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Data Journalism by, about and for Marginalized Communities

02 Doing Issues with Data

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Data journalism has a role to play in empowering marginalized communities to combat injustice, inequality and discrimination.

05 Investigating Data, Platforms and Algorithms

Keywords: data journalism, marginalized communities, injustice, inequality, discrimination, empowerment

06 Organising Data Journalism

I do data journalism in countries where things are widely considered to be going badly—as in not just a rough patch, not just a political hiccup, but entire political and economic systems failing. In such places, one reads that corruption has paralyzed the government, citizens are despondent and civil society is under siege. Things are going terribly. Producing data journalism in some of the most impoverished, uneducated and unsafe parts of the world has brought me to an important conclusion. Injustice, inequality and discrimination are ubiquitous, insidious and overlooked in most countries. Journalists I work with have unflinchingly embraced new tools to, for the first time, measure just how bad things are, who is suffering as a result, whose fault it is and how to make things better. In these contexts, journalists have embraced data as a means to influence policy, mobilize citizens and combat propaganda. Despite the constraints on free press, data journalism is seen as a means to empowerment.

07 Learning Data Journalism Together

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08 Situating Data Journalism

This chapter explores data journalism by, about and for marginalized communities. By attending to different aspects of injustice, inequality and discrimination, and their broader consequences on the lives of marginalized communities, we render them visible, measurable and maybe even solvable. These stories engage journalists deeply rooted in marginalized communities. They tap into issues that groups which face institutional discrimination care about to foster citizen engagement. They are disseminated through local mass media to reach large numbers of people and pressure governments into making better decisions for the whole country. In what follows I will discuss five kinds of data journalism

stories that attend to the interests and concerns of marginalized communities in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kenya, Kyrgyzstan and the Balkans.



Figure 45.1. Data journalists in pakistan develop initial wireframes with their data findings. Source: Internews.

Why Are People Going Hungry if Our Country Has Enough Resources to Feed Everyone?

In Kenya, donors were funding exactly the wrong food programmes. A 12-minute television story by NTV's Mercy Juma about Turkana, an isolated, impoverished region of Northern Kenya, revealed that malnutrition in children is a growing problem as drought and famine become more frequent and intense. Money goes to emergency food aid, not long-term drought mitigation. The same money spent on one year of emergency food aid could fund a food sustainability programme for the entire county and its nearly one million residents, according to draft policies in parliament. Juma threatened to pull her story when editors wanted to edit out the data: Her story depended on engaging donors, enraging citizens and embarrassing the government mostly through television, but also in print and a summary online (Juma, 2014).



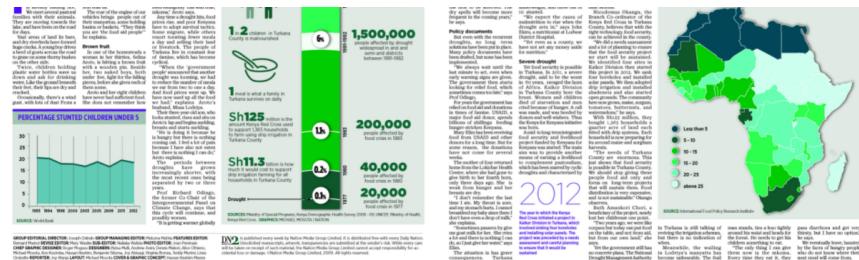


Figure 45.2. a print version of mercy Juma's television special on food security in Turkana. Source: Internews.

She convinced donors with the strength of her data. She sourced climate, agricultural and health data from government ministries, public health surveys, donor agencies and the Kenyan Red Cross. The USAID Kenya mission saw the data visualization demonstrating that one year of USAID emergency food aid could fund the entire Kenya Red Cross food sustainability strategy for Turkana. She demonstrated the health impact of delays on children, and the stark contrast with countries growing food in deserts. She was invited to present her findings at the USAID office in Nairobi and, in 2015, USAID's agriculture and food security strategy shifted from humanitarian aid to sustainable agriculture.¹

She won over public opinion with the intimate documentation of families starving in Turkana. She spent three days with the families featured in the piece along with a Turkana translator and videographer. The station phone was ringing off the hook before the story finished airing, with Kenyans seeking to donate money to the families featured in the story. Due to the massive reaction to the story from individuals and organizations alike, within hours the station established a relief fund for Turkana County. This and follow-up stories on the desperate famine situation in Northern Kenya prompted daily attention in the Kenyan media, which has historically shown a lack of interest in the plight of the isolated and impoverished regions of Northern Kenya. Her main audience connected to a strong, human story and not the data that would suggest donations could be more wisely invested in development.

The government succumbed to public and donor pressure. The Drought Monitoring Committee asked Juma to share data from her story because they claimed they were not aware that the situation had become so desperate, although the same department had tried to charge her for access to the data when she began her investigation. Based on Juma's water shortage data, the Ministry of Water plans to travel to Turkana to dig more boreholes. The government, through the Ministry of Planning and Devolution, released Sh2.3 billion (\$27 million) to go towards relief distribution in Turkana County, a development that Juma followed closely.

