



Report to Stakeholders

May–August, 2015



The latest in a series of periodic reports to our stakeholders about progress at ProPublica. Earlier reports, including [our annual report for 2014](#) and our report for the first period of 2015, are available at [ProPublica.org](#).

Transparency and Its Critics

In early June, ProPublica received a small contribution online, followed quickly by a note. The text of the note began, “Dear ProPublica, Please accept my donation as my first political action. I especially want to thank Michael Grabell,” the reporter on our series on the shortcomings of the nation’s [workers’ compensation](#) system. But it was the subject line of the email that touched us most deeply: “You inspire a new US citizen.”



Doctors in a small practice in Alabama have some of the lowest complication rates in ProPublica’s Surgeon Scorecard

This story goes to the heart of what we are trying to accomplish at ProPublica: to provide the raw fuel for democratic governance by empowering an engaged citizenry, and spurring them, and their representatives, to take action.

There is inherent in this work a leap of faith—faith that the American people, presented with facts, will make smarter decisions, demand better public policies, join together in holding powerful interests to account.

We saw all of these themes come together in July and August around our new Surgeon Scorecard. [Surgeon Scorecard](#) is the culmination of more than three years of work on issues of patient safety in our healthcare system. Our work in this area begins from the amazing fact that patient harm may well be the third leading cause of death in the U.S., trailing behind only heart disease and cancer.

On the cover: *Lake Powell is now half full or less, as explained in ProPublica’s “Killing the Colorado” series*

Surgeon Scorecard analyzes millions of Medicare records over a five year period, applies quite sophisticated statistical methods laid out in a white



ProPublica reporter Marshall Allen, right, speaking with staff at Beaumont Hospital, Royal Oak, in Michigan

paper unprecedented for journalism, and produces complication rates for 17,000 surgeons on eight common surgeries. [Among our findings](#): that many of the nation's hospitals, including some of the most prestigious, house surgeons with both high and low complication rates. Patient response to the availability of this data has been dramatic: Since its launch in July, Surgeon Scorecard has received nearly 1.7 million page views.

There has been push-back from a small number of surgeons and medical colleagues. The heart of their argument is that Surgeon Scorecard is imperfect—something we freely acknowledged from the outset. It uses only Medicare data, because private payer data is not publicly available. It deals only with those eight common surgeries (although that amounts to more than two million operations over a five year period); we hope to extend its reach soon. Its analysis of complications is not all-inclusive or unquestionable, although it was reviewed by a panel of distinguished physicians. It holds surgeons accountable for the total care of surgical patients—which the American College of Surgeons said for years is appropriate (until Surgeon Scorecard was published), and, of course, is a key reason surgeons are so well paid and highly respected. And it presents its conclusions with some uncertainty, providing confidence intervals similar to the margin of error in public opinion polls, which seemed to us the intellectually honest and more rigorous thing to do.

The critics argue that these imperfections mean patients should not be allowed to see the data at all. They say that the American people just aren't sophisticated enough to handle results that have a margin of error. They note that hospitals themselves have developed a far superior analysis of surgical quality—but fail to point out that 80% of the nation's hospitals refuse to participate in it, and that none of those who do, share the quantitative results with patients or the public. They often claim to advocate greater public disclosure, but almost universally fail to practice it.

This debate goes to the heart of why ProPublica exists. Our stated mission is “To expose abuses of power and betrayals of the public trust by government, business, and other institutions, using the moral force of investigative journalism to spur reform through the sustained spotlighting of wrongdoing.” We aim to pursue that mission fearlessly, whether the subject is the [failures of the Red Cross in Haiti](#), the day-to-day corruption of [corporate political contributions](#) or the continuing implosion of [group homes in California](#), whether the problems are systemic, as in the [water crisis](#) gripping the West or the [political gridlock](#) surrounding the gas tax, or as specific as a [single miscarriage of justice](#). Each of these stories was published during the middle months of this year.

In all of this work, we hope to continue to inspire to action our fellow citizens, new and old. We hope you’ll join us in this effort.



Abnault Dubuisson has now lived in a temporary shack in Haiti funded by the Red Cross for four years

Impact

The most important test of ProPublica is whether our work is having impact. By this, we mean not audience size or prizes, but real-world change. Examples of what we mean can be found at <http://www.propublica.org/about/impact/>, as can a white paper on how ProPublica thinks about impact and related questions.

