Storytellin With Dat

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Storytelling with data
Managing and writing for impact

Phase I: Developing the idea

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However your newsroom handles projects, you've probably had a few failures. You know the ones: the three-part series that didn't have any news; the hard-charging investigative piece that didn't prove its point; the long-but-important story that got no results. Chances are, those projects could have been better with some important nurturing up front and the ruthless pruning along the way.

1. Shape the idea: Every project starts with an idea. Make sure you've got a good one. Projects fail when the idea is unfocused or constantly adapted to reporting. Projects should have a clear premise, stated in a sentence. Avoid "topic" projects (status of children; poultry pollution) and go for vivid ideas that have a good chance of righting a wrong (the state is endangering children; poultry pollution in Barr County is making families sick).

2. Focus, focus, focus: Keep honing until you have sharp focus. Brainstorm for hours, do preliminary reporting and brainstorm again. Keep at it until you have something that will piss readers off and compel governments to take action.

3. Use the scientific method: Having a hypothesis or premise isn't bias, because you are going to test as many ways as you can, and abandon the premise if it doesn't hold up under rigorous testing.

4. Figure out the proof (and the disproof): Ask yourself: What information will prove my premise? And what information will disprove it? What records do I need to test my theory? And what records do I need to disprove it? Seek both.

5. Acquire data and records early. Do your FOIAs and data requests as soon as you have a premise and know the data you need. Don't invest a lot of time in the project before you test the premise, or you will fall in love with the idea, rather than the proof.

6. Plan the analysis: Once you've got evidence your premise will hold up, figure out the scope of your analysis.
Do you have to prove the state endangers every child, or only most of them? Or is endangering even one child too many? Is absolute proof worth the extra work required or is showing significant questions enough?

7. Scope out the landscape: Find out what's been done before on the topic. If it's original, great. If not, go ahead anyway if it's a significant local problem and you can make a difference with legislation, regulation, increased awareness or some other action.

8. Choose the right team: Match talents, temperament. Involve more than one reporter.

9. Report for the best storytelling: A narrative requires different reporting than an exposé. Think ahead to the writing.

10. Find the victims: Sometimes victims can be identified through the data. Often, they cannot. A project is useless without REAL victims, so if they cannot be identified in the data you will have to devise strategies to find them and get them to talk.

11. Know when to stick with the plan and when to alter: If your premise is significantly discredited, be ready to kill the project or scale back dramatically. If you aren't willing to kill a project that becomes unfocused or unwieldy, don't even start.

12. Make sure top bosses know what you are baking. Your executive editor won't be happy with a three-layer cake with fabulous icing and wonderful decorations if she's only hungry enough for a cupcake. Whet her appetite by keeping her informed along the way.

Phase II: Marrying data and reporting

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By this point, reporting is underway. The team has questions to answer and data to work with. Early reporting indicates you are on the right track. You have assembled a team that is ready to dig for facts from data, documents and sources. As a manager, your job is to keep the project focused on the goal.

1. Reality Check: Testing data on the street. Numbers are not the story. Editors, don't show off findings until you are sure of what you have.

2. Data Mining: Interviewing your data as a continuing source throughout the project Editors need to know what the data can say and what it can't say.

3. Secondary Data: Once you score the key datasets, ask early for companion data. Build in time for acquiring data. At the same time, evaluate every database you go after.

4. Data Limitations: Don't be put off by limits i.e. years available; fields; format complications. Be sure data has key fields you need to answer your questions.

5. Developing Sources: Include those who work with the data. They may tell you about data you didn't know existed or help you interpret your results.

6. Checking Results: Line up experts to review methodology. Look for other explanations.

7. Interviewing with Power: Use the information culled from the data to dig deeper into the subject. Be strategic. Don't overwhelm your subject with all that you know.

8. Keeping Track: Start a system early (especially when working on a team) of outlines, sharing notes and retrieving key interviews. Create a special factoids file for facts culled from the data analysis. Ask for memos or updates on reporting progress.

9. Moving in Sync, Working in Teams: Sources and documents become a check on what you are learning from the data and vice versa.

10. Plan Early for Photos/Graphics/Maps/Online: Even if you don't know what your story/project will conclude, get graphics/mapping/online in gear early. You may need to acquire special software i.e. Spatial Analyst if you are doing a density map, for example.

11. Details for Storytelling: People, setting, mood, atmosphere, descriptions, locations. These are the bits of information you can only get from being there. The data may lead you to the neighborhood, the accident location, the school, or the person. Only you can paint the picture in words of what you saw.

12. Write, Write, Write: Write as you go especially if the reporting extends over months. If you do a key interview with a victim's family, for example, write it as soon as you can even if you don't know whether they will be a key or minor player in your story.

13. Data Selection: In the end, limit the numbers in the text to those required to tell the story. Leave the rest to graphics or maps. Avoid jargon. Step away from the database labels to describe your analysis. Spare the readers details on the fact that you did a computer analysis or how you did it. Save those details for the nerd box or project explainer.

Phase III: Bringing it home

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1. Build the team. Get people from photo, design, graphics, copy desk involved. Today. They are the first readers on the story, and can provide initial reaction. If you're spending months working on a story, your colleagues also need months to present the material to readers.

2. Create a budget. Develop a backout schedule. Do it today. Set deadlines for when stories, photos, graphics are due to the line editor, to the copy desk. Include deadlines for giving the project to your managing editor and editor.

3. Write. Write. Write. Write every day. Read every day. If you write every day, you know what you have, what you don't have and where the holes are. There's no need for pulling an all-nighter to get a story to your editor by deadline. Editors: Read what the reporters are writing all through the process.

4. Know where you're at. The reporting-writing process has 5 parts. So does page design, photography and headline writing. Idea, Report, Organize, Draft, Revise. Knowing where you are in the process can help you over hurdles.

5. Tell stories. Memorable stories, stories with impact, stories that affect change are about people doing stuff. They have a protagonist and supporting characters. The people drive the story; the data is a supporting character.

6. Pick a plot. Focus your story. Simplify your story. A simple story is easier to write and easier to understand. Man against man. Man against nature. Man against government. What's your story about? Love, hate, injustice?

7. Pick a structure. Does your story have a **B**eginning, **M**iddle and **E**nd? The classic Wall Street Journal story is anecdotal lede, nut graf, development, kicker ending. Another way of looking at it:

> **A**ction
> **B**ackground
> **D**evelopment
> **C**limax
> **E**nding

8. Edit together. Line by line. Out loud.

9. Edit again. This time start reading from the bottom up to the top. You'll be amazed at what you find: wordiness; paraphrases that use the same language as quotes; logical inconsistencies.

Tell stories

Use active verbs
Omit needless words

Tape next to your computer