

Using data on a beat

- 1) Practice, practice, practice. Learning CAR is like learning a foreign language. If you don't keep practicing you will get rusty and eventually forget what you learned.
- 2) Start small. Look for simple stories you can crank out quickly. Even if that just means taking a spreadsheet of numbers and doing some simple calculations. Gradually build up to bigger stories.
- 3) Find those stories by constantly asking for data. When you hear about the existence of data that relates to your beat, put in a request. Spend some time getting to know the data before you actually need it for a story.
- 4) Build your own dataset. Perhaps there is something on your beat that you have to write about all the time. For example, if you're covering the city council maybe it would be worth tracking who voted for what measure and at the end of a year looking to see if there are certain councilors that always vote together or if there seems to be a clear leader who dictates which way votes will go, etc. On the police beat, keep your own database of murders, including as many details as you can.
- 5) Have a story in the pipeline all the time. Chip away at it in small pieces. Make a to-do list that you keep visible on your desk -- make each item a small piece of the project. For example, your list should have things that are very specific like "Call Mike Smith" or "query data to find orphan records", etc. Then you can be reminded of little tasks you can complete when you're waiting for a return call on another story or have a few extra minutes to spare at the end of the day.
- 6) Don't tell your boss about your idea until you are confident you have a good story. At small news organizations, in particular, you will be more likely to find editors who don't understand that a good story can take time (or they themselves feel under pressure to produce lots of stories). Try to work on as much of it as possible without them knowing. If you have to purchase data, though, you might have to tell them and in that case, you want to make sure they are fully aware that you won't be able to turn the story around immediately.
- 7) Become the person in the newsroom who volunteers for some of the perennial stories: release of school test scores, local census data, election night results, etc.

- 8) Look for feature stories you can do from data. Most popular dog breeds or dog names from the pet license database. People with only one name from the voter registration database. Use census data to profile a community and how it has changed over time. Use census data to write about places where there is an unbalanced ratio of men to women in the dating pool (great Valentine's day story).
- 9) Be ready for breaking news events that have CAR possibilities for follow-ups --- fatal car accident at a location that seems to be accident-prone; teenagers dying in a car accident (how many other teens are killed in car accidents); bridge collapse (what did the inspection records say?); somebody arrested/charged with their 15th DUI (how many other people seem to be skirting the system and continuing to drink and drive despite all the legal things in place to stop them?)
- 10) Remember that you are telling STORIES, not regurgitating numbers. Use the data analysis as a backbone to a narrative.
- 11) Teach somebody else. The best way to hone your skills is to teach it to somebody else. It really makes you THINK about what you're doing when you need to explain it. It also shows your bosses that you are "sharing" your data skills with others – it makes you more valuable and will likely make them more willing to give you extra time for your next great data-driven story idea.
- 12) Join the NICAR-L listserv (and pay the money to join IRE so you can get to their archives). Lurk on the list and absorb anything that looks familiar. Search the archives before posting a question (your question has probably already been asked), but also feel free to post even the most beginner questions. Don't worry: you won't get thrown out for asking an "easy" question. <http://www.ire.org/resource-center/listservs/subscribe-nicar-l/>

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