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There's an old line about the rooster crowing and taking credit for the dawn. Well, when I think about how to *think* about the impact of media, I imagine a newspaper reporter—or a television correspondent or a blogger—who *covers* the crowing rooster, taking credit for the dawn. Assessing causation in all walks of life is often a tough task, you know that. But there's no question that journalism — particularly kick-ass, independent journalism like we try to do at [Mother Jones](#) and others too — has a direct and substantial impact on the world beyond the printed word, the video screen, or tablet. You just have to ask Mitt Romney.

I'm often asked whether the [47 percent video](#) was a decisive factor in the 2012 presidential campaign. In a lot of ways, I'm the wrong person to ask that question. But there's no way to know because you can't run the election without the 47percent video. Pollsters for both campaigns in a very conventional manner will tell you that after we broke that story at *Mother Jones*, Romney saw a loss in support and Obama's lead in the polls expanded—but that within weeks, the numbers settled back into the pre-video pattern.

But I think this is using a rather narrow form of measurement. The 47 percent video was a dominant feature of the news cycle as you can see for at least a week and a half. And following the nominating conventions, both the Romney and Obama campaigns each had nine weeks to implement their very well-conceived and developed general election game plans. They know when they're going to pivot to the right, to the middle; when they're going to run foreign policy ads. They really have a 9-week plan. So for almost 20 percent of that period, the Romney campaign was knocked off its scheduled strategy and forced to respond to an unforeseen event. We can't evaluate what might have happened had the campaign been able to use that period, leading up to the first debate, to do what they intended to do. This is an interesting way of measuring impact. In this instance, it prevented something else from happening, and so we don't know whether that would have succeeded or not. And it could well be the 47 percent video hampered Romney's ability in that key period to persuade independent voters, or even unenthusiastic Obama voters, to back him and change their mind. We just don't know. It made the job harder, what impact that had.

But we do know that this story became part of the overarching narrative and provided millions of people around the globe with a peek into a world that they would otherwise never know – unless they had \$50,000 to pay to get into the fundraiser. To me, whether this influenced an electoral outcome or not, that was impact. We revealed a hidden part of the world to everybody else. You've never seen this before. Even if it didn't make a difference in the campaign, people now had

a better sense of what happens in a key moment in their democracy that they're not allowed to see otherwise.

Mother Jones, in case you don't know this, is not just magazine. We're a daily website that draws about 9 million page views a month and most of the content we produce is for that site — and we really strive every single day to produce journalism that has impact. There are a number of ways to do this. I break down the sort of stories we report into only two categories. First category — telling people things they don't already know about something they already care about. The other category is telling people things they don't already know about something they don't *yet* care about. We either generate scoops about matters already in the news — say, a presidential race — or about a subject not yet generating headlines in the rest of the media. Say, income inequality. (I'll get back to that in a moment.)

The key thing, you may have noticed here, is telling a reader, viewer, or whatever they may be, something he or she doesn't know. For me, news is the killer app. Especially, even more so, in the Internet era, when opinions are like backsides. Everybody has one. Once anyone can start blogging or emailing their views, all of a sudden your uncle was as important as a *New York Times* columnist, in certain ways. But at *Mother Jones* we don't do a lot of analysis — or whining or ranting. We do journalism. We report out stories, looking for new facts that expand a reader's understanding of an ongoing event or controversy, or breaking news that puts a whole new subject onto the radar screen. So we both try to engage the existing news cycle, as it exists, as we find it, while also trying to nudge it in a different direction.

A good example of the latter is [charts and explanations that we did of income inequality](#) that we produced in early 2011. If you haven't seen them, you can go google them. But they really helped shape at the time what was kind of a small, admittedly a small national conversation over economic fairness. This was before the Occupy movement began, but then once the Occupy movement began, these charts became posters and talking points and ammunition for a debate that was now much larger because of the protest movement. We were stunned to look at video of these protests and then seminars and symposiums in which were held and the charts were turned into posters. People were holding them and waving them like banners. They're very data driven. The idea wasn't to produce media for a protest movement. It was something that we thought was important and it really ended up having an impact by giving a visual representation to what people kind of felt, in terms of what was happening in this country with economic income inequality. For years, we've done things like that. We've reported on and assembled data about gun laws and mass shootings. Our [stats and stories about gun violence](#) are cited again and again, unfortunately, whenever a new gun-violence tragedy occurs. And they're cited at key congressional hearings. Sen. Dianne Feinstein just relied on our reported material at a recent hearing she held on an assault rifle ban. That's straight out impact there. You're getting in the debate and you're giving an advocate, a legislator, bad pun here, ammunition in order to make their case.

