organization

“Table Stakes helped us to create spaces to test, learn and test again. This might be the biggest effect of the program. Our spaces for design/do were small at first, but they're growing. It's most apparent in our geographic coverage challenge, where editors learned to tell local stories that resonated broadly and [to] curate a local newsletter for maximum impact. And it's becoming apparent in the digital story-forms effort, where a group of 23 core doers are trying to write in ways that are easier for readers to digest. The revenue effort has led to a stronger relationship with Michigan.com marketing and advertising departments, which has now sold a sponsorship to our morning Alexa/Google audio briefing—another place for experimentation.”—Jewel Gopwani, senior editor, engagement and events

In the News

[The Detroit Free Press reinvented how it does projects and saw a boost in digital engagement](#)
[Lessons from the ‘Table Stakes’ innovation initiative](#)

Omaha World-Herald

Vision

“The World-Herald will place great journalism at the center of its digital-age business strategy through informed newsroom decision-making, strong partnerships with circulation, marketing, advertising and IT and fast-paced experiments—all targeting key audiences with content they find worth paying for.”

Performance Challenges

- Increase digital subscriptions and engagement.
- Strategically approach food coverage with audience and profit goals.
- Increase unique visitors via use of data and targeted audiences

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Increased online training/proficiency of staff; shifted to digital-first focus in meetings; published stories online when ready; headline training/focus; better use of analytics/development of a data dashboard measuring visitors and engagement time with stories per reporter; stopped reporting on topics/stories that had little engagement.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Digital subscriptions grew from 6,028 before Table Stakes to 17,408 by fall 2019.
- Omaha Dines newsletter subscriber base grew from 11,065 in January 2018 to 13,374 in December 2018.
- Grew in-market average monthly uniques by about 20,000 from April 2018 to January 2019.

In the News

[Omaha World-Herald starts business newsletter](#)

Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Vision

“Pittsburgh has three rivers. Two of those rivers—the Allegheny and the Monongahela—merge at the confluence, Point State Park, to form the Ohio River. The Post-Gazette’s three challenges are quite similar. Two of the three challenges—audience-based transformations and community tapestry—merge together to help create the final challenge, an increase in digital subscriptions.”

Performance Challenges

- Increase in-market share of unique visitors via targeted content.
- Develop events and outreach to build engagement.
- Grow digital subscriptions.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Better use of analytics/goal-setting; training for assistant managing editors; use of digital storytelling coaching and guide; creation of checklist to help planning for multiple platforms; focus on newsletters.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Increased digital-only subscriptions from about 12,000 before Table Stakes to 16,000 by July 2019.
- Grew newsletters from five before Table Stakes to 17 by July 2019.
- Maintained average number of monthly unique visitors despite paywall tightening.

Impact on the Organization:

“I think for the PG (Table Stakes) gave us an actual playbook to follow and actual goals to reach. There were many starts and stops in the past at the PG when it came to digital first, apparently, and nothing stuck with the organization until Table Stakes was introduced. Having a clear path and clear goals made it easier to get the newsroom and other company leaders on board.”—Jim Iovino, former deputy managing editor

In the News

[In Pittsburgh, a print staple is finding new audiences online](#)

Sacramento Bee

Vision

“We are building on our early digital-subscription success by delivering more journalism that readers can’t live without, seeking to support half of newsroom costs with the resulting revenue by March 1, 2020.”

Performance Challenges

- Grow digital subscriptions.
- Identify and develop content for targeted audiences to increase users.
- Use a regional approach among 10 McClatchy West properties to drive loyalty and digital subscriptions.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Improved communication and sharing wins and insights across McClatchy West newsrooms; aligned efforts between McClatchy corporate and local newsrooms on digital conversion goals; improved use of analytics and goal setting for reporters and other staff; measured conversion rates for stories; employed sprint methodology; collaborated with other news organizations.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Grew digital-only subscriptions from 12,766 before Table Stakes to 23,608 by fall 2019. (Need 25,000 to meet the vision goal noted above.)
- Doubled the number of users hitting paywall from 76,000 to 150,000 per month.
- Increased digital revenues by more than \$230,000 over two years since starting Table Stakes.

