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Journalism first: doing advocacy with data on your side

Lessons from data investigations

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By Eva Belmonte



Some of the best examples of data journalism are big investigations, where you spend months understanding a complex issue, discovering data where there was none or diving into huge amounts of information to

find something invisible to the naked eye. Bringing new light to an issue. But to understand the complexity of this data you need time, resources, and a lot of digging.

By the end of that odyssey, you no longer consult experts, you are the expert. And it is a waste to not take advantage of all that knowledge to try to fix the problems you encountered along the way.

Now, you might say: "We are journalists. We are here to narrate the world, not to fix it."

I'm not so sure.

What I am sure of is that sometimes publishing a story is not enough. And that the line separating journalism from advocacy -- which has always been there, even if it has been hidden -- is thinner than it may seem to many, in both traditional journalism and in the most cutting-edge data journalism teams.

Miriam Wells, impact editor at The Bureau Of Investigative Journalism, said in an [interview with NiemanLab](#) that she felt "a bit frustrated" with traditional journalism: "No matter what you write, no matter how much of a splash it makes, it doesn't always make a change."

Miriam's role, as she explains, is, among other things, to bridge the gap between journalists and activists. And this relationship between the two camps generates many doubts: How do you treat those same activists when they are also sources? How does it affect your editorial independence, or modify which topics you investigate and which you do not?

But what if we go one step further and the journalist becomes an actual activist? Those questions become even more tricky. Yet, it is very worthwhile to try and solve them. In Miriam's words: "I became a journalist because, even though it's cliché, I wanted to make a difference."

You have the data on your side: take advantage

At Civio, a small non-profit newsroom in Spain, we have been combining investigative reporting and data journalism with activism for years. We have asked ourselves these questions millions of times and we are very aware of the need to build a Chinese wall between investigations and activism, and between the goals of each, which can be quite different. But yes, we lobby. And it all started because it was impossible for us to stop thinking about the problems we had found just because we had published an article, when we saw the solution so clearly. How can you not do anything when you have the data on your side?

Although the nomenclature varies and examples are scarce, we are not the only ones that combine activism and journalism. ProPublica does it, too. In a white paper, [Issues Around Impact](#), ProPublica president Richard J. Tofole links the relationship to [solutions journalism](#) and explains the reasons why ProPublica sometimes goes one step further: “When a problem is identified by reporting, and when a solution is revealed as well — e.g., nurses with criminal records are not having their nursing licenses revoked but could be, or presidential pardons are being issued and withheld on a racially discriminatory basis due to Justice Department internal guidelines that could be changed at the stroke of a pen — it is appropriate for journalists to call attention to the problem and the remedy until the remedy is put in place.”

“ *No matter what you write, no matter how much of a splash it makes, it doesn't always make a change.* ”

One of those examples arises from the long-running and deep investigation ProPublica have been conducting for years on presidential pardons. In this case, what the data have shown, and what ProPublica is fighting, is a clear discrimination by race in decisions to grant --or not-- presidential pardons.

In Spain, the essential question about pardons is different, because the context is different. Here the fact is that it is much easier to receive a pardon if you have been convicted of a corruption-related crime compared to a common crime, such as theft or small scale drug offences. Some 227 people have been pardoned for corruption in the last 23 years. And religious orders have a preferential path for pardons. All these headlines emerged from [The Pardonometer](#), an investigation by Civio that launched in 2013 and that, in addition to many stories, created the first database of pardons in Spain, now used by other journalists and activists.

With that experience behind us, we went to Congress to share our point of view, based on our data, on how to reform the century-and-a-half old Law of the Pardon that parliamentary groups were negotiating. We asked for two things: firstly, that pardons should no longer be at the Government's discretion and, secondly, that pardons should be given some oversight -- on the part of the sentencing judge or the part of the parliament. We knew that the pardons process was being abused to forgive corrupt people, sometimes members of the ruling party itself, or public officials. With this in mind, we also asked that the whole process be made more transparent.

This is where a certain professional selfishness comes in: During our investigation, we found a tremendous lack of information around pardons. There was no data on who requested the pardon, and the reasons for pardoning one person or another were not published. We asked that all of this information be made public. For us. For all journalists who might investigate this issue. And, finally, for all interested citizens.



Choose your battles

But what battles should a journalist fight? Is every cause worth it? ProPublica's Richard Tofel wrote: "When something is literally indefensible, and when the means of remedy are clear and certain, journalists should not hesitate to suggest how change could occur."

Are we sure that "literally defenceless" means exactly the same thing for everyone? Of course not. We can talk about human rights and find a general consensus -- or not, depending on the times. Or, we look at issues of common concern, like political corruption. Any fight against corruption, in countries where it is prevalent, such as Spain, may seem fair in everyone's eyes. It is one of the areas in which Civio advocates, although not the main one. Even so, there will always be someone who differs on the details or thinks that journalists should not get involved.

What I am sure a journalist can defend, and what they should in fact defend, because it is our profession, is freedom of information. There is no freedom of information without transparency and a right of access to information. That is where our activism becomes selfish -- in the best sense of the word -- because we are fighting a battle to defend our own field.

Civio's activism, for example, is very limited. That is because it requires a lot of resources and time. The path we have been pushing for years does not go through publishing a statement and waiting to be ignored until media pressure builds up, something that would be the activist equivalent of publishing an article and waiting for the problem to be solved alone. Instead, it requires us to study laws, draft amendments and propose concrete improvements based on the data extracted from our investigations. And, since it is limited, it focuses on the core of what we do.

*“ Without good laws, there is no data.
Without data, there is no story.
”*

Virtually all of our battles focus on demanding more transparency and access to information. If it is important in traditional journalism, then it is even more important when we talk about data journalism. The laws of access to information are one of the most powerful tools that data journalists have to get stories. Without good laws, there is no data. Without data, there is no story.

Demanding better transparency laws, litigating in court against the concealment of information, and demanding that key data be public...All are struggles for our raw material: neither more nor less. That's where

journalists can feel the most comfortable, where activism makes sense, even though it also benefits everyone else.

Journalists may feel pressure to find the solution to a general problem that affects all citizens, such as pardoning corrupt criminals, and demand more control and transparency in the process. That might reveal unexpected data to investigate and benefit their journalism.

Or, the other way around, a media outlet may press for the prices that governments pay for their medicines to write an article about new and expensive medicines and their impact on the health system. Then, perhaps the obligation to publish that information puts pressure on pharmaceutical companies, who might give greater discounts or patient groups may demand adding new drugs to the public health system, benefiting all citizens.

In neither case have we lost sight of journalism: it is always present as a public good worth protecting.

There is still a third case: when fighting, after an investigation, to eliminate the obstacles that we encountered along the way and made it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain the data we needed to tell our story. It's a sort of final revenge.