At *Mother Jones*, we have an advantage over the mainstream media — and I really don't use that term pejoratively; I know lots of great reporters working for big media establishments. Chuck does, and everybody here, people ProPublica, we all have colleagues who come from there or still work there and they do great work a lot of times. But our advantage is when it comes for the search for impact, because we are truly independent. Each day we get to decide what to cover. A lot of the media outfits are tied up or pinned down, forced to cover this press conference or that hearing the way that everybody else is covering the same thing. There are 30 or 40 good congressional hearings a day, but only one gets the attention. It's not unimportant. I can be the Benghazi hearing or the Obamacare hearing, but everyone floods the zone there. And they all end up covering it exactly the same way. And because newspapers again and again have to engage in what I call obligatory journalism, they use a lot of resources doing a stuff that doesn't have a lot of value added. A lot of people care about that stuff already are following it on twitter now, they're watching it live, streaming it, watching it on cable TV. By the time the next day rolls around, there's a story in the front page about the hearing, for half the audience that already cares about this, it's ho-hum. But yet, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post* and network news spend a lot of time doing this. We don't have to. We don't have to cover the talking points and the spin that will be covered by everybody else.

Some people may not realize this but in my bureau in Washington it's just a bureau. The main office is in San Francisco and we have an office here in New York City. I have 14 reporters and editors working for me. This makes us one of the biggest Washington bureaus there is. Bigger than *Newsweek*. Bigger than *Time*. Only the really large institutions have more than we have now. No regional outlet has 14 people. The *Los Angeles Times* and the *Boston Globe* don't have that many people any more – unfortunately. We do believe we can make a difference and produce consequential journalism.

Often this is on subjects that are neglected by the rest of the media. We're committed to covering climate change and the [pervasive influence of dark money](#) and special- money in American politics. Sometimes we're kind of alone in doing so. But we're also trying to look beyond the 24/7 news cycle of the current nanosecond and toward achieving long-term impacts. Again, hard to measure, particularly in the long term, but we see journalism as an enterprise that doesn't always have an immediate result or payback It's an endeavor that can establish the foundation for future debates and for future actions. We want to keep a focus on climate change and money-in-politics, particularly when others are not doing it, for we know that that's valuable in and of itself in the pursuit of the truth, but because these matters will again at some point, hit center-stage — often when there's a tragedy or scandal. We don't want to wait for today's headlines to tell us what to cover. We've done great articles explaining who benefits from food stamps and the importance of food stamps — and who will be harmed by cuts in the program. And we did this before the current fight over food stamps. When these fights happen, either people come to our stories or we repurpose them and do them again. We're trying to think: what

are the key issues for us, and find ways to give those stories and the content we previously produced impact of the moment. We spend a lot of time thinking about what's happening and what people are thinking about at a particular moment. If we're not producing something new, what have we done already that can impact, shape the debate, be useful. And we move very, very quickly to do that. It's really an important part of our job.

But back to immediate impacts. They are important to us and we aim to do the sort of journalism that yields game-changers, large or small, as often as possible. And we do really, really care about traffic. Unlike some nonprofits, we're a hybrid. We're nonprofit, but we also get revenue from advertising and subscriptions. So we have to make sure people want to subscribe. We have to exist in a marketplace in addition to the foundation and individual donations we get. So we do care about having immediate impacts and having immediate traffic and getting headlines that allow us to do what we like to do. In the beginning of 2011, we were the first to report that the new Tea Party Republican majority in the House of Representatives had a plan to [redefine rape](#) in order to make it tougher for a woman to receive federal assistance for abortions. This story sparked an online protest movement that went viral that we really had nothing to do with. There was a twitter campaign, hashtag "Dear John", named for House Speaker John Boehner — that decried this move and the Republicans were forced to drop this effort. They tried to introduce it again, we did another story and they lost again. That was just a good case of us looking at something other people weren't looking at. Everyone was focused on the Tea Party as an economic phenomenon and we said, "Wait a second, these guys are going to come in, these folks have the same conservative, traditional cultural agenda they've always had. What are they going to do on that front?" Because we looked where no one else was looking, we got a really great story and it just resonated. Like so much of what we do, we can never predict what's going to resonate in that fashion. There are times we put up stories I think are going to be killer and they go nowhere. It could be something else is in the news cycle, could be it just doesn't catch fire. Then we do stories that take off completely on their own that are unforeseen. Sometimes a story we've done six months ago get picked up by someone and have a whole new life of its own. What creates impact.... a lot of individual responses and you can never really measure that in advance.

