

Taking a Measured Approach to Launching New Tools in Your Newsroom

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About me



Eric Athas

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Name That Journalism Pivot
JEOPARDY!

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→ ***What is Facebook Live?***

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→ ***What is SEO (Search Engine Optimization)?***

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→ ***What is backpack journalism?***

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→ ***What is blogging?***

THIS HAS BEEN

Name That Journalism Pivot
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Other Candidates

- The homepage is the new front page
- Pivot to video
- Get on Twitter!
- Podcasts
- Snowfall
- Live blogs
- SEO, again
- Get off Twitter!
- ...Generative AI

**Newsrooms have been
through a lot of change.**

**More change
is needed.**

**64 percent of
journalists report
working more than 40
hours per week.**

**22 percent of
journalists reported
producing more than 11
stories per week.**

**Newsroom employment
has dropped 26
percent since 2008.**

U.S. newsroom employment has fallen 26% since 2008, Pew Research Center, July 2021

The risks of not being measured

- Innovation burnout
- Over-investing in the wrong things
- Newsroom's sense of creativity and invention

**Here are 10 ways to take a
measured approach to
launching new tools in your
newsroom**

1. Lead with journalism

First impressions matter

Option A	Option B
“The bosses have mandated that everyone begin using these new AI tools.”	“This new AI tool can help you comb through databases.”

First impressions matter

Option A	Option B
“We need to start using these recirculation modules to boost subscriptions.”	“This tool makes it much easier to connect readers to our stories.”

First impressions matter

Option A	Option B
<p>“We need to start writing alt-text for our photos because we’re getting sued.”</p>	<p>“We need to start writing alt-text for our photos to make our visual journalism accessible to more of readers.”</p>

**“
... leading transformations has really convinced me that the most important thing you can do is understand what is not changing first. You can call it either the mission of the place or even the soul of the place.”**

A.G. Sulzberger, publisher of *The New York Times*

2. Ask questions early

Question	Purpose
What are we doing?	Succinct “elevator pitch”
Why are we doing it?	Goals
How are we doing it	Plan
Who’s doing it?	Roles
Who needs to know?	Stakeholders
When are we doing it?	Timeline




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NDS: Put a project name here [DRAFT]

One sentence that summarizes the goal of this document so that people know what they should gain from reading it. Prepared by [name] Month/Year.

Summary

In a couple of sentences, provide background and context here. Why are you proposing this project? Where did the idea come from?

Project Goal(s)

Clearly state goal(s) of the project.

Relevant Newsroom and NDS Goals

Clearly state the larger goal(s) this project maps to.

Roles

To make role responsibilities clearer, we'd suggest listing tasks or specific responsibilities each person will complete on the project. This allows for team members to try for stretch assignments, balance their workloads and clarify or grow their areas of expertise. Every project should designate a team lead who's in charge of communicating with management.

Responsibility divisions we've seen work well include: Alternating who leads meetings and who takes notes; designating one person in charge of keeping the Home Base and Airtable updated; or designating who will take on which tasks at weekly check-ins.

3. Separate innovation and operation

To-do

- Daily deadlines
- Breaking news
- Enterprise
- Investigations
- Live coverage
- Planned events
- Management
- That new project

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Tips for separating innovation

