

DETROIT PBS · DATA STRATEGY BRIEFING

From Data Chaos to Connected Strategy

What three public media peers — and the 2026 PBS Annual Meeting — taught us about building a data-driven organization

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What we'll cover

I spoke with peer data leads at Connecticut Public and Nebraska Public Media, and reviewed two PBS Annual Meeting sessions on data infrastructure and impact measurement. Here's what's relevant to our own build-out.

01

Three Models of Data Maturity

Connecticut Public, Nebraska Public Media, and PBS SoCal — and the investment each one represents

02

Process & Workflow

What it actually takes to move from one stage to the next

03

Reports That Feed Decisions

Matching what we build to how leadership actually decides

04

Beyond Reach

Value metrics from PBS's "If a Tree Falls in the Wilderness" session

05

Recommendation

Where Detroit PBS goes from here

There's no single right model

“If you’ve seen one public media station, you’ve seen one public media station.” Data maturity is a spectrum — the right question is what your organization is willing to invest, not which station to copy.

— Collin Berke, Media Research Analyst, Nebraska Public Media

Connecticut Public

Manual & Focused

- ~1 person, self-taught
- Single master spreadsheet
- 4 yrs to build
- Low cost, high person-risk

Nebraska Public Media

Distributed & Layered

- Dedicated analyst team
- Purpose-built tools per team
- BigQuery data warehouse
- Medium investment

PBS SoCal

Connected & Automated

- Full MarTech + CDP stack
- Data Estate, AI-ready (MCP)
- 6+ yr phased build
- High investment, outside vendors

Detroit PBS is closer to Connecticut today. Leadership's ambition points toward Nebraska — or even SoCal.

Connecticut Public

71

digital platforms managed

4 yrs

to build the master spreadsheet

30%

fewer ad-hoc requests after
baseline dashboards

- One person, largely self-taught — data reporting is a fraction of the role, same as at Detroit PBS today
- The “poor man’s data warehouse”: a single master Google Sheet feeds every dashboard, with formulas hidden on back-end tabs so the front page stays clean
- Core reports: monthly Tonnage report (manual, ~1 day to compile) to senior leadership, a talk-show baseline dashboard, quarterly initiative dashboards, and one-off Proof of Performance reports
- Governance: an intranet form auto-routes “data”-tagged requests to the data team, with a standard two-week turnaround
- Risk: all institutional knowledge of the manual transform lives with one person

“

Start small and buildable. Automate what's easy first, then let teams request deep dives once a baseline exists. Don't attempt the Empire State Building on day one.

— Susan Bell, Connecticut Public

Nebraska Public Media

~7 yrs

from manual PDFs to today's stack

3

purpose-built internal tools

4

metrics per group, by design

- Access philosophy is distributed, not gatekept: self-serve GA4 for sophisticated teams, purpose-built tools for everyone else — Signals (leadership), Judy (news), Digit (digital)
- Grew from one analyst compiling static PDFs to a small dedicated analyst team plus a Google BigQuery data warehouse
- Output isn't just dashboards — dynamic PowerPoint decks with auto-updating KPIs and scheduled Teams pushes matter just as much
- For leadership's “LT Plus” tool, each business vertical names just four metrics it actually cares about — constraint made the tool usable
- Cadence matched to decision-making: monthly for most teams, weekly only for news, because that's their actual decision cycle

“

Reframe the 'everything dashboard' as an investment question, not a technical no: will you invest in a warehouse, in ETL, and in engineering time?

— Collin Berke, Nebraska Public Media

PBS SoCal

6+ yrs

phased build, 2019–present

250+

activation destinations via CDP

1

unified “Person” record

- A full “Data Estate” (lake, warehouse, index, hub) fed by automated ETL from broadcast, digital, and CRM sources
- A Customer Data Platform (Hightouch) links Membership, Email, App viewing, Events, and Website into one person-level record, activated out to Google DV360, Meta, and Iterable
- Built in phases — 2019 Vision, 2020–25 Focus on real operational problems, 2026+ Expansion into AI — not all at once
- Now connecting that estate to AI (MCP + data catalog) so tools like ChatGPT and Claude can query it directly — still in beta
- Paid an outside firm for parts of the ingestion pipeline; effective, but a significant financial investment

“

You either build the capability in-house, or you pay someone to build it. PBS SoCal chose to invest — that's not necessarily where every station should start.