Impact on Organization

“We’ve empowered our newsroom to contribute to digital subscription growth and are measuring subscriptions regularly. Our ultimate goal is to fully sustain newsroom operations with digital subscription revenue.”—Amy Chance, senior editor

In the News

[Forget competition. How two traditional competitors are working together to grow audience](#)

[How the Sacramento Bee used ‘sprints’ to drive digital subscriptions](#)

Cohort 4, 2019

Charlotte

Vision

“By fiercely focusing on our audience funnel and upping our internal digital capabilities and literacy, we will double our net digital-only subscriptions.”

Performance Challenges

- Our best journalism will be core to our business future.
- Double our net digital-only subscriptions.
- Reconnect news and advertising departments to leverage content and platforms.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Use of analytics; better setting measurable goals; focus on reader revenue instead of page views; improved business literacy among leaders; hiring of talent; development of playbook for initiatives.

Notable Results by December 2019

- Grew digital-only subscriptions from 10,794 before Table Stakes to 14,504 by December 2019.
- Published six high-impact enterprise pieces or series.
- Identified content topics that serve niche audiences and experimented with strategies to target those readers.

Impact on Organization

“Dramatic acceleration of digital subscriptions vs. our pace in early 2019. Greatly improved skills at setting measurable outcomes for our goals, and a refocusing in the newsroom on reader revenue instead of page views. Business literacy has increased significantly in the news leadership team.”—Sherrie Chisenhall, executive editor

In the News

Team’s possible “win” idea for BetterNews.org: Build a playbook that replicates how we publish and market our most impactful journalism, giving every editor a roadmap on critical steps and who can help at each stage.

Indianapolis Star

Vision

“We will aggressively grow digital subscriptions by creating interesting content for our target audiences. Our focus will be on providing value and relevance and on converting our target audiences into active and loyal subscribers.”

Performance Challenges

- Increase digital subscriptions.
- Improve mobile experience to grow loyal readers and subscribers.
- Expand audience reach and revenue generation through original multimedia content.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Improved use of analytics; provided training and checklists for readying stories for mobile; built multimedia playbook; expanded stop-doing list; created audience lab; improved partnerships with marketing and sales; improved budgeting and workflow.

Notable Results by late Fall 2019

- Increased digital subscriptions from 20,912 before Table Stakes to 31,478.
- Increased revenues by \$99,000 with new sports programming including [“Friday Night Live”](#) sports show.
- Improved mobile storytelling but seeing flux in baseline of loyal mobile monthly unique visitors. (August 2019: 700,173 + 2.8 percent; September 2019: 628,058 -7.8 percent)

In the News

Team’s possible “win” idea for BetterNews.org: How we earned an extra \$87,000 for the IndyStar newsroom in six months; advertising sold sponsorships to three projects: “Friday Night Live” high school football show, 12 newsletters (sold as a package for a three-month period), “Pit Pass Live,” Indy 500 show.

Los Angeles Times

Vision

“We will engage more and more of the newsroom in producing the journalism that will pay for our future and give it the tools and training to do so.”

Performance Challenges

- Increasing to 300,000 the number of digital subscribers.
- Using food coverage to build a multi-platform offering that generates revenue through digital subscriptions, events and other new products.
- Produce audience-focused coverage on housing and homeless issues, and climate and the environment.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Technology improvements; hiring of newsroom, business, marketing talent; partnering with cable system; reporter beat changes and adoption of coverage themes; creating ownership of initiatives/mini-publisher teams.

Notable Results by Fall 2019

- Food coverage expanded; one event received \$200,000 from a sponsor and generated revenue of \$100,000.
- Grew digital-only subscriptions from 156,215 to 180,000.
- Grew average monthly unique visitors and exceeded digital subscription conversion goals for both housing/homeless and climate/environmental expanded beats.