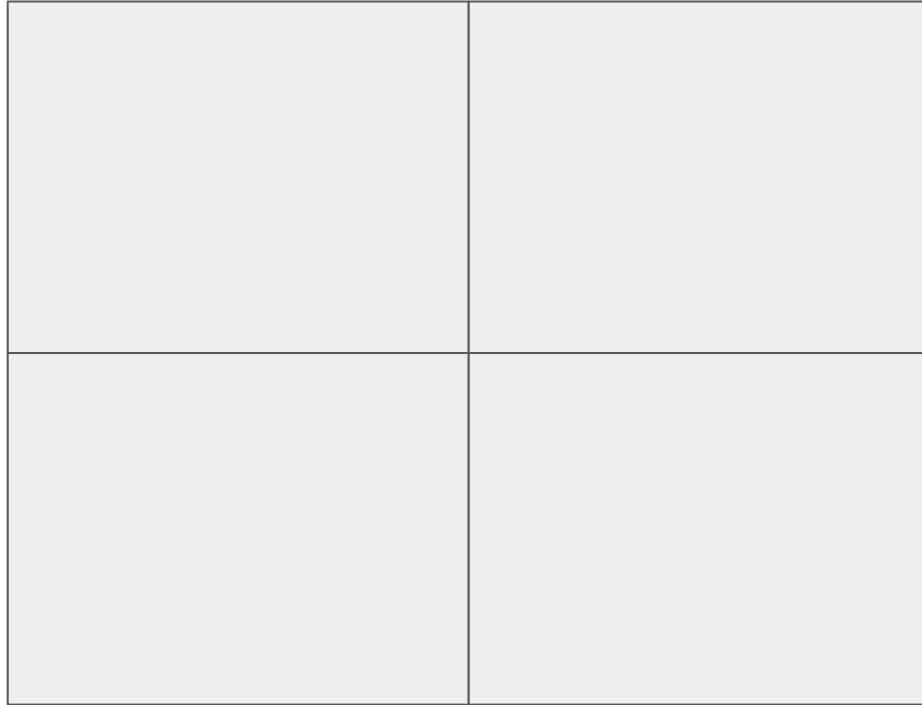
- Start an “innovation lab”
- Give a person or team dedicated time to develop something new
- Measure innovation differently
- Give it a catchy name

4. Start small

The elements of a good pilot

- **Small:** Keep it contained to limited people, teams, projects.
- **Clear purpose:** Know what you want to get from it.
- **Intentionally flawed:** The goal is to learn, not perfect.
- **Timed:** Declare an end date from the start.
- **Informative:** Collect feedback once it's complete.
- **Fun:** This is where you get to try new things.