— Collin Berke, on PBS SoCal's approach

Side by side

	Connecticut Public	Nebraska Public Media	PBS SoCal
Team	~1 person (self-taught)	Small dedicated analyst team	Full marketing/BI department
Core system	Master Google Sheet	BigQuery data warehouse	Data Estate + CDP (Hightouch)
Primary reports	Tonnage report, baseline dashboards	Signals, Judy, Digit + KPI decks	Tableau dashboards, AI insights
Time to build	~4 years	~6–7 years	6+ years, still expanding
Investment level	Low — mostly time	Medium — headcount + tooling	High — vendors + ongoing compliance
Key risk	Single point of failure	Tool sprawl across teams	Cost & complexity to maintain

“Can we” is the wrong question

Every advanced model is downstream of a deliberate investment decision. Before we talk about which station to emulate, we need to answer three questions as an organization.

1

A centralized data warehouse?

Somewhere all our platforms' data lives in one structured place

2

ETL — automated or manual?

A defined, repeatable process to get raw data into that warehouse

3

The engineering time to build & maintain it?

In-house capability, or budget to pay an outside firm

TWO REAL PATHS

Build in-house

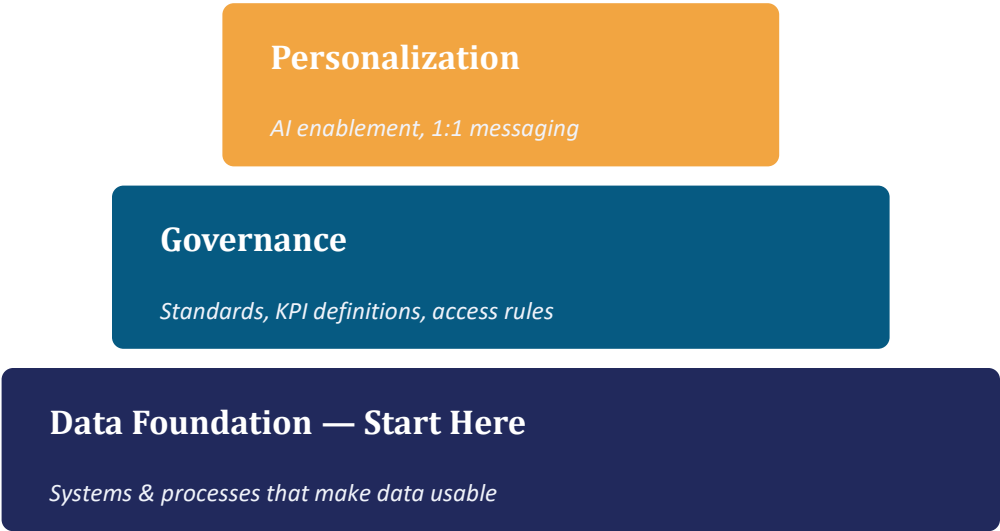
Nebraska's path: dedicated analyst headcount and internal engineering time, grown over years.

Pay to build it

PBS SoCal's path: an outside firm builds the ingestion pipeline and CDP. Faster, but a real financial commitment.

A third option: Connecticut skipped both and fully documented a manual process instead — it works, but concentrates risk in one person.

What it takes to get there



PBS SoCal's data foundation pyramid — skipping the base is why “the everything dashboard” asks stall out

EIGHT STEPS TO START

- | | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|---|--------------------------|
| 1 | Identify business goals | 5 | Build a data estate |
| 2 | Improve existing data quality | 6 | Build the MarTech stack |
| 3 | Evaluate existing tools | 7 | Track results of efforts |
| 4 | Connect data sources | 8 | Enable AI |



Map your data sources

All three peers did this, at different levels of depth — from Connecticut's simple source/login reference sheet, to Nebraska's full network graph, to SoCal's complete MarTech map. It makes the real scope of any “dashboard” ask visible before committing.