Impact on Organization

“Managers are more focused on setting goals and asking questions about how we measure success. It hasn’t fully permeated but we are on our way. We have also started putting up dashboards throughout the newsroom showing our digital subscription goals – as well as daily top converting stories.”—Kimi Yoshino, senior deputy managing editor

In the news

[The L.A.Times’ disappointing digital numbers show the game’s not just about drawing in subscribers — it’s about keeping them](#)

Team’s possible “win” idea for BetterNews.org: From Events to Evangelists: Use live events to acquire email addresses and ultimately drive digital subscriptions

Newsday

Vision

“We will engineer a sweeping transformation that allows us to quickly identify revenue development opportunities and maximize their return with smart, innovative strategies and techniques. We will accomplish this by developing a cross-functional team that will accelerate approved new products or partnerships. The team will consider our core audiences, utilizing employee feedback and market research.”

Performance Challenges

- Increase revenue diversification.
- Improve perception and experiences by audiences.
- Increase engagement and digital subscriptions.

Key Changes to Build Digital Skills and Capabilities

Developed “pipeline” for vetting/approving/tracking new product initiatives; created playbooks; created mini-publisher teams; better use of data; hiring for key positions in editorial, product and video.

Notable Results by December 2019

- Launched three new products that generated \$455,000 in new revenue.
- Grew digital subscriptions from 14,425 before Table Stakes to 18,246.
- Exceeded goals for newsletter subscribers from 250,000 to 351,894 and podcast listens from 250 per week to 2,650 per week.

Impact on Organization

“Improvements to revenue and cash flow.”—Patrick Tornabene, vice president audience development and analytics

In the News

Team’s possible “win” idea for BetterNews.org: Newsday is driving digital subscriptions and engagement with targeted newsletters.

Table 9. Rank of Table Stakes in terms of average reduction in gap, by organization

Organization	Time between quizzes	TS 1 audience	TS 2 platform	TS 3 continuous	TS 4 funnel to pay	TS 5 motivate	TS 6 partner	TS 7 mini-pub
Dallas Morning News	29 months	5	2	7	6	4	3	5
Miami Herald	29 months	15	9	9	10	5	4	2.2
Minneapolis Star Tribune	29 months	4	9	7	6	8	11	6
Philadelphia Inquirer	29 months	13	15	13	11	7	13	10
Bay Area News Group	17 months	4	6	7	6	1	2	1
Houston	not available							
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel	17 months	10	8	6	11	6	0	3
Seattle Times	17 months	7	10	5	4	5	1	1
Detroit Free Press	9 months	2.9	4.8	3.6	0.2	4.8	n/a	5
Omaha World-Herald	not available							
Pittsburgh Post-Gazette	10 months	8	11	9	11	6	n/a	9
Sacramento Bee	10 months	4.2	3.6	3.2	1.2	2.6	n/a	1.2
Charlotte Observer	10 months	1.8	4	2.2	3.8	4.5	n/a	2.1
Indianapolis Star	10 months	3.3	4.1	0.9	5.8	4	0.8	2.2
Los Angeles Times	10 months	5.4	3.8	3.5	2.7	0.8	n/a	2.1
Newsday	10 months	-1.6	0.6	-1.2	0.1	0.2	-0.4	-1.6
Average progress across all respondents		5.9	6.5	5.4	5.6	4.2	3.8	3.4
Number of respondents		14	14	14	14	14	9	14
Rank of progress across all seven Table Stakes		2	1	4	3	5	6	7