We broke the story nationally that Republican state lawmakers in Pennsylvania wanted to change the state's election rules so that the state would not award all of its presidential electors to the candidate who won the majority of the state's vote. This was a brazen attempt to help a Republican win the presidency by dividing up the Pennsylvania electoral vote. But once again, the outcry that ensued after that caused the Republicans to dump the plan. It lead even some moderate Republicans to say, "This is crazy. I don't want any part of this."

Several years ago — in one of my favorite investigations — we revealed that the [NRA had planted a spy](#) within the nation's leading gun control groups and that for years this woman had been privy to the gun control community's internal

deliberations and strategy-making — and she had reported all this back to the NRA. That is until we outed her. Again, what's the impact of that? I don't know how to measure it, but in the battle between the gun control groups and the NRA, the NRA knew everything the gun control groups were going to do for years. What's the value — as they say in the ad priceless — of having a strategy session that stays secret?

More recently, one of my reporters was the first to report that Larry Summers, who was then in the running to be Federal Reserve Chairman, had an enormous conflict of interest. Because he was a consultant to Citibank, he would have to recuse himself from any of the Fed's key decisions and deliberations about Citibank — meaning everything. My reporter was really the first to come across this. I grilled her long and hard because I could not believe that no one had seen this yet. We called all the ethics experts and looked at the law, and she had it. After our story came out, several senators privately told banking reform advocates that this was the last straw for them and that they would not support Summers' nomination. Soon after, he withdrew. I don't know if any of you are friends of his. I like him in a way. He's been helpful to me in a book I did. We were not mounting a crusade against him. We were reporting facts — and everybody, whether they're on your side or not on your side — they have to be able to withstand factual scrutiny. And that story had an impact.

This past summer we broke the news that [32 progressive House Democrats had signed a letter written by a financial lobbyist](#) that called for weakening protections for retirement accounts for millions of Americans. That story got picked up by cable news and elsewhere. Two months later, almost all of the 32 flip-flopped and voted to preserve these protections. We think that's because we put the spotlight on them.

And our journalism really isn't partisan. Rand Paul used a story we did on John McCain to critique the GOP foreign policy establishment. *Mother Jones* has a great tradition for doing non-political investigative journalism, into corporate abuses — the exploding Pinto and all that. We did a story — not as big as that — on the [lack of security at the Shutterfly website](#). Some of you may have kids on sports teams. Lots of sports teams use Shutterfly to keep track of practices and games and who's on the team. We showed that the site had no security and that predators could gain access to real private information, including the comings and goings of kids because the site hadn't gone to the expense of adding a very routine level of security. This led to other media picking up the story and, eventually, that site and other sites that are similar to it, fixed of the security problem. So impact — did it prevent something bad from happening to one kid somewhere? Maybe.

But as we do more and more of this sort of independent investigative journalism, we get more and more leads. A lot of them are very silly or funny but some of them are very serious, but we can't prove them, which is unfortunate. In the past year, tips have led to a series of headline-generating stories. One detailed chaos and misdeeds within FreedomWorks, a key tea party organization; another lead to a scoop revealing the existence of an unknown conservative coalition called Groundswell that meets weekly in Washington to coordinate messaging and talking points for the

right and that works with Congressional leadership — Republican leadership — to do that; and another article, we showed via videos, the extreme rhetoric of Ted Cruz's father Rafael Cruz, whom the senator uses as a surrogate and as a substitute speaker for him. While speaking for Ted Cruz, Rafael recently accused Obama of being a Marxist who wants to “destroy all concept of God.” That's pretty far out. That's just not liking Obamacare. That's going beyond that. Each of these investigations had a pretty serious impact. FreedomWorks, for one, saw its brand tarnished, and it has been struggling to raise funds this year. Last year it raised \$45 million.

I should say that one reason why we're able to produce journalism that yields concrete impact is because we're a non-profit. We're supported by a diverse stream of revenue. Money from subscribers and others I've mentioned. And support from individual donors and foundations. This gives us great latitude in deploying our resources where we see fit. And this diversity means that we're not tied only to stories that will get traffic — but as I said earlier we do love getting traffic. We're not chasing profits every day for a corporate owner, and because of that we have the luxury of being driven by our values and by our mission.

I think these days impact-driven journalism is a bit like the ballet. There would be few museums, opera houses, symphony orchestras, or dance companies without the support of benefactors, large and small. Given the economic pressures that much of the media have come under, it may well be that non-profit reporting, supported by individuals and foundations, is essential, is vital to maintaining investigative journalism overall. And investigative journalism that produces short- and long-term results. Some we see now, some we may not see for years. In some ways, just preserving a culture in which accountability is important. If mainstream media, because of economic pressures, cannot do the type of reporting that we do, that [ProPublica](#) does, that [Chuck's group](#) does and other people do, it's a real loss for society. There's not accountability. There's less transparency and politicians, corporate leaders and others feel that they can get away with stuff. Just supporting these institutions and making sure that they exist in a way that their overall mission is recognized and perceived by others as being part of our overarching political and national discourse, I think this has value in and of itself.

