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What is a data state of mind?

Approaching story ideas with the mindset that you are going to quantify or measure something, rather than just getting the facts and all sides of the story. This requires that you analyze some data on your own, making you less dependent on public officials to give you the straight story and oftentimes giving you a story that wouldn't have been possible without the analysis.

The data could be a very simple table with summary information (i.e. total budget figures for each city department this year compared to last year) or it could be very detailed information (i.e. the city's accounting logs with one record for every expenditure).

How do you develop this mindset?

Think of data as people too.

The database you get from a public agency is just like a human source. It can answer questions, raise questions, point you in the right direction, or even mislead you if you're not careful in not only how you ask the question, but also in how you interpret the answer. It can be a tipster or it could be the key source in your story or it could just offer some background or context.

Define your story ideas as questions, not statements

Instead of saying, I want to do a story about unsafe bridges...say I want to find out what percentage of bridges in the state are unsafe? This frames your story into something that is quantifiable and helps you figure out how to get started.

Tune your radar to pick up opportunities to quantify

- Trend stories that vaguely say something has changed over time or is bigger or different here versus there
- When interviewing sources, listen for times when they refer to something that was measured – when they talk about something increasing or decreasing; when they clearly make it sound like there was some analysis to get that answer. Ask them, where did you get that? And then, perhaps, you might also want to ask to get the raw data yourself.
- When you find yourself asking a source to give you summary numbers for a story, stop and think whether it would be better to get the data that those numbers are based on. For example, if you are writing a story about how overtime has caused the police department's budget to go through the roof... instead of asking the city to give you total

figures on overtime this year versus last year (or some other breakdown), ask yourself if you'd get a better story if you had data showing how much overtime each employee got?

- A local government (city, county, state, etc) created a program to do something last year.. Can we find a way to measure whether it has succeeded?
- A breaking news story. How often has this occurred in the past?
- Use IRE's Extra Extra to find ideas that others have done
- Look at your own past stories and look for missed opportunities – could you go back and do a deeper or broader look at the topic using data?
- That rumor/myth that is always circulating. Can you figure out whether it's true?

Learn what datasets are available on your beat

What is collected and why? How does the government agency use the data? What reports are generated from it? This will prove useful in a couple ways...first, it might give you more insight into your beat and second, it might set the stage in case you need some of this data down the road (especially if the story is time-sensitive).

Visit the agency or office when you aren't working on a story. Talk to your contacts there — find out what information they track and how they track it (paper? database? spreadsheet?).

Read the agency's annual reports to get clues about what information they collect.

Read auditor reports

These are great for seeing how the professionals tackle a topic. They almost always measure something, and most importantly, they usually have a question they are trying to answer. Be sure to check out the methodology. Minnesota Legislature Auditor's office allows you to sign up for email alerts when they put out new reports (best ones are from the Program Division). You can also go to their website to see the list of things they are working on. Nationally, check out reports from the GAO.

Get to know your public records law

Requesting data is a bit trickier than requesting paper documents. It's very helpful to know how the appropriate public records law works. If you're requesting federal government data, you go with the Federal FOIA. If it's from a state or local agency, then the state law applies. In Minnesota, the state law is called the Data Practices Act (Chapter 13 of the state statutes). It applies to all government entities EXCEPT the legislature, the courts and townships. The courts have their own public access rules. The legislature is sort of a wild west — you get what they are willing to give you.

A couple good things to know regarding data requests in Minnesota:

- If the information you want is stored electronically, they are required to give it to you electronically (if you so wish). However, they are not required to create something new that doesn't exist.

- They are allowed to (but not required to) charge you "actual cost" for copying the data. They can't charge you for redacting, or verifying the accuracy of the data or for CPU time. They can only charge you for the time it takes someone to write a query to export the data.

- The hourly rate must be the rate for the lowest-paid person CAPABLE of doing the job, even if that's not the person actually doing the work.

- It's a good idea to include this in your request so you don't get surprised by a big bill: "If there will be a charge for my request, please provide me the cost estimate writing, in advance of filling my request. Please include the amount of time expected to copy the data and the hourly rate.

Go-To Sources — State/Local:

- Voter Registration data
- Public salaries
- Education — test score, student demographics, teacher demographics, teacher salaries
- Financial — budgets, check registers
- Campaign finance reports
- Property records — deeds, liens, mortgages, etc.
- Incorporation records, UCC filings, Tax liens
- Contracts for public officials (i.e. school superintendent contracts)

Go-To Sources — National:

- Census (American FactFinder2)
- IRS 990 Forms (Guidestar or ask the charity for it)
- FEC Campaign Finance

- Plane Crashes:

Find out info on flight origination and destination, takeoff times, etc. on FlightAware (you

need to get on there quickly, though. The free stuff is only for a limited window of time):

<http://flightaware.com/>

Find out who owns a plane and other details. It works best if you have the tail number (also called the N number): <http://registry.faa.gov/aircraftinquiry/>

Airport-Data.com: <http://www.airport-data.com/> (search everything from tail numbers, to airports, to serial numbers, etc)

NTSB Accident Database:

<http://www.nts.gov/nts/query.asp>

Landings.com: Searchable databases of pilots and registered aircraft, and service difficulty reports--

SDR's (note: the reporting requirements for SDRs are not very comprehensive).

<http://www.landings.com/>

- Car accidents:

FARS-Fatality Analysis Reporting System has a query tool that allows you to find summary data on fatal accidents in your locality, going back a number of years. You can

either view the results online or download to a txt file:

<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/nca/fars.html>

Also check with your state highway patrol — they likely have their own database of accidents.

- Commercial trucks and buses:

The U.S. Department of Transportation has a database called SAFER that has information

on interstate trucking and bus companies. You can find out safety records of a trucking company and more. <http://www.safersys.org/>

- Vehicle recalls: Download data files of all complaints filed with NHTSA, defect investigations, recalls, and

technical service bulletins (updated regularly). <http://www-odi.nhtsa.dot.gov/downloads/>

- Bridge Collapse

The National Bridge Inventory database, kept by the U.S. Department of Transportation's

Federal Highway Administration has inspection data on all bridges in the U.S. The data is

usually a year or so behind, so it might be worth checking with your state agency that oversees bridges to see if you can get a more current copy of this same data for your state (MN keeps one on their website). Best way to get the national dataset is from NICAR: <http://data.nicar.org/node/2521>

- Workplace safety:

OSHA's website allows you to search their inspection database online.

<http://www.osha.gov/oshstats/index.html>

This would be useful following workplace accidents at local businesses. You can also get the raw data from the NICAR database library.

- Bad Weather

Storm Events database (kept by NOAA) has data on all kinds of weather events, including tornadoes, hail, high winds, etc. The NICAR database library also offers the raw data for purchase. <http://www4.ncdc.noaa.gov/cgi-win/wwcgi.dll?wwEvent~Storms>

Check with your local branch of the National Weather Service to see what they might have. One in MN keeps an Excel file with all the past tornadoes and details about each one.

Also check with your state climatology office to see what they have. The MN one has data on precipitation, temperature, etc. on a daily basis going back decades.