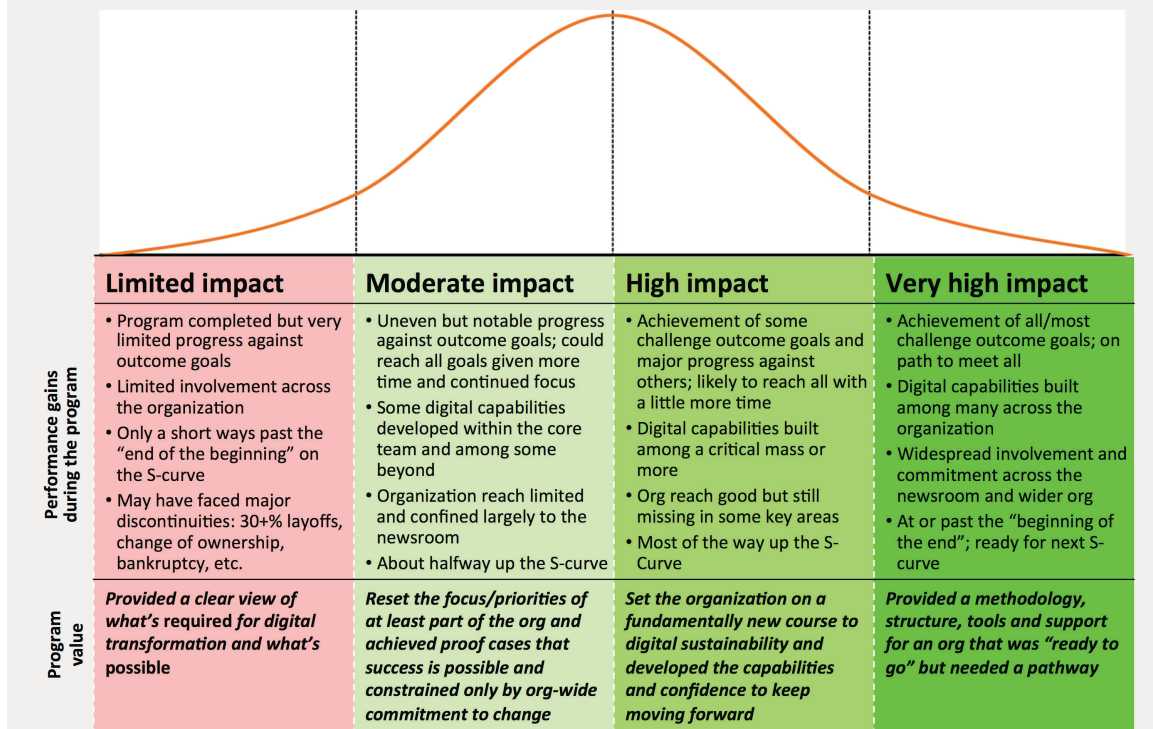
The progress each organization made toward achieving each of the seven Table Stakes. Scores for individual newspapers reflect the difference between their first gap quiz to identify areas needing improvement and a follow-up quiz. The higher the number, the greater the improvement. (Table Stakes categories are restated at bottom of this page.)

The last rows summarize the results, showing the average improvement on each Table Stake and the ranking of those stakes, with 1 being the most improved on average and 7 being the least improved.

