

Great data stories

By Margaret Renn

Les Diarios Secretos – the Secret Diaries – is a great story and a great data story.

Four young Brazilian journalists exposed a racket, run by state politicians and officials, employing ghost workers. Some were retired employees or politicians; others were just names they had stolen. The furore caused by the story was so great the state government in Parana had to resign. The data was gathered on a vast Excel spreadsheet, running to tens of thousands of entries, every item culled from official or fraudulent “official” documents. Nothing was available online.

The key data was a list of names of the ghost workers. The only numbers were dates and salaries. So here, in one place, you can see data journalism in action, in a video the journalists prepared for last year’s Power Reporting investigative conference, held at Wits University: www.journalism.co.za/powerreporting

The reason for telling this story is to dispel the notion that data journalism is about figures. That you need to be good at mathematics, or have numbers at your fingertips.

People confuse data with numbers. Write down the name, hair and eye colour of everyone in your office or class, put the results into three columns in an Excel spreadsheet and you have a database. You can extrapolate all manner of variables using “data sort”. Now you have the data, the question remains, what’s the story?

Data journalism is about using these techniques to find stories. The data can come from government (the British MPs’ expenses scandal is an excellent example), public bodies, private companies, or you can create your own. The possibilities are endless. And you can mix data sets too.

Andrew Trench, investigations editor at Media24, worked with the Institute of Security Studies to calculate crime rates in South Africa. They took the crime figures for each area, overlaid the population figures for the same areas, and discovered that the worst crime rate per 100 000 of population is in a small area on the edge of Bloemfontein, and seven of the top 10 worst crime rates are in Cape Town. Not quite the outside world’s conception of crime in South Africa.¹

Data journalism as a tag doesn’t quite cover what we are doing. The term computer assisted reporting (CAR), which sprang into life in the 1980s in America, is perhaps more accurate. The skills are related and overlap. Using your computer you can find data from all over the world that relates to South Africa. You can

drop it into Excel to sort and shape it. You can download software to visualise or map it, to translate it into or out of English, French, Spanish; the possibilities for good journalism inside your computer are endless and changing all the time.

Two years ago we decided to introduce data journalism training into the mainstream of our Wits Journalism programme. It is now an integral part of the course for career entry Honours students, it’s taught as part of the Masters in Investigative Journalism and we run an array of courses at the annual Power Reporting investigative journalism conference.

Wits Journalism has been organising this three-day working conference, held in late October, for eight years and the computer classes have become an increasingly important stream, for everyone from beginners to the most advanced participant. We bring in international trainers and go from a basic entry-level introduction to Excel to something that will interest and excite the likes of Andrew Trench, who also teaches at the conference. Trainers come from the US, the UK and the Netherlands, and from a number of African countries.

Ron Nixon, an investigative journalist at the New York Times and a data specialist – he was training director at Investigative Reporters and Editors for several years – has joined Wits Journalism as a Visiting Fellow to teach a data-based investigative course. The course is built around an actual investigation.

For two years we have also done a week-long advanced data journalism course for those who are already practitioners and need the focus and concentration of a whole week to improve their skill level. This course covers an Excel refresher, learning SQLite, and an emphasis on that same core question: what is the story?

Finally, thanks to the Valley Trust, we have the funds to send two journalists for a year to IRE’s computer-assisted reporting conference in the US. There is one condition: having been to the conference these journalists join our team that teaches data journalism at Wits and at Power Reporting. Training the future South African trainers is an integral part of what we do.

We hope to bring data journalism and computer-assisted reporting into the main stream of South African journalism education, and from there into the main stream of South African journalism.

Endnotes

1. <http://www.andrewtrench.com/2011/09/16/a-murder-map-of-south-africa-interactive/>

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