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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).

Here are some examples that illustrate how to approach a story with a “data state of mind”:

A suburb of St. Paul was considering a new ordinance that would set prohibitions on where certain sex offenders could live. The reporter had done the simple story saying they were talking about this. I suggested that we try to measure what would happen if they instituted such an ordinance. We mapped out all the locations of the places sex offenders would have to stay a certain distance away from – schools, parks, churches – and then, using mapping software, determined such a law would essentially push all sex offenders out of the city altogether. The council dropped the idea at their next meeting.

Former Pioneer Press reporter Jeremy Olson got a press release about an increase in children being treated in hospitals in the US for medication overdoses, so he decided to see if that held true in MN. The first thing he did was pull out several years' worth of death data (which we have in-house) and looked for deaths on poisonings. And he found that it wasn't primarily children – it was young adults like Cody Nelson, the lead of his story. And where did he learn about Cody Nelson? From the data, of course. From there, he started calling state and federal experts and discovered that this was a topic that was just starting to hit the radar screens of public health officials. What if he had not gone to the data first? What if he had simply called state officials? Jeremy thinks he wouldn't have found this story.

A few years ago, several cities in the Twin Cities metro started passing ordinances prohibiting smoking in public places. As more and more cities piled on, the objections from restaurant and bar owners got louder. We kept writing story after story filled with he said, she said. The restaurant owners complained this was driving them out of business; the public health advocates claimed it was necessary to protect the health of waiters and other restaurant staff. So we decided to see if we could measure whether or not the restaurant owners' claims were true – were they really losing business? The answer, which we found through data from the state's department of revenue, was largely no.

Covering aviation — and specifically Northwest Airlines — for the Pioneer Press, John Welbes had spent a lot of time at the airport and talking to airport officials, so he knew how things worked. Every year during the Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday season, he heard the media reports about the airport facing its busiest time of the year. Officials at the airport had told him that wasn't true, but he wanted to prove it. So he turned to data kept by the FAA on takeoffs and landings at each airport each day. It was a simple data file that we could work with in Microsoft Access, tallying up the total flights (passenger numbers are not included) each day. It showed that at MSP the busiest days of the year are in early June — just after schools let out.

Some tips:

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

Some example to watch out for:

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?

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).