

Reflections on a Decade of Explaining Data

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By

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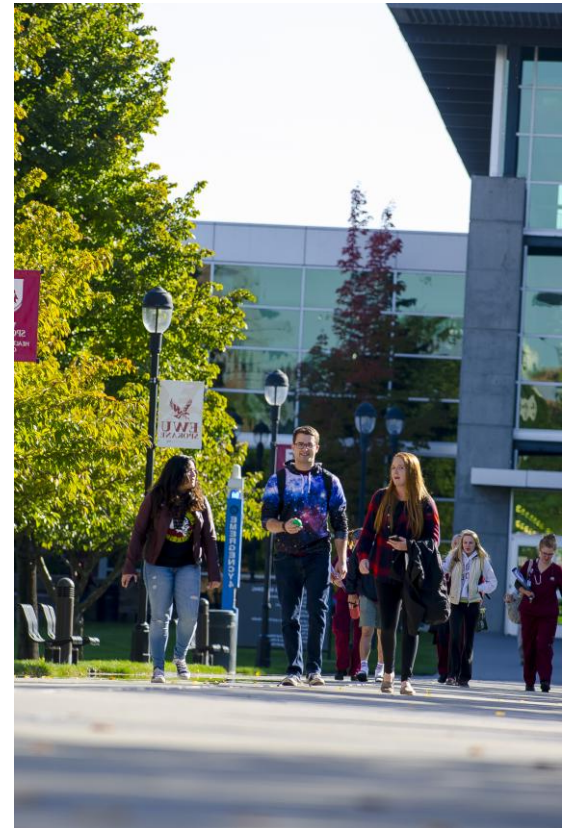


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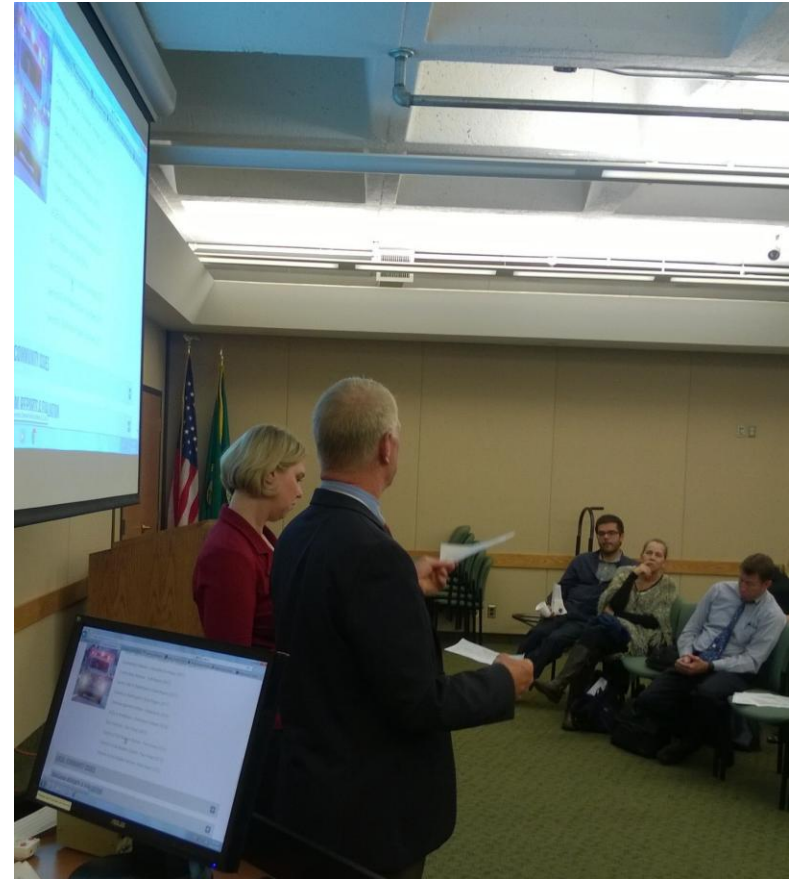
Background

- 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

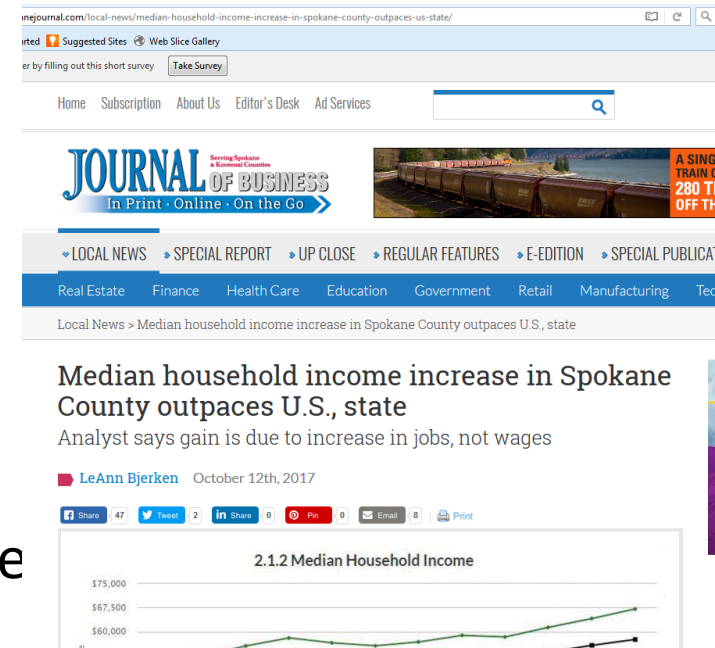
- Especially noticeable in smaller, rural communities with low SES
 - Not accustomed to having data at their fingertips
 - Some cases of outright distrust (“Where did you get your data?”)
- On the other hand, communities with higher SES usually show strong use
 - Spokane, Walla Walla

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 steady 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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