Data state of mind

--think about data as a “source” and you are going to ask it questions. The difference is that you need to learn a new language (sort of) to ask those questions.

--learning data skills is like learning a foreign language – practice, practice, practice!

--be prepared for sources to be: unreliable, incomplete, and complicated.

--data sources can give you wrong answers if you ask the question the wrong way, just like a human source

--unlike people, though, data can’t “hide” something from you

--Most reporters use data all the time, whether they have “data skills” or not. They frequently ask sources for summary data – i.e. total crimes, city’s budget totals broken down by department, how much something has changed from one year to the next, etc.

--that summary data you’re getting is the result of somebody else questioning a database. Someone at the police department is the one who tallies up all the crimes and tells you how many there were last year. What if you got the original database – with one record for each crime, instead?

--instead of someone else ‘translating’ the data for you, you can ask as many questions as you want

--Data exists for nearly every topic you can imagine; if it doesn’t exist in electronic format, often it’s possible to build your own database

--Most often, you’ll find data is the underlying “spine” of a story – look at the 60 data-driven story ideas list. Nearly every topic under the sun.

Some of my favorites:

--Matt Waite’s story on Pasco County commissioners’ web activity

--Target Field analysis

--Milwaukee – water usage highest in poor areas of the city

--USAT’s mass killings database

--Snow towing

--Data has been behind some major stories that have had huge impacts:

--[Public Service Pulitzer prizes](http://www.pulitzer.org/bycat/Public-Service) (2008 through 2013 for sure, plus 2004, 2005, 1999, 1993)

--[Nebraska prison sentencing](http://www.cjr.org/united_states_project/omaha_world_herald_uncovers_nebraska_prison_sentencing_scandal.php)

--[Florida story on police speeding](http://www.sun-sentinel.com/news/speeding-cops/fl-speeding-cops-20120211-story.html#page=1)

--The Child Exchange

--538 and The Upshot and other data-driven websites are evidence of just how much data is out there. Those sites, though, don’t always do their own analysis. Many of their posts rely on analysis done by others and are more of an explanation of the data and what it means. But there are some examples I’ve linked to on Moodle

FINDING DATA:

--you can find data the same way you find human sources: ask other people, look for evidence online, look at stories other journalists have done

--not all data is online

--even the data that is online might be incomplete (maybe doesn’t show all the fields)

Finding ideas for your story assignments in this class:

Key things to keep in mind for both:

--data must be readily available and relatively easy to work with (there are datasets out there with dozens of tables and complicated topics – i.e. environment – that I’d shy away from)

--can’t use summary data (except in circumstances such as: census data, school-level data). Must be data that requires you to do your own analysis. Can’t just get a spreadsheet with the answers already filled in by someone else.

--topic must be “manageable” in terms of the reporting

Story 1 – aim for something like the blog posts on 538 or The Upshot. These involve data analysis and reporting, but not a ton of reporting, and the topic is very focused. Here it would be okay to have your analysis findings – and the explanation – be the focus of your story.

Story 2 – aim for something more than a basic news story, but less than a “project” level. Topic should have some meat and newsworthiness to it – since this is the one you’re most likely to get published. You should aim to tell a story, not just regurgitate and explain some data. Get people in here. Data should be your story’s spine, not the focus.

Story ideas – frame them as questions, not nouns.

Instead of “I want to write about bad bridges”, you could frame it like: “How many bridges in Minnesota are in need of repair? And how does that compare to before the 2007 35W bridge collapse?”

Look at:

--stories you’ve written for the Daily or other publications – could they be expanded?

--what is your favorite topic right now?

--what burning question(s) do you have about the world around you?

--Steal ideas: 60 story ideas in 60 minutes and IRE Extra! Extra!