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Commentary:

Openness and Transparency in the Data Journalism Practice

In the Nordic countries, data journalism has been developed in collaboration with the developments of the open data movement. In Finland in particular, access to open data and the involvement of activists have been crucial factors for the development of data journalism.¹

Another important factor for the development of data journalism is how data journalists all around the world share knowledge about their working methods and tools and sometimes specifics about data sets they are using with their peers. The act of sharing working methods can, in a European setting to some extent, be explained by how journalists and activists, often with roots in computer science, started cooperating through joint initiatives focused on data collection, analysis, and visualization using public data.²

This, in turn, brought along ideas of transparency, a concept that has been argued to provide journalism with legitimacy in the Internet age.³ On a more general level, transparency is associated with the new digital environment of the Internet, including the move from mass communication to network communication, with interactivity and interconnectivity contributing to conversation.⁴

The practice of helping fellow colleagues in data journalism can also be explained by the influence of the development of CAR (Computer-Assisted Reporting) in the U.S.⁵ Through conferences and events, the Investigative Reporters and Editors (IRE), founded

in 1975 in the U.S., have taught basic investigative and computational newsgathering techniques to journalists globally, emphasizing a collaborative and open culture that encourages sharing knowledge about working methods with fellow data journalists across organizations and countries.

In line with the practise of sharing knowledge about data journalism working methods, the Finnish award-winning data journalist Teemo Tebest builds his essay *Open Data – Fuel for Data Journalism* around the importance of openness in data journalism and the collaborative work of reporters, coders and graphic designers. Describing the process of working with open data, Tebest also points to several resources where data journalists can find support from their peers. In a Nordic setting, one of the most prominent resource groups is the Facebook group Datajournalistik, founded in 2012 by Jens Finnäs, a Swedish-Finnish data journalist. The group is a source of inspiration for data journalists and others interested in data journalism in the Nordic countries, with the purpose to develop knowledge, but it also has a strong social function of increasing bonding social capital and promotion among the subgroup of data journalists in the Nordic countries.⁶

Tebest points out that the audience enjoy stories where they can “get personalized and detailed information for example about themselves”. An intimate relationship with the audience in such a manner is one part of openness and transparency. However, in the scholarly debate, transparency also includes journalists recognizing that there is a certain subjectivity

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to journalism, at times in contrast to long-standing journalistic norms around objectivity. Furthermore, the concept of transparency in journalism also encompasses a recognition that journalists sometimes make mistakes that can be corrected openly and thus explained to the audience, for example, commonly seen in the more recent fact-checking initiatives globally.

While there is an ongoing debate about transparency as the new objectivity, in data journalism, openness and transparency has always been a basic component, for example, demonstrated by the provision of clear descriptions on how a story came about and how data was obtained and refined, with links to the data set used in the story.⁷

Recent international research has found that as journalists embrace transparency in their own work, they subsequently expect transparency from the key institutions of social power that they cover.⁸ However, despite

the many open-data initiatives in Europe, and despite the recent governmental focus on making public data available for reuse by third parties, access to data by journalists has at times been perceived as “restricted through the bureaucratic mechanisms of public bodies, in some cases available after prolonged negotiation, and provided in a non-machine-readable format making it difficult to use”.⁹

Thus, despite the many efforts to provide open data, data providers still have much more to do. Besides access to data, Tebest also points out that data providers have a great responsibility to provide meta-data in order to avoid misuse, and he urges data publishers to work more closely with their users.

Even though Tebest accounts for many challenges when working with open data, he concludes by stating that many data sets still remain unopened for journalists, and in that statement lies a promise of many more stories to uncover.

Notes

1. Aitamurto, Sirkkunen, & Lehtonen (2011).
2. See, for example, De Maeyer et al. (2015); Karlsen & Stavelin (2014).
3. Vos & Moore (2018).
4. Fourie (2017).
5. Fink & Anderson (2015).
6. Appलगren (2016).
7. Appलगren (2017).
8. Vos & Craft (2017).
9. Borges-Rey (2017, 8).

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