Reflections on a Decade of Explaining Data

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By

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Background

• Eastern WA University

• Institute formed in 2002 as a pilot

• Became full-time 2005

• Commitment to data dissemination from the beginning

• Blank check approach from president ....... w/o the funds
Our approach

• Communities determine the metrics

• A comprehensive look at life – not just economics & business

• Commitment by EWU to maintain the sites in a timely manner

• Scrupulous attempt to focus on the data

• Motivate & define, but little attempt to explain the results (why)
Status

• 9 projects, covering 13 counties in WA & ID

• Funded by a wide variety of local organizations, including government

• Work supports staff of 5 (full & part-time), plus students

• Increasing use & recognition
  – Robert Wood Johnson Foundation
  – National Academy of Sciences
  – State of WA
Founding premises

• The presence of the best data available will lead to better decision-making
  – Public sector
  – Private sector
  – Citizens, especially those who aren’t data-savvy

• Visualization will lead to insights by a broader swath of the population than academics trained in data analysis

• The insights may also serve as a catalyst for certain initiatives
Reflection 1: To a degree, goals have been achieved

- Visualization has helped more residents of the Inland Pacific NW understand complex phenomena

- In one project, indicators have served as the anchor for community initiatives (Priority Spokane)

- Has “better” decision-making occurred?
  - Hard to measure
  - It appears that more people are using data to make decisions
Reflection 2: But.. progress has been slow

- Indicators or Trends sites hardly the stuff of daily conversation
- GA & social media numbers far lower than many web sites
- Pockets of support – besides funders
- Getting “found” on the web - a constant challenge
Reflection 3: Our audience isn’t as numerate as we had supposed

• Even pictures (graphs) can be a challenge for many to comprehend

• Little ability to interpret graphs, such as calculating % changes
  – Statistical significance tests even less

• Still not instinctual by many to reach for numbers in making local policy decisions
Reflection 4: Positive correlation between education levels & site use

- Especially noticeable in smaller, rural communities with low SES
  - Not accustomed to having data at their fingertips
  - Some cases of outright distrust (“Where did you get your data?”)

- On the other hand, communities with higher SES usually show strong use
  - Spokane, Walla Walla
Reflection 5: Local government is primarily interested in “its” data

• Our core unit of measure – counties

• A not infrequent response: “But where are we in this graph”?

• Led us to disaggregate when feasible (financially & data availability)

• Making the argument of the shared impact beyond one’s borders sometimes hard
  – Worry among smaller entities about “getting lost” in a larger entity
  – E.g. reaction of two rural counties to their inclusion into the newly defined MSA
Reflection 6: Enlist the press continuously

• My approach: We’re supplying stories to you

• Covered well in local newspapers
  – In some, a regular column
  – In others, a frequent story

• Over time, have become a go-to source for comments & articles

• Note: this only applies to the printed press
Reflection 7: Governmental turn-over hurts adoption there

• Long-sitting elected federal officials have supported our efforts
  – Opportunity to present to them usually limited
  – Their staff becomes key to the use of the sites

• But turnover is endemic in our federal delegation’s staff

• At local level, often deal w/ different elected faces every four years
  – Spokane’s mayoral, 1-term “curse”
  – Very significant consequences of elections

• Local government staff has provided a steadying hand
Reflection 8: Data champions help greatly

• We work to cultivate these “power users”

• Especially important when they can wield formal influence
  – E.g. Spokane’s current mayor & City Council: insistence on outcome measures from the Community Indicators initiative
  – E.g. United Way of the Tri Cities (Kennewick-Richland-Pasco) demand that funding requests show an indicator(s) that the proposed project will affect

• Still, not enough of this commitment
Reflection 9: If you build it, will they come?

• Yes, but not in droves......
  – Many still regard these as “data sites,” & not a visual depiction of facts relevant to their lives or businesses.

• Underscores the continuing need to get out from behind our screens:
  – A refrain of mine: graphs are stories
  – Does it work? Yes!
Thank you!

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