In the middle period of 2015, ProPublica stories produced such change in a number of important areas:

- Last year ProPublica, in partnership with the Washington Post, published stories on the business practices, and especially high-priced loans to active duty service personnel, of USA Discounters (since re-named USA Living). With the resulting congressional pressure and a change in Defense Department regulations, the company is now going out of business and filed for bankruptcy protection in August.



USA Discounters recently filed for bankruptcy protection, citing lower sales, “regulatory investigations and adverse media reports” in its bankruptcy filing as reasons for its collapse.

- After a ProPublica story, also published in partnership with the Washington Post, charted the harm stemming from nursing homes’ failure to monitor the administration of blood thinner Coumadin, the federal agency responsible for nursing homes formally warned them in July to be on the lookout for such errors.

- New federal rules, promulgated in July in part in the wake of ProPublica reporting in 2012 on failures to enforce the Open Housing Act of 1968, especially in and around northern cities, require local governments to use federal housing funds to reduce racial disparities—or pay penalties for failing to do so.
- Following a January ProPublica story, published with New York magazine, which focused on a man whose death in a hospital was broadcast on television without his or his family’s consent, New York City hospitals agreed in July to no longer allow patients to be filmed without prior consent.
- Health Canada is considering lowering the recommended dose of acetaminophen, the active ingredient in Tylenol, following a report in the Toronto Star last year on the painkiller’s dangers. The Star’s report followed a 2013 ProPublica investigation; ProPublica aided the Star for its story.
- Also following our Tylenol coverage, the FDA in August finally endorsed a safety device for the liquid form of children’s acetaminophen.
- Responding to press coverage, including articles by ProPublica, New York Governor Andrew Cuomo in May ended his administration’s practice of automatically deleting all emails after 90 days.
- The Food and Drug Administration announced in July that it is investigating the risk of chemical deposits in the brain for patients who are given repeated MRIs using imaging drugs that contain a heavy metal. Such imaging drugs containing gadolinium, especially GE Healthcare’s Omniscan, have been the subject of extensive reporting by ProPublica beginning in 2009.

What People Are Saying

“Since being launched in 2008, [ProPublica] (which is supported almost entirely by philanthropic contributions) has established itself as the premier investigative Web-based unit. It has tackled such worthy subjects as the environmental hazards of fracking and the lax oversight of nurses, the erosion of workers’ comp and mismanagement at the Red Cross. For an investigation into financial ties between medical institutions and drug companies, ProPublica compiled a list of payments those companies made to doctors and from it built a searchable database that patients could use to look up their own physicians. ProPublica has been a leader in such creative uses of data—a boom area on the Internet.”

—**Michael Massing**

New York Review of Books

June 4

“Thanks to ProPublica I was able to uncover the raw, factual data one needs to show the stark contrast of [a] provider's prescribing practice compared to others in his field. Alone I could not have begun to collect this amount of data. For those of us who want to help stop Medicare Fraud ProPublica offers us the finest and most helpful first line of defense with its invaluable tools. Thank you.”

—**Ramona, donor**

June 25

What People Are Saying

“Years from now, we may well find ourselves referring to the new era after this pivotal moment in healthcare as ‘Life after the Surgeon Scorecard.’ Really, the surgeon scorecard is just the beginning. Next, we will see similar reports extending beyond the eight elective surgeries covered in the ProPublica article. After that, we will see similar data reported for physicians in non-surgical specialties.

“Just as it was the consumer market that has been dragging Fortress Medicine into the digital health era, so too is consumer demand for transparency about physician performance dragging data such as those reported today into full view.”

—**Todd D. Johnson, HealthLoop CEO**

“WikiLeaks for Healthcare”

July 16

“Since its earliest days, one thing that helped distinguish ProPublica from other news outlets — aside from its nonprofit status and focus on investigations — was its reliance on sharing. That took a number of forms, in the partnerships with other news outlets to deliver investigations, and in creating news apps around data that let stories take on new life after publication.”

—**Justin Ellis**

NiemanLab

August 20

“The nation would be far better off if every major city or every state had a ProPublica-like news organization.”

—**Steven Waldman**

“Report for America”

June 16

What People Are Saying

“Anyone who really wants to know what's going on around us should support this organization. It's hard these days to get the unvarnished truth but you know it's there in ProPublica. Keep up the good work!”