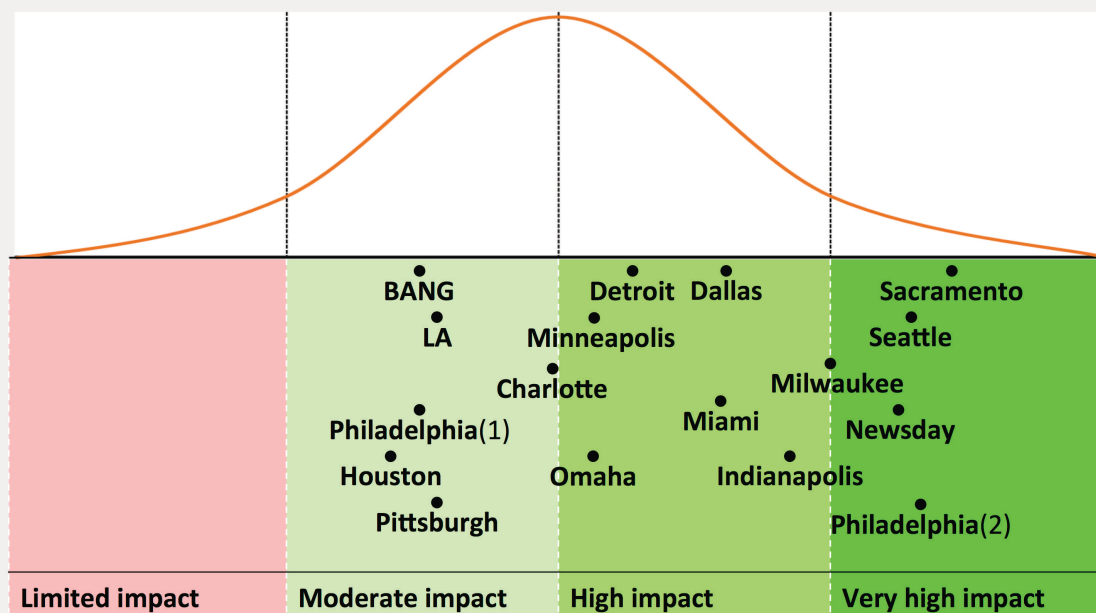
Background: Each organization's staff took a gap quiz at the beginning of the Table Stakes program and again 9 to 29 months later to rate their competencies in the seven Table Stakes. Respondents scored 16 questions for each stake with a 0 or 1, to yield a score of up to 16 on each Table Stake. The lower the score, the fewer "gaps" that needed to be filled so as to achieve the Table Stake.

Seven Core Table Stakes: 1. Serve targeted audiences with targeted content; 2. Publish on the platforms used by your targeted audiences; 3. Produce and publish continuously to match your audiences' lives; 4. Funnel occasional users into habitual, valuable and paying loyalists; 5. Mobilize your entire enterprise around growing and diversifying revenue from the audiences you build; 6. Partner to expand your capacity and capabilities at lower and more flexible cost; 7. Use the "mini-publisher" concept to drive audience growth, revenue and profitability within targeted audiences and platforms

