

ProPublica unleashes the power of digital video for investigative journalism

ProPublica is an independent, nonprofit newsroom producing investigative journalism.

OPPORTUNITY

ProPublica was a text-centric publisher, but wanted to increase its capacity for producing and publishing digital videos so it could reach a wider audience. It saw an opportunity to build up the skills, processes, and best practices required to execute digital video investigative journalism at the highest level, and to leverage this newfound expertise across its newsroom and reporter network.

APPROACH

ProPublica built up a team and educated the wider organization around digital video reporting, then started to publish visual evidence-based research videos. During the year, the team broadened their scope to include other investigative videos in order to increase viewership and subscribers.

Setting up the team: Video was still a relatively new medium for ProPublica, and many of its previous video pieces required audiences to also read an accompanying article. So, ProPublica hired several new staff with experience in visual investigation, and set up the team with new equipment. The company also invested in a network attached server (NAS), which enabled systematic organizing, backing up, and archiving of audio-visual projects — prior to this, ProPublica used external hard drives and did not archive projects in a systematic way.

Getting everyone on board: The visual investigations team held a presentation for other in-house ProPublica staff explaining the mission of the digital video initiative (to improve digital video reporting based on visual evidence), outlining how reporters could collaborate with the team on investigations, and providing input on how best to gather visual evidence (e.g., how to request police or security camera footage).

Developing workflows and processes for video content: The team then began researching and developing their own original investigative story ideas as well as soliciting pitches for evidence-driven visual stories from the larger newsroom. The team identified several new stories to pursue and began submitting records requests for visual evidence. In May, they published the first of their digital videos.

Scaling the project: The team started to work directly with ProPublica's 100+ reporters, who were situated across three time zones, to help identify potential stories. They introduced new procedures to improve communication around stories that had the potential for visual evidence, and the organization as a whole made more of a concerted effort to employ standardized methods for obtaining visual evidence.

Pivoting the project to better attract audiences: ProPublica wanted to increase viewership and YouTube subscribers so it broadened the scope of the project. The team created a new series called "Evidence", which included stories that didn't rely exclusively on visual evidence, but instead presented ProPublica's investigative work (e.g., how they obtained and verified visual evidence). They used YouTube best practices to create eye-catching thumbnails, titles, and descriptions that would improve the discoverability of this content.

Building a studio: Toward the end of the project, they identified the need to build a studio space where they could do more controlled filming, and create videos with a more polished

and professional look. They also purchased equipment to help with filming interviews, including a teleprompter.

Measuring performance: ProPublica measures all of its journalism by impact — how does it help to right injustices? In addition, the team looks at video views, shares/mentions by stakeholders (e.g., lawmakers, policy influencers, etc.) and watch time.

RESULTS

ProPublica built up a digital video team who were able to create digital-first content that helped grow audience and subscriber numbers.

- **42% increase** in subscriber numbers over the course of the project.
- **775K+ views and 40K+ hours of watch time** for one investigative video.
- **Visual evidence stories** have been picked up by several broadcast media outlets, including CBS, NBC, ABC, CNN, and Telemundo.

LEARNINGS

You can still engage audiences without a regular cadence:

While digital video best practices suggest a regular publication schedule can help build an audience, many organizations (like ProPublica) find it challenging to maintain a regular cadence (e.g., weekly or biweekly). But ProPublica found you can still attract large viewership if you have the following elements: Videos that can stand by themselves as stories without the support of a text article, important and newsworthy content, and high-quality, intriguing, easy-to-follow stories.

Great thumbnails lead to a strong click-through rate:

Creating smart and interesting thumbnails helped increase ProPublica's click-through rate and viewership. Once the team learned what worked best, they created a thumbnail template for their "Evidence" series, and videos that utilized the template performed better.

“ **The culture of ProPublica has been very text-centric for the majority of its existence. Over the past year, people within ProPublica are beginning to recognize the power of visuals as evidence and the storytelling power of the medium of video. This is a huge cultural shift.** ”