# Data journalism may be helping to solidify the divide between those who can afford to be in engaged in the political process and the rest

By Democratic Audit UK

Many have welcomed the increased role of data journalism, praising its capacity to shed light on the cold hard facts which were often at the mercy of ideology and conjecture. But what role doesit play in fostering (or discouraging) citizen engagement? **Tom Felle** *argues that it may in fact help to solidify the emerging gap between those who are already interested and engaged with political and public life, and those who are not.*
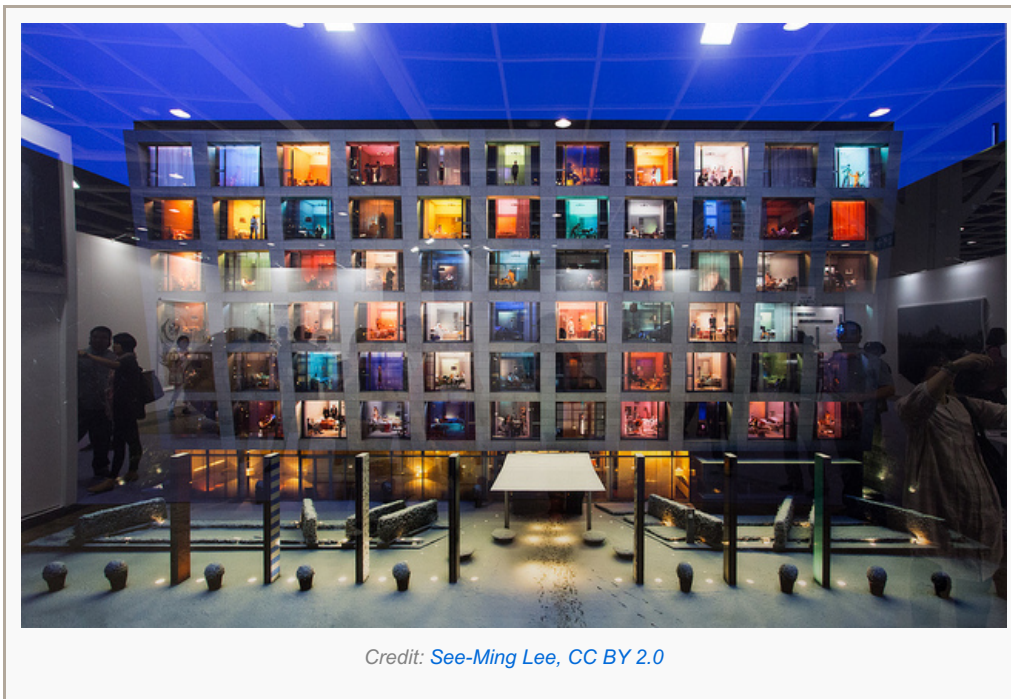
Credit: *See-Ming Lee, CC BY 2.0*

The use of official statistics and data to report news is nothing new. Newspapers and broadcasting organisations have always reported on the latest official statistics from State agencies; business news has contained charts and graphs to visualise the financial stories of the day; editors have commonly used graphics to display rising house prices, or politicians' expenses. Many of these stories have had data as their source. Reprinting a table of figures may be unintelligible for audiences, so journalists have traditionally acted as translators, and story tellers, taking the figures and reporting contemporaneously, analysing what they mean, and giving context to help audiences better understand them.

Computer assisted reporting or CAR as it became known was first used by the US television network CBS in 1952 to predict the outcome of the US presidential election. For more than 60 years journalists have compiled their own databases, or sought to use official data, when conducting investigations. Rather than simply report on what a government press releases said, or on 'spin' from private corporations, these reporters sought to independently verify facts and reveal truths, often using social science methods and rudimentary computers in order to do so.

A newer data reporting community has emerged with the advent of digital journalism within recent years. Greater and more powerful computers and software has allowed journalists to operate far more effectively in sourcing and investigating stories, where large and complex datasets can be mined and cross-referenced, often proving a rich source for news; and in telling stories. The development of application programme interface (API) access allows users to query and mine large and complex datasets. Visualisation software such as Tableau Public and geo-coding with Google Maps allows for far greater interactivity between the story and the audience, and therefore has

the potential to increase public engagement with stories.

Increasingly, governments throughout the world have moved away from paper-based bureaucracy, and now hold far more information in electronic form. Access to large datasets is increasingly being made available as part of a general move across Western democracies toward more open access to government, and part of initiatives including the Open Government Partnership.

Journalists have always had key role to play as watchdogs on democracy and the emerging digital data journalism community has an important part to play in this regard, in reporting on and investigating what is being published; and to independently verify stories. The 'fourth estate' role is also heightened, as possibilities that data creates to tell important stories, allows for far more complex investigations using software to find connections. Previously these stories might not be reported fully, or may never be uncovered at all.

Research I've conducted finds evidence to suggest that digital data reporting is greatly enhancing the ability of the news media to report on digital government. Interviews conducted with data journalists working in newsrooms worldwide shows that journalists strongly view their role as a new method of conducting accountability journalism, and are using digital data reporting skills to do so. Evidence from articles published by news media organisations demonstrates this is also the case.

Engaging audiences in reporting on government and politics has also been enhanced by digital data journalism. The news media has traditionally sought to engage audiences through various methods such as letters to the editor pages and competitions for new writing. With the advent of social media such engagement – such as shares, likes and re-tweets – is a regularly measured and closely monitored metric for media organisations, and is widely considered a new form of engagement, since it didn't exist a decade ago.

For media organisations that employ data teams, the research suggests interactive storytelling using visualisations, maps and graphics has increased reader engagement in storytelling. New tools have allowed reporters to interpret, contextualise, examine and analyse news in quite different ways. Newspapers and media organisations have used readers to help tell complex stories, such as National Public Radio (NPR) in the USA, and the Guardian in the UK, using crowd sourcing in various investigations.

However the level of engagement is not uniform. Most engagement occurs with stories that are directly relevant to audiences such as health and family issues; schools; personal finances and taxes; and local areas. Engagement is much lower when stories involve politics, political campaigns, spending and elections, except in Canada and Germany where politics engages audiences more than elsewhere.

However in order for journalism to be effective, it needs to have both an engaged, and a mass audience. There has been some criticism that data reporting is fast becoming an exclusive domain for the technologically literate, or data elites as scholars have termed them. Is digital data journalism really engaging mass audiences, and producing tools that people can use in the democratic process? Those most likely to read 'red top' tabloids in the UK are those most likely to be disengaged from politics, and among lower socioeconomic classes. Conversely, news organisations that have invested heavily in digital data reporting in the main include traditional ABC1 readership newspapers in the US, Canada, the UK and elsewhere such as The New York Times, the Globe and Mail, and the Guardian.

There is strong evidence that digital data journalism is being accessed in the main by those who are already engaged by virtue of the fact that news organisations who are publishing this type of journalism are in the main ABC1 circulation publications, or in the case of broadcasters are specialist broadcasters with niche audiences. Rather than acting as a watchdog on behalf of all citizens, evidence from my research suggests that data journalism is creating a wider gap between those that can afford to be engaged, and large tranches of society that are becoming completely disengaged from the wider political process, and effectively opting out of society.

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