

# What Journalists Can Do If They Learn to Code

Sisi Wei, @sisiwei  
Deputy News Apps Editor, ProPublica

# Should Journalism Schools Require Reporters to 'Learn Code'? No

The faulty logic behind a popular theory

OLGA KHAZAN | OCT 21 2013, 7:31 AM ET

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When I started journalism grad school in 2009, I couldn't wait to finish so I could begin my reporting career. But this was the recession, and after I had read the hundredth news article documenting the travails of aspiring journalists [walking dogs for cash](#) or [eating vitamin soup](#), I got a little discouraged.

And after I had what felt like my hundredth freelance pitch rejected, I grew

# Scooped by code

"Every skill you don't have leaves a whole class of stories out of your reach. And data stories are usually the ones that are hiding in plain sight."

## PREDICTIONS FOR JOURNALISM 2014: A NIEMAN LAB SERIES

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In 2014, you will be scooped by a reporter who knows how to program. Yes, you. Not the reporter a few cubes over. Not that guy you went to j-school with. You.

Sure, reporters don't need to know how to program. But there are lots of things reporters don't need to know how to do. They also don't need to know how to write — plenty of great scoop artists can barely write their names and get heavily rewritten by harried editors. Plenty of great writers are nervous types who never get the hang of convincing strangers to tell them their secrets. And we all know reporters who don't

know how to write a FOIA letter and who can't bear the thought of reading the avalanche of documents that, with luck, arrive in response



**Code = ?**

**Three (thousand?) stories  
journalists can only tell  
with code.**

# **1. Stories that require collecting large amounts of data**



# **Dollars for Docs**

**How Industry Dollars Reach Your Doctors**





**2012 U.S. Health Care Professionals Payment  
Disclosure Report - Cumulative**  
Period January 1, 2012 to December 31, 2012

Recipient Name	Affiliated Organization	Recipient Address	Spend Date	Payment	Service Provided or Related Activity
Aamodt - St Pierre, Stephanie		1900 W. Polk St Chicago, IL	12/13/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aamodt - St Pierre, Stephanie		1900 W. Polk St Chicago, IL	12/13/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aamodt - St Pierre, Stephanie		1900 W. Polk St Chicago, IL	12/13/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aanderudd, Paul		13450 E. 12 Mile Rd. Warren, MI	05/22/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aanderudd, Paul		13450 E. 12 Mile Rd. Warren, MI	08/15/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aaron, Brunner		210 Village Center Pkwy Stockbridge, GA	08/03/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aaron, Katrina		4021 Balmoral Dr Sw Huntsville, AL	05/15/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aaron, Loyd		301 Ne Knott St Portland Or 97212, OR	11/02/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aaron, Loyd		301 Ne Knott St Portland Or 97212, OR	11/02/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	04/08/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	04/25/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	05/17/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	05/24/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	07/22/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	07/22/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	08/19/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Road Raleigh, NC	08/27/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	01/01/2012 - 03/31/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Rd, Ste. 101 Raleigh, NC	01/01/2012 - 03/31/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Aarons, Maureen		3225 Blue Ridge Road Raleigh, NC	11/20/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation
Abadi, Jules		285 Sills Rd Patchogue, NY	05/02/2012	\$0.00 - \$100.00	Meals or refreshments in connection with informational presentation



2012 Health Care Professionals **Payments Disclosure Report** [Contact us online](#) or at 800-511-2727

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Entities Paid 77931 - 77940 of 135046