In recent years, thanks to our supporters, we've been able to invest a lot in reporters and technological infrastructure — that is key. It used to be that every 20 years you needed a new printing press. Nowadays, every 20 minutes you need new code. You really have to be on top of this stuff. The newest forms of social media. Every day there's another back end issue, and I'm not talking about something anatomical. The amount of resources that you need to be a player now, is high. The great thing about the information revolution is it really knocked down a lot of gatekeeping, and *Mother Jones* can compete. We compete with *The New York Times*, with the *Washington Post* with NBC News. We compete with them in getting stories. Once we get a good story, whether it's the 47 percent or something else like redefining rape, the merit of the story propels it. There's a certain sort of meritocracy in the world of

information and social media now. If people care enough about something, they will push it forward. You don't have to get Tom Wicker to write about something in an op-ed column in the *New York Times* three weeks after you broke a story to say, "Hey, we got some attention for this." We literally compete. But to compete, you need those technical resources as well. Our first task is to develop stories that make a difference, and then we need to maximize how to disseminate them. It's important to do that because it really takes a lot to cut through all the clutter of our cacophonous media world.

At *Mother Jones*, that means having a very forceful social media presence. On Facebook, 327,000 likes. On Twitter, 320,000 followers. It's amazing how much of our traffic in the last six months to a year now comes through social media. We get a lot of links from places like *Huffington Post* and *Digg* and *Reddit* and other aggregators and pointers, but more and more, it's coming through our social media interaction with the rest of the world. If you can send a note to 600,000 people all together saying, "Hey we just put out this story, check it out" that's a really great launching pad. I have 130,000 followers of my own. Everybody who works at *Mother Jones* has a twitter account. When you add it up, our social media reach and Facebook reach gets close to 1 million. If you know we're going to have a big story this is a good way of launching it. We also do a lot through the rest of the media to amplify our stories – through NPR, cable news and MSNBC and all that.

Not too long ago, the lead singer for the [rock band OK Go](#) (I'm sure you're all fans, right?) was telling me the secret to the band's success. In case you're not familiar with them, they have produced a string of elaborate videos for their songs that have gone not just viral, but hyper-viral! They've reached tens of millions of people with these very innovative, imaginative videos. [Gigantic Rube Goldberg machines](#) that have pianos swinging, cars hitting bowling balls. They're all real and they all work. He told me that when they're working on a video, they keep one thought in mind: when someone sees this, he or she has to say, "Oh shit, I really need to send this to my best friend...or my mom, or my boss, or that guy I work with."

At *Mother Jones*, when we're conceiving and chasing stories that we think we can do this and it will compel someone not just to read it but to pass it on. Maybe to take an action. Maybe to send a letter to "Dear John." Impact, I think, really begins with sharing. I know it sounds touchy feely. But these days, word of mouth — or word of click—is the first and most essential step to consequential journalism.

Let me finish by going back to the 47 percent video. When I talk to journalism students about that story, I have the chance to convey what I think is one of the most important lessons about how to do journalism that has an impact. That story came about because I had spent weeks and weeks researching Mitt Romney's investments overseas — in China and elsewhere — in companies that were offshoring what had once been American jobs. These stories required digging through SEC records and other financial documents, and they received some attention in the middle of the chaotic campaign coverage. They had a small impact, I suppose. But as I kept digging

for more on this subject — and at *Mother Jones*, we get the time to dig and dig. I don't know if we get years to do stories, but certainly sometimes weeks if not months. I eventually came across an audio clip posted anonymously on the Internet that featured Romney talking about a trip he had taken to a Chinese factory. I went looking for the source of that video, hoping to discover more information about Romney's investments in China. When I found the source, he was willing to work with me because he had actually read the previous stories I had done about Romney and China. And when I finally reached him he told me the video he had didn't have much else on China. But, he added, there's other stuff you might be interested in.

To sum up, because we had an impact on one guy, a bartender in Boca Raton, we ended up having an impact far and wide. A ripple turned into a wave, and perhaps the important thing is that this particular impact could not have been foreseen. When I started doing these stories, [the question was] "What's the impact of Romney's investments overseas?" I don't know. It depends on what I find. It depends what else is in the news. It depends who else decides to talk about it. But the Romney 47percent video only happened because every day we try to do journalism like that. And I really believe, in my heart, that if you set out to do that, you will find impact that Potter Stewart will fully recognize. I know it when I see it.

Thank you very much.