5. Pace things out



Scale of new change

Small

Large

Scale of new change

Large

Small



Slow

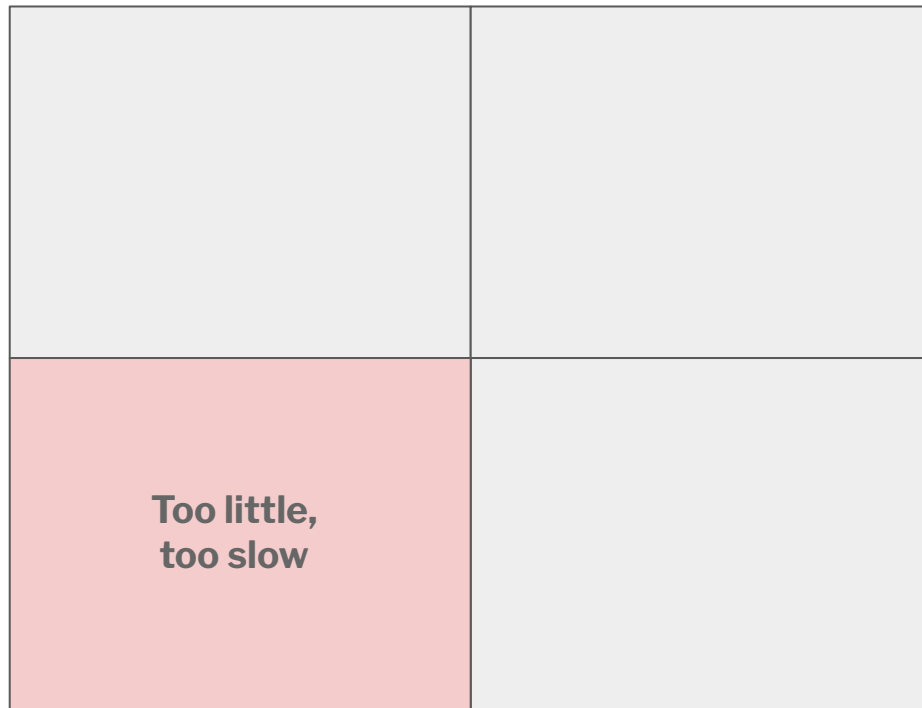
Fast

Pace at which you roll out new things

Scale of new change

Large

Small



Slow

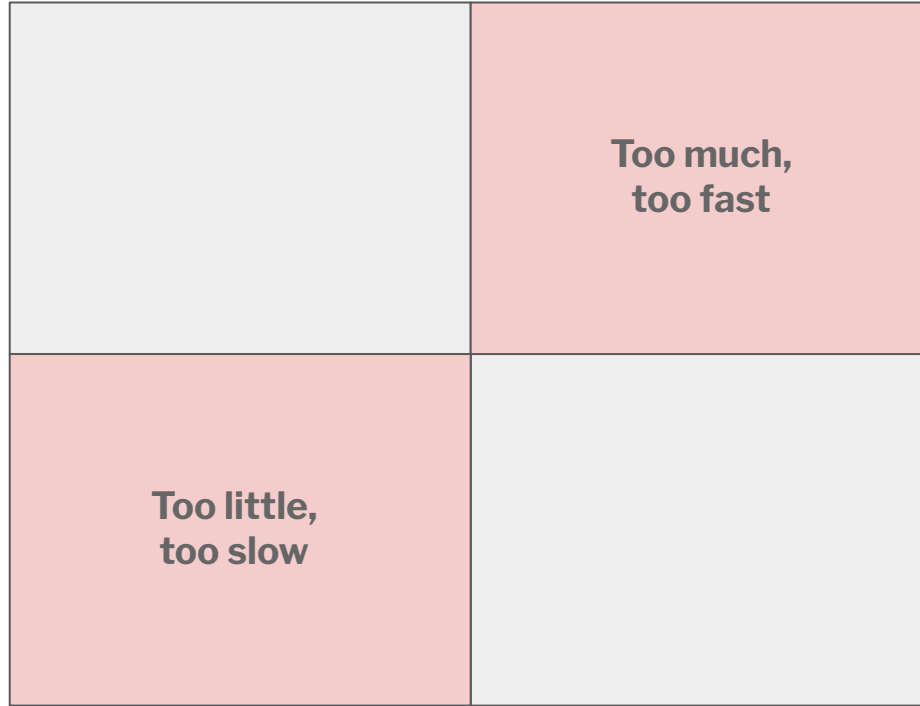
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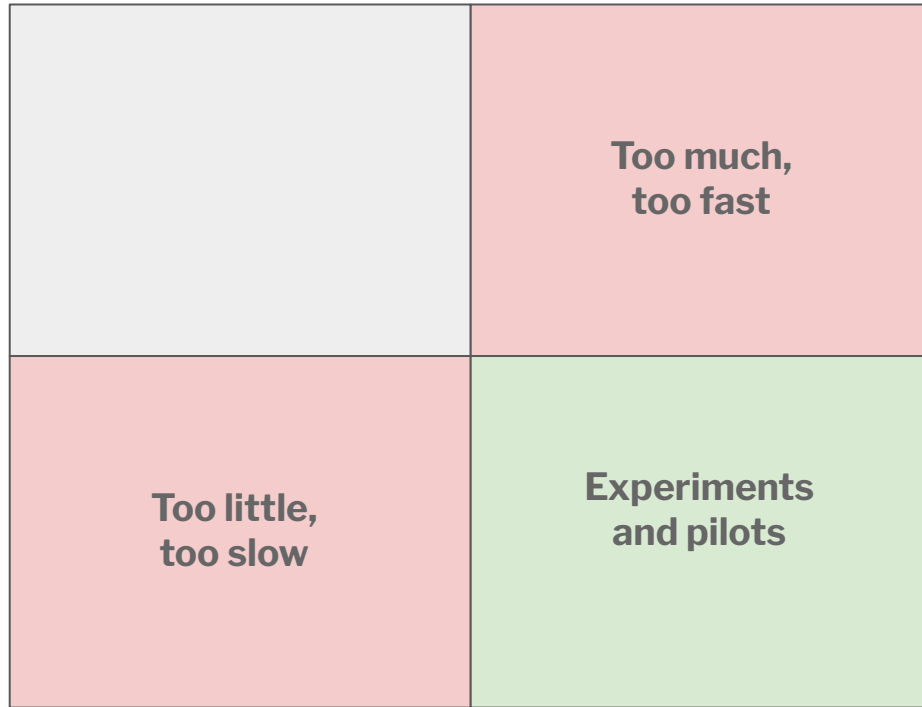