### Viewing all Entities Paid

Entity Paid	City	State	Service Provided or Activity	Cash	Non Cash
MCCOY, CASEY ELIZABETH	SAINT LOUIS	MO	<u>Educational Items</u>	---	\$71
Total Received by: MCCOY, CASEY ELIZABETH				---	\$71
MCCOY, CLARK STEVEN	GAINESVILLE	FL	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$15
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, CLARK STEVEN</a>				---	\$15
Total Received by: MCCOY, CLARK STEVEN				---	\$15
MCCOY, DEREK ANDREW	FRANKLIN	VA	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$33
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, DEREK ANDREW</a>				---	\$33
Total Received by: MCCOY, DEREK ANDREW				---	\$33
MCCOY, DOROTHY	HACKENSACK	NJ	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$28
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, DOROTHY</a>				---	\$28
Total Received by: MCCOY, DOROTHY				---	\$28
MCCOY, DOUGLAS RAYMOND	COLUMBUS	OH	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$184
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, DOUGLAS RAYMOND</a>				---	\$184
Total Received by: MCCOY, DOUGLAS RAYMOND				---	\$184
MCCOY, GREGORY BUEL	PORTLAND	OR	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$24
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, GREGORY BUEL</a>				---	\$24
Total Received by: MCCOY, GREGORY BUEL				---	\$24
MCCOY, HARRIET R	RICHMOND	VA	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$25
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, HARRIET R</a>				---	\$25
Total Received by: MCCOY, HARRIET R				---	\$25
MCCOY, JAMES ARTHUR	ATLANTA	GA	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$20
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, JAMES ARTHUR</a>				---	\$20
Total Received by: MCCOY, JAMES ARTHUR				---	\$20
MCCOY, JIMMY EUGENE	BOERNE	TX	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$11
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, JIMMY EUGENE</a>				---	\$11
Total Received by: MCCOY, JIMMY EUGENE				---	\$11
MCCOY, JONATHAN DOUGLASS	HANOVER	MD	<u>Meals</u>	---	\$22
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, JONATHAN DOUGLASS</a>				---	\$22
Total Received by: MCCOY, JONATHAN DOUGLASS				---	\$22

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[Z](#)

Pages: All results

Page 1

Entities Paid 1 - 1 of 1

Search on: MCCOY, CLARK STEVEN and Related Entities

Entity Paid	City	State	Service Provided or Activity	Cash	Non Cash
MCCOY, CLARK STEVEN	GAINESVILLE	FL	Meals	---	\$15
Healthcare Professional: <a href="#">MCCOY, CLARK STEVEN</a>				---	---
Total Received by: MCCOY, CLARK STEVEN				---	\$15

Pages: All results

Page 1

Entities Paid 1 - 1 of 1

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[Z](#)

# Total of

PDFs:  
17,320 pages

Websites:  
243,034 pages

# 1,099,377 records

~ 1.1 million records  
at 10 seconds per record  
= 11,000,000 seconds  
= 3055.55 hours

At 8 hours/day, 5 days/week, a person works  
2,080 hours/year.

$3055.55/2080 = 1.47$  years of work

# Dollars for Docs

## How Industry Dollars Reach Your Doctors

By Charles Ornstein, Lena Groeger, Mike Tigas, and Ryann Grochowski Jones, ProPublica. Updated December 13, 2016

Pharmaceutical and medical device companies are now required by law to release details of their payments to a variety of doctors and U.S. teaching hospitals for promotional talks, research and consulting, among other categories. Use this tool to search for general payments (excluding research and ownership interests) made from August 2013 to December 2015. | [Related Story: We've Updated Dollars for Docs. Here's What's New.](#) »

### Has Your Doctor Received Drug or Device Company Money?

 All States 

For example: Andrew Jones, Boston, 10013



**\$6.25B**  
in disclosed payments



**810,716**  
doctors



**1,171**  
teaching hospitals



**1,866**  
companies

Totals listed below account for all payments from August 2013 to December 2015.

### Top 50 Companies

Click on a company to see how its payments break down by drug, device or doctor. Or, [see all companies](#) »

COMPANY	PAYMENTS
GENENTECH, INC.	\$727M
DEPUY SYNTHES PRODUCTS LLC	\$167M
STRYKER CORPORATION	\$153M

### Highest-Earning Doctors

NAME	PAYMENTS
ROGER JACKSON Orthopaedic Surgery of the Spine	\$54.1M
SUJATA NARAYAN Family Medicine	\$43.9M
STEPHEN BURKHART Orthopaedic Surgery	\$43.4M
KEVIN FOLEY Orthopaedic Surgery	\$39.8M

### About the Dollars for Docs Data

Details behind our drug company money database.

### Download the Data

The entire data set is available for purchase in the [ProPublica Data Store](#).

### Source

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services [Open Payments](#) data.

### Archive

Search for payments made by 17 drug companies between 2009 and 2013.