Set SMART goals

Susan piloted defining goals & KPIs at the start of every initiative and campaign at Connecticut Public — a lightweight way to avoid teams asking for performance data with no baseline to measure against.



Limit metrics per group

Collin's team asked each Nebraska business vertical to name just four metrics it actually cares about, rather than exposing everything. That constraint is what made their leadership tool usable.

Reports, then dashboards

Every dashboard sits on top of a report that supplies its data — and each peer built a different tool to display the result.

SOURCE REPORTS — WHAT FEEDS THE SYSTEM

Master spreadsheet / workbook The backbone — every dashboard and report pulls from here	Continuous
Tonnage / rollup report One number for “how big is our audience”, to senior leadership — Connecticut	Monthly
Quarterly initiative report Tracks named strategic priorities against goals — Connecticut	Quarterly
Proof of Performance (P.O.P.) One-off answer to a specific campaign or hypothesis — Connecticut	As needed
Annual & Impact report Our own stated goal (from the Nebraska call) — not confirmed at either peer	Annually

Teal = confirmed peer practice (Connecticut). Amber = our own stated goal, not yet observed at a peer.

Connecticut's push-back philosophy: don't just pull raw metrics on request — ask what story or decision the report needs to support, then pull and analyze accordingly.

DASHBOARD & VIZ TOOLS, BY PEER

Connecticut Public Looker Studio (via Supermetrics) Narrative insights added manually when time allows — not the easiest to keep current
Nebraska Public Media Custom apps per department — Signals, Judy, Digit “Dashboards have their place, but aren't automatically the best format.” — Collin Berke
PBS SoCal Tableau (and Superset) on the Data Estate Separate from their CDP, which activates data to marketing — not for internal reporting
Nine PBS (aside) Internal dashboard, tool unconfirmed Described as “Power BI-style” in source material — not necessarily built on Power BI

Cadence follows real decisions, not the calendar:

News teams get weekly dashboards (Connecticut, Nebraska) because that's their decision cycle; the rest of the org runs monthly or quarterly — the cadence a team needs also shapes which metrics get pulled for them.

From KPIs to impact

Standardizing KPIs and setting SMART goals tells us what to measure. This section answers a different question: once we have the numbers, what do they mean — and what story are we choosing to tell? A single viral post can rack up millions of views with no mission alignment, so raw numbers alone won't answer that. Every peer keeps circling back to the same question:

“How do we show impact?”

THE IMPACT MEASUREMENT FRAMEWORK — HOW PBS ANSWERS IT



3 questions to ask of every initiative: *What did you make? Why did it matter? What did you learn — and how will you apply it next time?*

Past stakeholder expectations — episode counts, event counts, raw reach — are no longer enough on their own. Leadership increasingly wants outcomes and impact, not just output.

Shifting to holistic impact measurement

WHAT IT TAKES



Shared definitions

Agreement on what counts as an output, an outcome, and impact



Alignment upfront

On intended audiences, outcomes, and success measures, before work begins



Shared process, end-to-end

Plan → Create → Measure → Learn → Apply

A SHIFTED APPROACH

FROM *Create, then report* → TO **Plan for impact, then measure**

FROM *Only post-campaign reporting* → TO **End-to-end impact planning**

FROM *Isolated metrics* → TO **Connected outcomes**

DEFINING IMPACT — A DIRECT COMPARISON

PBS System

Definition:

Changes within an individual, community, organization, or system resulting from our work.

Means:

The “why”: inform, educate, and enrich the public; address the needs of our community.

PBS SoCal

Definition:

Short- and long-term changes from our products and services. Reach is not impact.

Means:

The “why”: inform, educate, enrich, and connect the public; strengthen the social fabric; respond to community needs.