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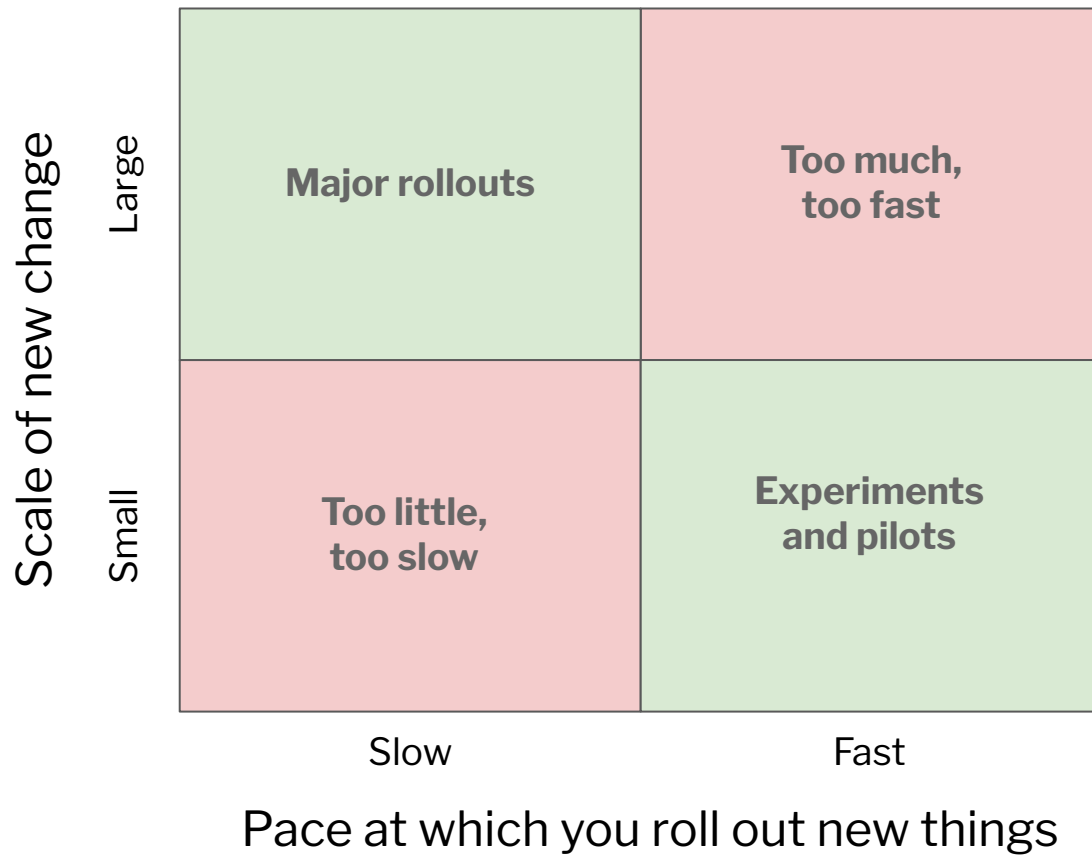
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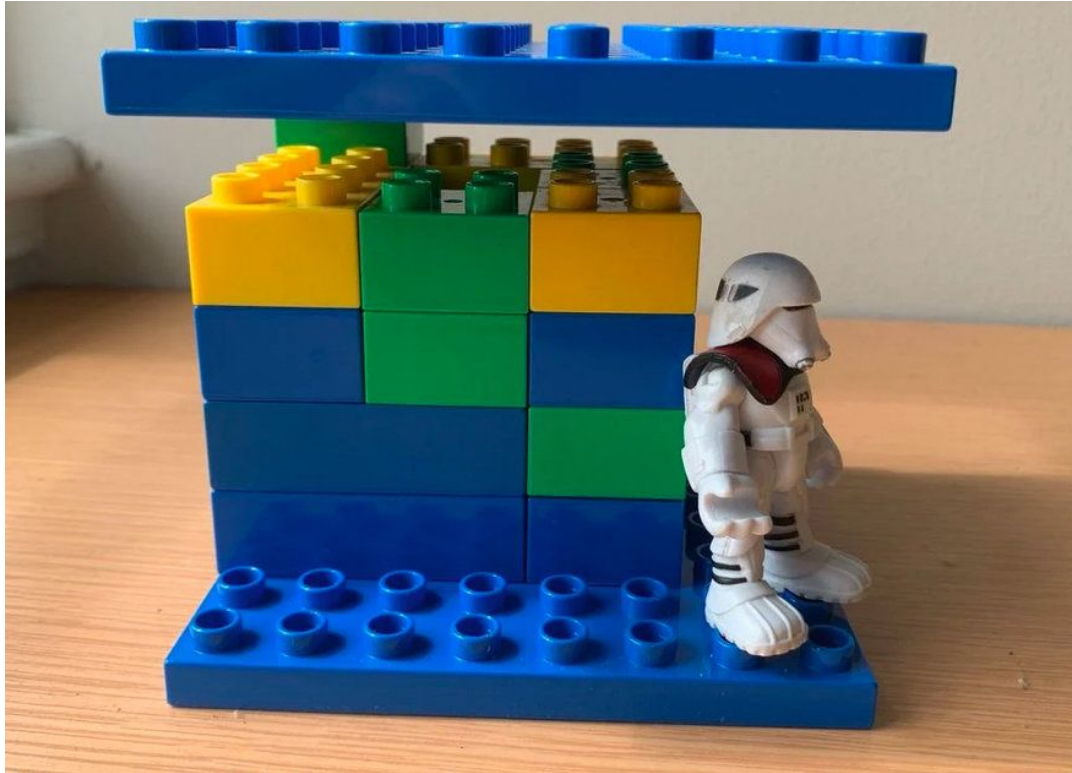
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Pace at which you roll out new things