### Patients, Take Action

We want to know how you've used or might use this information in your day to day lives. Have you talked to your doctor? Do you plan to? Tell us: [propubli/participate-d4d](http://propubli/participate-d4d)

### Reporters, Use Our Data

Have questions about how you can best

## Has Your Doctor Received Drug or Device Company Money?

All States

Search

For example: [Andrew Jones](#), [Boston](#), 10013

## Search Results: 1,011 Doctors

### If your doctor is not listed:

Results are sorted to display closest matching names first. The addresses associated with doctors are provided by the government and do not reflect all of a doctor's practice locations. If your doctor does not appear in the listing, that could mean that the doctor did not receive industry payments from August 2013 to December 2015, or you have misspelled his/her name.

DOCTOR	LOCATION	HOW MUCH
<a href="#">JON DRAUD</a> Psychiatry	<a href="#">NASHVILLE, TN</a>	\$664K
<a href="#">JON ADCOCK</a> Obstetrics & Gynecology	<a href="#">BIRMINGHAM, AL</a>	\$1,383
<a href="#">JON ANDERSEN</a> Surgery	<a href="#">JERSEYVILLE, IL</a>	\$80
<a href="#">JON ARNASON</a> Rheumatology	<a href="#">MADISON, WI</a>	\$278
<a href="#">JON BAKER</a>	<a href="#">MATHER, CA</a>	\$26
<a href="#">JON BALDWIN</a> Nuclear Imaging & Therapy	<a href="#">BIRMINGHAM, AL</a>	\$25
<a href="#">JON BANWART</a> Orthopaedic Surgery	<a href="#">GALENA, KS</a>	\$2,505
<a href="#">JON BERAN</a> Family Medicine	<a href="#">CHICAGO, IL</a>	\$323
<a href="#">JON BERNER</a> Psychiatry	<a href="#">WOODINVILLE, WA</a>	\$1,957



# JON DRAUD

Listed Specialty: Psychiatry

1916 PATTERSON ST 715, NASHVILLE, TN, 37203-2118

[SEARCH THIS NAME IN DOLLARS FOR DOCS ARCHIVE »](#)

IS THIS YOU? DO YOU BELIEVE THE DATA CONTAINS ERRORS? [CLICK HERE FOR INFORMATION »](#)

## Is This Your Doctor?



Print out this record, along with questions and tips for talking with your physician about payments.



Have you used or plan to use this information? [Tell us about it.](#)

## Yearly Payment Breakdown: 2015

### All Payments: At a Glance

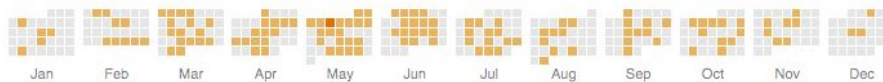
2015	<b>291</b> PAYMENTS	<b>\$199,702</b> PAYMENT TOTAL	<b>14</b> COMPANIES PAID THIS DOCTOR
2014	<b>547</b> PAYMENTS	<b>\$373,940</b> PAYMENT TOTAL	<b>13</b> COMPANIES PAID THIS DOCTOR
2013	<b>145</b> PAYMENTS	<b>\$90,198</b> PAYMENT TOTAL	<b>9</b> COMPANIES PAID THIS DOCTOR

### Payment Calendar in 2015

This doctor received a payment on **133** days in 2015.

Each box below represents a single day during the disclosure period. A gray box indicates no payments. The darker the color, the more payments a doctor received that day.

2015



### Types of Payments in 2015

CATEGORY	PAYMENTS	PAYMENT VALUE
PROMOTIONAL SPEAKING/OTHER	83	\$153K



# Dollars for Docs: Talk With Your Doctor

<https://projects.propublica.org/docdollars/>

You can print this page and show it your doctor.

ProPublica's Dollars for Docs database lets you search for payments to U.S.-based doctors made by pharmaceutical and medical device companies between August 2013 and December 2014. The disclosure of these payments is required under the Physician Payment Sunshine Act, a provision of the 2010 Affordable Care Act.