Eight ways to show impact

1

Go beyond reach

Ask what content achieved, not just how far it went

2

Ask the right questions

Field surveys that test real assumptions

3

Check online comments

Analyze sentiment and themes at scale

4

Solicit partner feedback

Map and survey community stakeholders

5

Record testimonials

Capture stories in the moment, with permission

6

Visualize the data

Photos, maps, and video tell it faster than tables

7

Tailor your message

Values, emotion, or logic — match the audience

8

Take it full circle

Plan for impact from the start, not just after

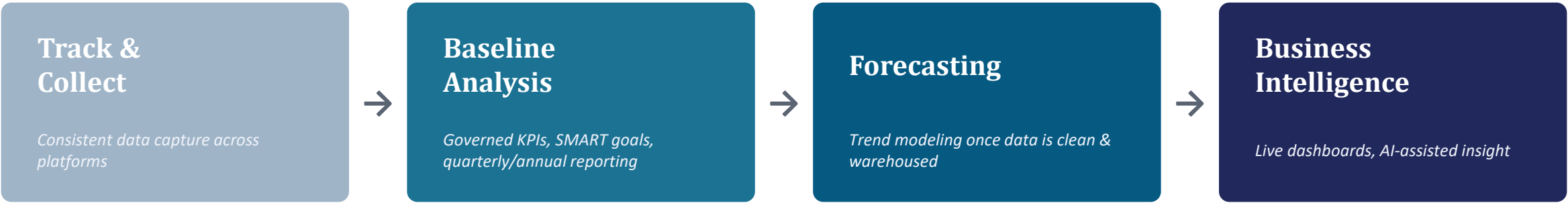
“Don't save impact measurement for the Annual Report — you should always be showing your impact.”

Foundation before dashboards

We're closer to Connecticut's model today — largely manual, self-taught, one primary data lead. Rich's ambition points toward Nebraska, or even PBS SoCal. But we shouldn't layer dashboards on top of ungoverned data. Before we automate anything, we need organizational data literacy, governance, and a defined foundation — not a raw-data feed.

THE GOAL

Move from data tracking & baseline analysis to forecasting and business intelligence



We're at stage 1, building toward stage 2. Stages 3 and 4 depend on the ETL and warehouse investment decisions on slide 8.

Why not dashboards yet?

Without a defined ETL process, a dashboard just exposes raw, ungoverned data faster. Connecticut and Nebraska both built governance and standardized reporting first — dashboards came only once there was a clean, repeatable pipeline behind them.

The roadmap

PHASE 1 — NOW: BUILD THE FOUNDATION (NO DASHBOARDS YET)

- 1

Standardize KPI definitions & governance (in progress)
- 2

SMART goals for every department & every campaign, like Connecticut's
- 3

Map our data sources across every platform
- 4

Follow Connecticut's playbook: spreadsheets feeding reports, quarterly & annual cadence only — no raw data exposed yet
- 5

Start with content performance, then expand to audience behavior
- 6

Research data warehouse options, and Tableau vs. Power BI, in parallel

PHASE 2 — NEXT • Pilot BI, once ETL is defined

- Named data point-person per initiative
- Looker Studio pilot for internal teams only — no public raw data yet
- Evaluate BigQuery given our Tableau license & Microsoft footprint

PHASE 3 — IF WE INVEST • Connect, forecast & activate

- Unified data warehouse / CDP
- Forecasting and AI-assisted insight on clean, governed data
- Requires dedicated budget — in-house build or outside vendor

The ask: name the ETL, warehouse, and headcount investments leadership is willing to make — before we commit to a Nebraska- or SoCal-level ambition.

“Let's have an impact.”

Thank you — questions and discussion welcome.

SOURCES

- Peer call with Susan B., Connecticut Public
- Peer call with Collin Berke, Nebraska Public Media
- 2026 PBS Annual Meeting: “If a Tree Falls in the Wilderness” (bit.ly/impactcounts)
- 2026 Tech Summit: “From Data Chaos to Connected Strategy,” PBS SoCal