How would you improve this design?



6. Subtract

Tips for subtraction

- Appoint a “subtractor in chief”
- Celebrate when someone stops doing something
- Launch a subtraction audit
- Make a rule: To add something, take something away

7. Balance innovation with workload

When is the best time for a journalist to learn something new?

- A. On deadline
- B. Working on a big investigation
- C. Election night
- D. None of the above

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8. Clear process debt

“
When you hire really smart people who want to be creative and innovative, you don't have to work on routines to help them be innovative, because that's their default state. You have to work on the routines that prevent them from being in that default state. The moment you remove those and give them space, they're going to be creative, they're going to be innovative.”

Arvind KC, chief people and systems officer, Roblox

Where to find process debt

- Meetings
- Messaging software
- Email
- Workflows
- Administrative (approval processes, etc.)

9. Beware of the cobra effect

**“
When a measure becomes a target, it ceases to
be a good measure.”**

Goodhart's Law



The cobra effect in newsrooms

- A production quota leads reporters to lower the bar for newsworthiness.
- A push to write five comments on every story leads to reporters posting five minimal comments instead of one or two rich ones.
- A target to increase pageviews leads to lower quality listicles.
- A mandate to share everything on social media leads to reporters posting to fulfill the target, without putting much thought into the content.

10. Check in and listen

QUESTION FOR THE ROOM

What new ideas are you working on today, and how can you take a measured approach to rolling them out?

Thank you

Stay in touch

Email

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Session notes and newsletter

ericathas.com/nypa



Endnotes

- [State of Journalism 2024](#), Muck Rack, March 2024
- [U.S. newsroom employment has fallen 26% since 2008](#), Pew Research Center, July 2021
- [Will AI Fix Work?](#), Microsoft, March 2023
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- [Subtract: The Untapped Science of Less](#), Leidy Klotz, Flatiron Books, 2021
- [The Science of Mind Wandering: Empirically Navigating the Stream of Consciousness](#), Jonathan Smallwood, and Jonathan W. Schooler, *Annual Review of Psychology*, 2015
- [The cobra effect and the dangers of turning measures into targets](#), Eric Athas, 2024
- [Attention Span: A Groundbreaking Way to Restore Balance, Happiness and Productivity](#), Gloria Mark, Hanover Square Press, 2023
- [How to Give Busy People the Time to Innovate](#), Eric Athas, Harvard Business Review
- Eric's newsletter: ericathas.com