Due to the massive reaction to the story from individuals and organizations, food sustainability legislation that redirected aid was finally introduced into the Senate in May that year.² Juma has continued to produce data-driven features on the disconnect between public perception, donor programmes and policy, including in “Teen Mums of Kwale,” an investigation on the impact of contraceptive use on teen pregnancy rates in a conservative part of the country (“#TeenMumsOfKwale,” 2016).

How Do We Ensure Our Justice System Is Protecting the Marginalized?

In Afghanistan, the Pajhwok Afghan News data team used data to probe the impact of two policies lauded as key for progress towards justice in the country: Afghanistan’s Law on the Elimination of Violence Against Women (2009), and the Afghanistan National Drug Control Strategy (2012–2016). It found two unexpected casualties of these policies: Abused women and rural labourers. Although Afghanistan does not have an access to information law, many agencies that receive donor funding, including the women’s affairs and counter- narcotics ministries, are contractually obliged to make that data available.

Five years after the domestic violence law took effect, Pajhwok Afghan News wanted to track the fate of abusers and the abused. The team obtained the data on the 21,000 abuse cases from the Ministry of Women’s Affairs and several UN agencies tasked with tracking cases, from registration, to final verdicts and mediation. They found that in the worst country in the world to be a woman, the widely lauded law has channelled women through a local mediation process entrenched in traditional chauvinism, that usually lands her right back with her abuser (Munsef & Salehai, 2016). Two years later, Human Rights Watch published a study confirming PAN’s findings, namely that law and mediation have failed Afghan women (United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan, 2018). Even if more women had access to the court system, which boasts a high rate of conviction for abusers, there remains the thorny issue of what to do with divorced women in a society where women do not work.

Similar practical challenges arise in the enforcement of Afghanistan’s drug strategy. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime was granted rare access to prisoners convicted of drug charges and handed over the raw survey data to the Pajhwok team. Analysis of survey findings revealed that the policy has seen mostly poor and illiterate drivers and farmers being imprisoned, while most drug kingpins walk free (Barakzai & Wardak, 2016). Most also reported that they planned to go right back to labouring in the drug trade once they are released as it is

the only way to support their families in isolated rural areas.

These stories served a threefold purpose for the Pajhwok data team: To reality check policies developed from a Western legal lens, to highlight the consequences of economic marginalization by both gender and location, and to provide data-driven public interest content in Dari, Pashto and English for a diverse audience.

How Do We Ensure Quality Education for Everyone?

Access to education, often regarded as a great equalizer, has allowed marginalized communities to quantify the government's failure to provide basic public services and push local leaders towards reform. In a series of stories, developer-cum-journalist Abdul Salam Afridi built a beat around education access among the disadvantaged, which landed him on the shortlist for the Data Journalism Awards for his portfolio. In his first story, he used official government education statistics and nationwide education survey data to show that parents in the remote tribal region of the Khyber Pass, who out of desperation were sending growing numbers of children to private schools, were making a bad investment. His story showed that most graduating students in both public and private schools fail basic standardized tests (Afridi, 2017a). Further stories on public education in the Khyber Pass and the Federally Administered Tribal Areas, where Salam himself is from, probe the reasons behind the failing schools (Afridi, 2017b, 2018).

Another story based on student rosters for the national vocational training programme and national job listings revealed a huge gap between skills and market demand. The investigation revealed that the country is training IT specialists and beauticians when it needs drivers and steel workers. Thus over half of their alumni are left unemployed, largely because of who is behind the project. Funded by the German government development fund, GiZ, the Pakistan government did its own analysis, came to the same conclusion, and quickly overhauled the programme, adding new course offerings aligned with more needed jobs skills (Afridi, 2017c).

An inherent advantage to data-driven beat reporting among marginalized communities is that the journalist can stay on the story after the initial scandal is forgotten. What these stories also have in common is that they use data not just to report the problem, but also what can be done about it. These journalists gathered data to measure the problem, the impact, the causes and the solution. Globally, there is a push for accessible data journalism by, about and for marginalized communities to win their trust and engage them in civic life.

Data journalism under constraints

Much of the division in academia about the long-term viability of data journalism stems from a split over whether its aim is to produce high profile interactive products or fact-based public interest reporting. Journalists in developing countries use data to answer basic questions about institutionalized gender discrimination, prejudicial justice systems and wilful neglect of the hungry, and to deliver that information to as many people as they can. They do this knowing that these problems are complicated and policies are still very unlikely to change as a result. Data journalists in the West, with access to better resources, data and free media, and a more responsive government, are often not seizing the opportunity to ensure that in such tumultuous times, we are addressing the information needs of marginalized citizens and holding government accountable.

Most of these problems were invisible in the past and will become invisible again if journalists stop counting. Data journalism at its best is by, about and for those who society has decided do not count. Luckily civil society, activists, academics, governments and others are working together to do a better job of counting those who have been left out. Journalists have a vital role in ensuring that these are problems people are talking about and working to fix. Everything was terrible, is terrible and will be terrible unless we keep counting and talking. Year after year, we need to count the hungry, the abused, the imprisoned, the uneducated, the unheard, because everywhere on earth, things are terrible for someone.

Footnotes

1. www.usaid.gov/kenya/agriculture-and-food-security

2. kenyalaw.org/kl/fileadmin/pdfdownloads/bills/2014/TheFoodSecurityBill2014.pdf

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