—**Mary, donor**

June 5

“Investigative reporters Marian Wang and Heather Vogell[’s] work for ProPublica is shocking readers and waking up lawmakers. Marian Wang exposed the machinations of Baker Mitchell, a North Carolina charter school operator whose ‘non-profit’ charter school has fattened his personal bank account. Before moving to ProPublica, Heather Vogell blew the whistle on Atlanta’s school cheaters.”

—**John Merrow**

“27 resources on education, from a reporter who’s covered it”

PBS NewsHour

May 13

“KILLING THE COLORADO is an EXTRAORDINARY piece of urgently needed journalism. It comes at a time when truth-telling about the climate and environmental impact crises is beginning to reach survival-level proportions. I travel a lot in my current work, and I’ve recently been appalled by seeing close-up views of drought impacts in the Southwest and the disappearing snowpack, emptying lakes and dry reservoirs in California, the Pacific Northwest, and the Rockies....

“High quality journalism is as important to a healthy society as high quality blood circulation is to the health of our bodies.

“I wish you all good fortune in finding and telling the truth about things that people care about and that really matter to the health of our American democracy.”

—**Bernard, donor**

June 25

Honors

ProPublica was the first online news organization to win a Pulitzer Prize (2010) and the first to win a Pulitzer for stories not published in print (2011). Most journalism awards are bestowed in the first months of the year, but honors received in the middle period of 2015 included the following:

- ProPublica’s website is a finalist for the **Online Journalism Award for general excellence** for the sixth time in seven years, and ProPublica will receive the **PEN Center USA Award of Honor** at their dinner in Los Angeles in November.
- Work on **Firestone’s activities in Liberia** at the time of Charles Taylor, in partnership with Frontline, won the Robert F. Kennedy Journalism Award for new media, was a finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism for international coverage and has been nominated for two Emmy Awards, for outstanding long-form investigative journalism and for outstanding research.
- Jesse Eisinger’s column, **The Trade**, won the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism for commentary.
- Our reporting with the Lens on the rapid loss of land on the Louisiana coast, **“Losing Ground,”** won an Edward R. Murrow National Award for website audio, is a finalist for the Online Journalism Awards’ Knight Award for Public Service, was a finalist for the Data Journalism Award for data visualization and the Press Club of New Orleans Award for science writing, and was third place for the Society of Environmental Journalists Award for feature writing.
- Stories about abuses of the **wage garnishment** system, reported in partnership with NPR, won the National Press Club Award for broadcast consumer journalism and were a finalist for the Gerald Loeb Award for Distinguished Business and Financial Journalism for video/audio.
- Our **Treatment Tracker** news application on payments under Medicare Part B, won a Data Journalism Award for open data.
- Stories on **gun violence** in our cities and post-traumatic stress disorder, one published in partnership with Essence, won the National Association of Black Journalists Salute to Excellence Award for magazine investigative journalism and the Deadline Club Award for public service.

- Our article “**Segregation Now**,” on the re-segregation of American secondary education, won the National Association of Black Journalists Salute to Excellence Award for an interactive feature and the Deadline Club Award for beat reporting.
- Our 2015 coverage of **workers’ compensation**, published in partnership with NPR, is a finalist for the Online Journalism Awards’ Al Neuharth Innovation in Investigative Journalism Award.
- The news application **China’s Great Firewall** was a finalist for the Data Journalism Award for data visualization.
- Reporting on **Deadly Force** and racial disparities in police shootings was a finalist for the National Association of Black Journalists Salute to Excellence Award for a single news story.
- Our news application on **extinctions** was a finalist for the Data Journalism Award for data visualization.

ProPublica Partners, May–August 2015

Atlantic	New York Times
BBC*	NPR News
Boston Globe	Politico
Daily Beast	Slate
Health News Florida	Source
Los Angeles Times	Virginian-Pilot [Norfolk]*
Matter (Medium)*	Washington Post
Miami Herald	

**new partner*

By the Numbers

Average monthly page views at ProPublica.org:

2.7 million, up 60% year-over-year

Average monthly unique visitors to ProPublica.org:

979,000, up 41% year-over-year

Twitter followers: more than 404,000, up 8% since May 1

Facebook fans: more than 111,000, up 12% since May 1

Total email subscribers: over 75,000

Donors: 700+

Image Credits

Front Cover: Michael Friberg, *special to ProPublica*; **Page 2:** Tim Skipper, *AP Images for ProPublica*; **Page 3:** Daymon Hartley for *ProPublica*; **Page 4:** Marie Arago for *ProPublica*; **Page 5:** Paul Kiel, *ProPublica*