

Notes from ‘The state of data reporting outside major cities’

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Notes from our #NICAR19 group discussion

Make the time

Most of us agreed we need more time to get further into our data journalism. We talked about ways to look at our existing schedules to prioritize blocks of time to work on our skills. It will be easier for us to get those blocks of time when we show our bosses that we don't need six months at a time to do the work. Figure out when you tend to have down time in your schedule, and mark off that time as your data journalism space. If you're an athlete, it might help to think of it like blocking off time for training.

Find a buddy

One of us wished we could have a data wrangler to do some of the tasks we need done, and we talked about how frustrating it is that we can't do that when we're the main technical person in our newsroom. Sometimes, we can look for buddies within our data journalism community to help us get through that work we're having trouble with. There are two Slack channels, News Nerdy and NICARLCC, that can help serve this purpose.

Safety in numbers

We talked a little about whether to pursue multi-organization FOI requests. Many of us said it was hard to justify that because of the competitive nature of our news organizations. If you are part of a larger company, one option could be to use a sister paper to do multi-organization records request. Another is to loop in an internal staff member, such as an editor or colleague, into records requests so that you can feel a little more supported.

Find a back door

Many of us had issues getting the records and data we want at the local level. If we don't have the resources to hire a lawyer and fight the denial, we can look for back doors. One method is to think about what state agency deals with the same type of issue, and get into contact with them to see if they have information you're looking for. Often the state staffers are more used to getting these types of requests, so it will be more fruitful.

The power of a conversation

When dealing with local public information officers, sometimes they genuinely don't understand the law or the file type you're asking for. One method to address this is to explain the law to the person and cite the part that describes what they have to do for you or why they can't charge you the fees. If it's not a legal issue, another option is to have a conversation about what you're looking for and why. While one of the bedrocks of FOI is not needing to explain why you want the information, you would be surprised at how many people will let their guards down and stop fighting you when you explain why you need it.

Write the public records story

There are many ways that the government will try to stop us from having records. Sometimes our newsrooms will need to sue over these records, and we should not be afraid to. But if that is not an option for us, whether for legal issues or a lack of resources, we can write a story about the government's desire to keep information private that we are seeking for our communities. It will be a more impactful story if you have several denials on related FOI requests.