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A Survey of Data Journalism

Over the course of the quarter, I studied broadly what data journalism is, looked at examples, and explored the process of creating data journalism through the perspective of the journalist. I wanted to study communication of data in the context of COVID19, as it is extremely relevant to us this year but also because I myself have struggled gaining meaningful insight from COVID-19 data dashboards. Therefore, during the project we looked at what data journalism is broadly, how to interpret complicated data dashboards and models, and what the public response to pandemic journalism has been. We also attended the Computation and Journalism Symposium hosted by Northwestern University, and finally we spent the last week stepping into the shoes of the journalist by reading interviews and listening to podcasts.

Beginning with a broad definition of data journalism, I learned that data journalism is a lot more than written pieces that consult data sources. Data journalism includes interactive dashboards, like the ones we have all interacted with to find COVID data. It also includes stand-alone graphs and charts that one might see at a museum, in a social media post, or on an advertisement. Finally, data journalism includes the popular understanding of the field which is larger written pieces that include charts and statistics as supporting evidence. As a part of this exploration, I learned a lot about common “traps” in charts and data visualizations that can confuse readers who are not very data literate. For example, a heat map of the US that shows total COVID positive case count, and one that shows COVID positive case count per 1k people, will look very different and communicate different ideas about what areas are more or less affected. Similarly, decisions as simple as color choice can communicate very different messages!

Working off of this foundation, we looked at COVID19 data dashboards in particular to assess how different dashboards might be more or less effective in communicating useful information. I conducted interviews with students, teachers, and essential workers to gain more insight into how useful these dashboards were. One thing I learned was that dashboards that were more localized (like the WA Department of Health dashboard) were easier to interpret and relate to because of their smaller scope and geographic precision. On the whole, people seemed to be using national dashboards a lot less today than when the pandemic began a year ago because of overwhelming numbers that are difficult to relate to. News articles relating to dashboard reliance communicated similar findings, saying that people were a lot more interested in local stories and dashboards with local numbers when making decision making.

Finally, I stepped into the shoes of the journalist by hearing a lot about personal experiences with producing this work. At the symposium, a number of journalists spoke to the emotional toll that it takes to publish and research stories about loss and tragedy, at a time with no clearly defined end. Additionally, many journalists spoke to the frustrations they face when

considering the general lack of trust in media that Americans hold at the moment. It is difficult to produce news that is meant to inform, when a large portion of the population either does not trust what they are reading or do not read the news at all. Therefore, journalists must find new and inventive ways to make their work not only more engaging but more worthy of the public's trust.

I definitely learned a lot this quarter about what goes on behind the scenes to this constant influx of data related news I encounter online. I was able to find empathy for journalists that have a difficult job regarding dark realities. I also got to gain insight into the role the data journalist plays in improving data literacy of the masses, so that information is not only accessible but understandable, and therefore impactful. It was eye-opening to hear personal stories about journalists, learning about their thinking process and hearing their opinions on what the role of data journalism is, and how it needs to improve beyond the growth it's shown in the last ten years.