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## About This Information

- The information that appears here comes directly from the federal government. Companies must attest to its accuracy and doctors have the ability to contest information they believe is in error.
  - This site includes payments for such activities as speaking, consulting, meals, travel and royalties. It does not include payments for clinical research.
  - It is legal for companies to make payments to doctors as long as the payments are not a kickback or inducement to use their products.
  - Some doctors say collaborative relationships, particularly those involving research, are necessary to develop new treatments and cures. But many ethicists have raised questions about the payments, and studies show that they may influence doctors' prescribing decisions.
  - Only you can decide if this matters to you and if so, whether you want to talk to your doctor about it. If you plan to talk with your doctor (or if you already have), please help us by filling out this short survey: [propubli/participate-d4d](http://propubli/participate-d4d)
- 

## Preparing for Your Conversation

If you decide you'd like to talk to your doctor about this, please keep in mind:

## **2. Stories that require analyzing large amounts of data**

Updates from last version:

- \* Replaced screenshot with up-to-date version
- \* Clarified language describing readmission measure to indicate 30 days from discharge

## Assessing surgeon-level risk of patient harm during elective surgery for public reporting

Olga Pierce, Marshall Allen  
ProPublica

Whitepaper as of

August 4, 2015

*Olga Pierce and Marshall Allen are journalists at ProPublica, a non-profit organization dedicated to journalism in the public interest. This analysis was done by ProPublica in consultation with Sebastien Haneuse, Karen Joynt and Ashish Jha of the Harvard T. H. Chan School of Public Health, Marty Makary of Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, dozens of other researchers, surgeons and other practicing physicians, and hundreds of patients who have been harmed while receiving medical care.*

### Abstract

**Background** Patients undergoing elective surgical procedures sometimes suffer avoidable, serious complications like infections, blood clots and hemorrhage. However, little is currently known in American medicine about the relative performance of surgeons when it comes to minimizing these types of harm. While practices such as peer review may identify individual egregious errors, there is little infrastructure in place to identify patterns of complications over time, or across separate facilities. Overall, it's estimated that fewer than 1% of surgical outcomes are being measured<sup>1</sup>, leaving patients, the medical community, and even surgeons themselves unaware of how their patients fare collectively over time. Most surgeons

# Surgeon Scorecard

*by Sisi Wei, Olga Pierce and Marshall Allen, ProPublica, Updated July 15, 2015*

Guided by experts, ProPublica calculated death and complication rates for surgeons performing one of eight elective procedures in Medicare, carefully adjusting for differences in patient health, age and hospital quality. Use this database to know more about a surgeon before your operation.

## READ OUR STORY

Making the Cut: Why Choosing the Right Surgeon Matters Even More Than You Know

## METHODOLOGY

Read how we calculated complications and the key questions we considered.

## EDITOR'S NOTE

Why ProPublica is naming surgeons and what experts are saying about it

[Find Near Me](#)[Find a Surgeon](#)[Find a Hospital](#)

## Surgeons and Hospitals Near My Location



 Use My Location

...or jump straight to your state:

Pick a state





# CITRUS MEMORIAL HOSPITAL

502 W HIGHLAND BLVD, INVERNESS, [FLORIDA](#), 34452, PHONE: 352-726-1551

## How Surgeons at This Hospital Perform, by Procedure



**How we calculated these rates:** Guided by top researchers and doctors, ProPublica used Medicare data from 2009-2013 to identify cases where a patient died in the hospital or had to be readmitted within 30 days for a problem related to one of these elective procedures. We then calculated complication rates for surgeons, carefully accounting for differences in patient health, age and hospital quality. These rates are calculated using data from Medicare records, which do not include patients with private insurance or in another program like Medicaid. A surgeon's rate spans all hospitals at which he or she operates and is not unique to a given hospital. [Read our methodology »](#)

**Important: Some surgeons may no longer be operating at this hospital.**

*Hover over underlined items to see details.*

## Knee Replacement

Total knee replacement (ICD-9-CM code 81.54)

Replace diseased knee joint with an artificial knee. The most common reason for a knee replacement is osteoarthritis,



### **3. Stories that uncover what's been been removed from the Internet**

Political Speech 党走

Long Text

Dissidents

Bo Xilai

Public Figures

Protests

Wang Lin

Scandals & Corruption

Censorship

Cartoons & Humor

Select View



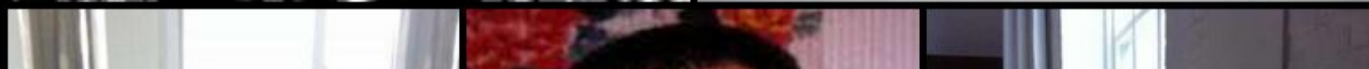
Following Wang Lin's blog  
and all the other blogs  
that are part of the  
New Citizens Movement  
New Citizens Movement  
New Citizens Movement  
New Citizens Movement

