



Jonathan Jones

THE POWER OF DATA JOURNALISM

BY ANDREW TRENCH

The power of data is its ability to tell many intimate stories even as it describes the greatest of things.

This is the edge that data journalism offers and it's the area that my Media24 investigations team and I have been working to develop in our reporting.

A story we tackled earlier this year may serve as an interesting case study of how public data can be mined to ask some pointed questions about the impact of public policy.

We located an interesting data set from the national Treasury which had details of remuneration and benefit packages for all senior public officials – including executive mayors – of South Africa's 280-odd local councils. We also located another data set which listed South Africa's most financially-delinquent councils.

Using the two sets of information we built a simple database and ran some queries asking, for example, how many of the most expensive municipal teams also featured on the delinquent list.

The answer was surprising – about 20% of the most expensive council management teams were also among the most financially malfeasant.

That query generated an interesting piece of journalism which asked a hard question about what kind of bang

ratepayers were getting for their tax bucks in these areas.

The power of data often lies in the small detail as well as the big picture, so we took our project a step further and built a web application which allowed readers to navigate an interactive map and to also search for their own councils to find out what the top officials were earning.

We pulled into that additional data from the government's latest community survey to provide population data for these areas, which provides another illuminating filter on the spending of these local authorities.

The application – called What's Your Mayor Worth? (<http://www.m24i.co.za/what-mayor-worth/>) – generated a range of responses.

Readers wrote in thanking us for shining a light on their towns and the officials who ran them, while some government spin doctors accused us of potentially fomenting local service delivery protests. They also gave us tips about local officials who may be of interest to us.

We were told that citizens would be so enraged at the pay disclosures when held up against service delivery failures that they would riot.

As far as I know this has not happened. What *has* happened, we hope, is that citizens living in areas of endemic,

service-delivery flops are now armed with some quality information to inform their next voting decision.

In a democracy where officials often pay lip service to transparency, the availability of data – and active scrutiny of it – can lift the mist on government.

Data journalism and the credible knowledge it provides can be a catalyst for meaningful civic activism. It also provides a platform for potential collaboration between society and the state for when the measurables of public policy are laid bare and interrogated new insights can emerge.

Elsewhere, the Kenya Open Data initiative (<https://opendata.go.ke/>) embraces this thinking, providing hundreds of official data sets for citizens to interrogate – and extract insights from – in formats which are easy to use. This initiative leaves South Africa red-faced in its shameful lack of accessible public data.

Yet, through entities like the national Treasury, the Department of Basic Education, Statistics SA, among several others, useful local datasets are emerging, providing more than enough grist for the mill of journalists, hacktivists and ordinary citizens to ask probing and intelligent questions about the society in which we live.