Range of potential program impact

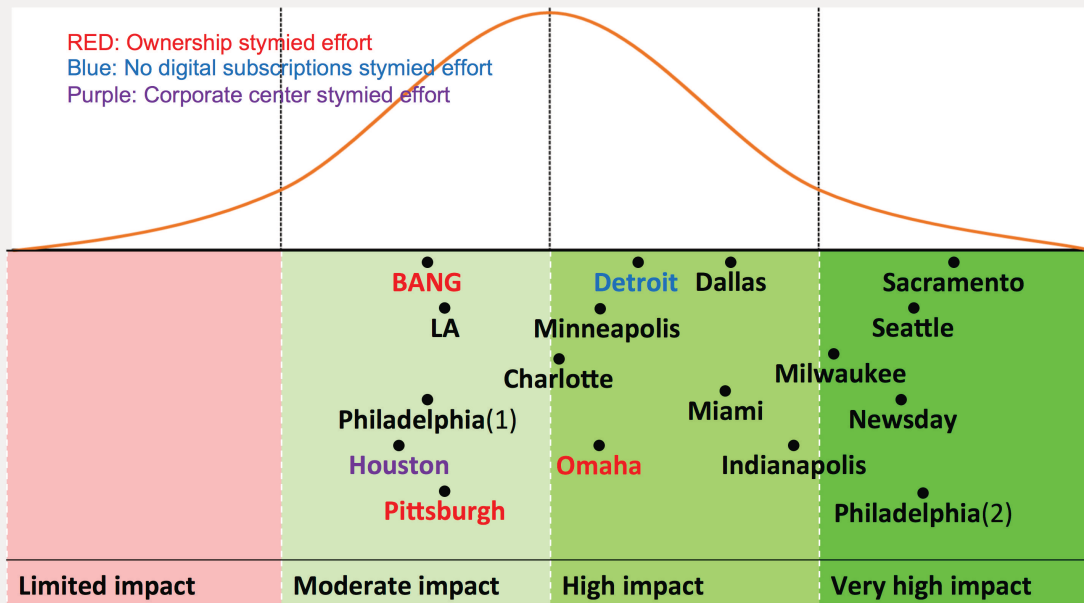


Major Market assessment



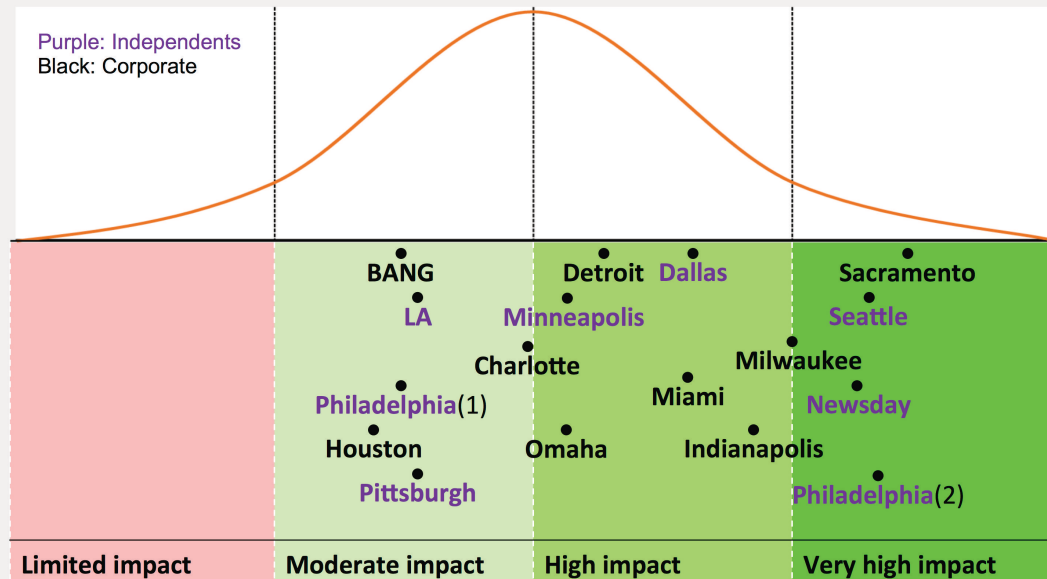
Note: Assessment made on the basis of impression, judgement and recall. Poynter program assessment using the same framework based on review of final updates against three impact factors (achievement of challenge SMART outcome goals, share of the organization on board and contributing, and capabilities developed) and an assessment of types of outcomes achieved and Table Stakes capabilities developed across the portfolio of participants.

Major Market assessment



Note: Assessment made on the basis of impression, judgement and recall. Poynter program assessment using the same framework based on review of final updates against three impact factors (achievement of challenge SMART outcome goals, share of the organization on board and contributing, and capabilities developed) and an assessment of types of outcomes achieved and Table Stakes capabilities developed across the portfolio of participants.

Major Market assessment



Note: Assessment made on the basis of impression, judgement and recall. Poynter program assessment using the same framework based on review of final updates against three impact factors (achievement of challenge SMART outcome goals, share of the organization on board and contributing, and capabilities developed) and an assessment of types of outcomes achieved and Table Stakes capabilities developed across the portfolio of participants.

Gap Quiz Questions

Starting on the next page is the complete gap quiz as answered by the Table Stakes participants. One or more newspaper representatives answered each question per the instructions. Total score for each Table Stake was calculated and then recorded in the tables included in this report. The publications with more than one representative who answered the questions computed the average answer across each question, and then those averages were totaled to arrive at the score for each Table Stake.

The maximum possible score on any stake is 16. The higher the score, the larger the gap between an organization's current digital abilities and where it needs to be.