I’m published!! In the Pudding! Check it out here!

<link>

Getting to this point was downright terrifying. For a hyper-anxious person with a need to do everything The Right Way, the lack of information around how to develop and sell my projects was disheartening. There’s a ton out there on how to pitch novels and newspaper articles, but not much at all about data visualization. To hopefully shed some light here, I thought I’d share two of my own pitches to the Pudding—one successful and one not--and how I created them.

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I want to discuss my unsuccessful pitch first. You can read the whole thing <here>. In summary, I wanted to see if Trader Joe’s parking lots are as terrible as they’re made out to be. If you’re not lucky enough to have a Trader Joe’s in your area, let me explain—it’s a tropical island-themed grocery store with amazing deals on great food. They intentionally under-invest in their parking lots so that they can spend more on getting good products. Getting a spot in a Trader Joe’s lot can feel akin to a middle-class demolition derby.

As I was leaving Trader Joe’s one day, I realized I felt similar parking-lot frustration at my local Target and Fred Meyer, too. Are Trader Joe’s parking lots really that bad compared to other grocery stores?

Not knowing how to determine what a “bad” parking lot was, I decided to start gathering what data I could and figure out the story later. This is almost always the approach I take, and it often works. It’s hard to know what direction a story will take until you can get a little data to look at.

I scraped a list of all Trader Joe’s locations from their website, and started looking them up one by one in OpenStreetMap to see if someone had already mapped the store and its parking lot. I added the missing ones to OSM myself. I used a Microsoft Access database to keep track of which parking lots and which buildings were relevant to my project, and which weren’t.

<picture>

This amount of targeted activity aroused the suspicion of someone on the site, who messaged to ask if I worked for Trader Joes!

I did this for all 200-ish Trader Joe’s in California, and then I did it for 100 randomly chosen Safeway and Whole Foods locations as well.

If this sounds like an enormous amount of work, well, it was.

I’d fallen into a trap of my own making.

Even after a solid 40 hours of mapping parking lots I still had no idea what made one good or bad to park in. I started throwing in other data points as well—Google’s average wait time was one—in the hopes that something would jump out at me, but nothing did.

I ended up pitching the concept that there really is no difference between Trader Joe’s and other stores. The data I collected didn’t show much difference between Trader Joe’s and the other stores, and the best I could come up with was that the idea that Trader Joe’s lots are terrible has become some sort of in-joke or meme.

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*A quick note on the actual experience of pitching. I was terrified. I’m self-taught. I do not do data visualization professionally. I do this work as an evenings-and-weekends hobby. I did not (do not) know if my work was (is) strong enough to stand on its own, especially on a site like the Pudding. Their other freelancers are people like Shirley Wu, for chrissakes. I sort of assumed I’d hear a “no”, but of course I really, really didn’t want that outcome.*

*I sent the pitch email and then obsessively checked my phone until they responded. Every email notification made my stomach flip, and I wasn’t sure if it’d be better to hear a hard no or to never get a response at all. Eventually I started leaving my phone in my car when I went to work because it was such a horrible distraction.*

*Thank you to my friends for putting up with a week of “do you think they’ve seen it?” “what if they hate it” “what if they hate me” “oh god what I have done”*

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Of course, they rejected this pitch on the grounds that there really wasn’t much of a story to it. They were really kind about it, and later told me they prefer to reject people in a sympathetic way, with considered feedback.

It stung, of course, but on reflection it made sense. If even I wasn’t convinced of the value of what I was pitching, why would they be? What point was I even trying to make? What was I hoping to get out of this?

In retrospect, I think I jumped right into pitching this article because it felt like the first idea “big” enough for the Pudding. It involved an enormous about of data collection, and I amassed a dataset I’m almost certain nobody else (save probably Trader Joe’s themselves) has. I mistook hard work for an interesting article.

I don’t want to abandon all the work I did and I’m still really interested in my dataset. I do want to get back to it (…eventually…) and finish up data collection for all 380-ish Trader Joe’s locations. It’s just that now I think this might make a really neat poster, but not a story.

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On to the successful pitch. You can read the whole thing <here>

Unusually, I have a written record of where the idea for this one came from. Our book club was very annoyed with the “writing with one hand”-type descriptions of a fairy in Patrick Rothfuss’ The Name of the Wind. Liana had the idea to analyze how exactly he describes her body:

<picture>

The idea was too good to pass by, and we all loved it. I decided to expand on it to see how authors in general describe bodies, and we were off to the races.

Immediately, this idea felt very different than the Trader Joe’s parking lots one. No matter what results came back from my analysis, there’d be a story. Either rote stereotypes are indeed played out in literature, or Patrick Rothfuss’ writing is exceptional in its poor treatment of female bodies. (Spoiler alert: it’s the former.)

All the same, I wanted to get a solid dataset to analyze before pitching anything. If I’ve learned anything from life, it’s to have all your ducks in a row before presenting anything to someone you want to impress. I wanted to be able to tell the Pudding a story, not tell them that I would tell them a story 😊.

To get started, I grabbed a few pages of The Name of the Wind. A bit of Google brought me to the CoreNLP demonstration page (as of this writing unfortunately offline), where I could play around with Natural Language Processing (NLP). Just a few demo runs were enough to convince me that extracting body parts, owners, and adjectives was completely possible.

I then moved on to using the spaCy NLP parser in R to extract body parts more efficiently. Before this project I was completely unfamiliar with NLP. I definitely didn’t sit down with a plan and just type out some code and boom, results. Getting my code together was a process of trial and error – feeding the parser a few simple sentences, seeing what came back, tweaking it, feeding it more sentences, and so on.

I almost never know exactly what to do when I sit down to do a coding project. I consistently start by getting the smallest piece working, and then building up from there. When something breaks, I strip away layers until it starts working again, and then build it back up once more.

Once I got my code working smoothly and all my books parsed, I took something of the opposite approach to write the pitch. Liana, Makena, and I threw tons of ideas out and developed all of them. <some of those ideas here>. Once we saw *everything*, we could strip away what wasn’t compelling until we reached what felt like a concise, tight draft that covered everything we thought was important.

This took some time. I have at least four full drafts saved in Word, but that doesn’t count the Google docs, the email chains, and the text threads. This was probably overkill, but I wanted to be super-duper confident in what I was sending over. The idea felt really solid, and I didn’t want to do it disservice by sending over a flabby pitch.

Of course, this pitch did end up being successful. Naturally, I still panicked for the couple weeks it took the Pudding to get back to me, but I felt much better about what I had sent this time than the first time. The difference, ultimately, was that I thought our findings were genuinely interesting. I could get behind the article without reservation, so it seemed more likely that the Pudding could, too.

How do I wrap this up? I don’t really know! Maybe with some lessons learned:

* If your idea isn’t really compelling to you, it probably isn’t compelling to anyone else either
* Work on a project you genuinely love, because it is going to take a lot of time and effort
* Be clear on what your essay/pitch is trying to achieve
* Hard work != good work
* Everything is easier with friends ☺