## Dissidents 异见人士

This category includes images of well-known Chinese dissidents, their political essays, petitions for their release from jail and updates on their detainment or whereabouts. These dissidents include:

Xu Zhiyong (许志永), a well-known Chinese lawyer and rights activist who was arrested during our observation period in late July 2013. Xu is one of the co-founders of the [New Citizens Movement](#), which calls for democracy in China. Many deleted posts are photos of Xu or [Long Weibo](#) petitions or essays calling for his release.

Xiao Shu (笑蜀), a journalist who campaigned for Xu's release, was [taken away by police](#) a few days after Xu was arrested. Censors deleted photos of him, as well as his public statement calling for Xu's release.



```

[
  {
    "created_at" : "Tue Nov 30 16:21:13 +0800 2010",
    "text" : "转发微博。",
    "truncated" : false,
    "retweeted_status" :
    {
      "created_at" : "Tue Nov 30 16:05:41 +0800 2010",
      "text" : "对待事物的出发点、立足点，决定着事物的发展及发展后的结果。这个结果实际也是一种相对而言的成败。世俗间追求这种成败却又调整不好出发点，更是找不到立足点。所以成也好败也好，放下了最好。",
      "truncated" : false,
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      "annotations" :
      [
      ],
      "in_reply_to_screen_name" : "",
      "geo" : null,
      "user" :
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        "favourites_count" : 0,
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        "description" : "心存慈悲 身奉善行 出世入世 修己助人 归元禅寺官方网站: http://www.gui
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    },
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    "annotations" :
    [

```

**YOU, yes you,  
can learn to code.**



ahhhhhh!







**So how do I start?**

**1. Pick a project**

## **2. Stay focused**

# 3. Google it

## **4. Talk to people**

# Scooped by code

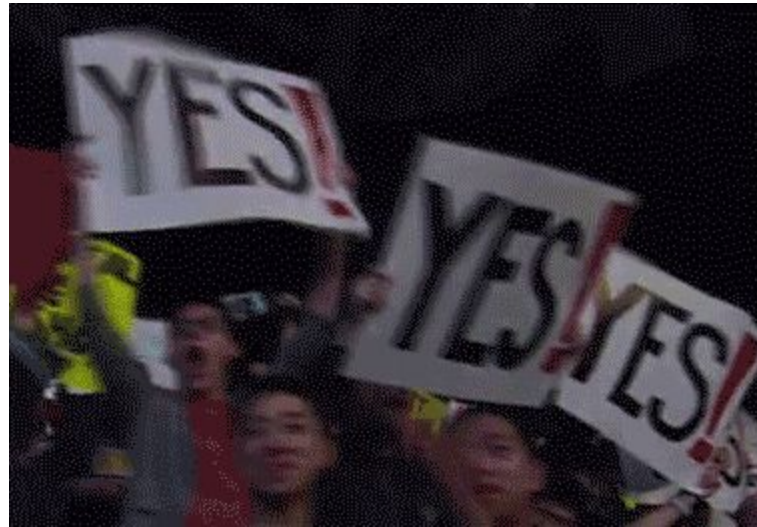
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"Every skill you don't have leaves a whole class of stories out of your reach. And data stories are usually the ones that are hiding in plain sight."

**PREDICTIONS FOR JOURNALISM 2014: A NIEMAN LAB SERIES**







# ProPublica Data Institute

ProPublica is proud to announce our second Data Institute, a 11-day intensive workshop on how to use data, design and code for journalism. The workshop will be from June 7 to June 21 in our NYC offices. The deadline to apply is **March 31**.

Apply!

Questions? Check our **FAQ** and email [data.institute@propublica.org](mailto:data.institute@propublica.org).

[propublica.org/data-institute](http://propublica.org/data-institute)

# Questions?

[Sisi.Wei@propublica.org](mailto:Sisi.Wei@propublica.org)