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"How Interactivity Can Build Transparency: What Tech Can Teach Us about Rebuilding Media Trust

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On the night of the 2016 election, *The New York Times* launched a feature that had never been used on
the site before: a pictorial data interactive with live updates. The technological sophistication was
admirable—even the most ambitious newsrooms during the election season had only attempted real-time
text-based interactives, such as NPR's automatic transcription of debates. In fact, the closest newsrooms had
gotten to live-time graphical displays were rudimentary stock charts. However, *what exactly* this *Times*
visualization meant was unclear for anyone looking for information about the election. A Gizmodo author,
JK Trotter (2016), chronicled the confusion, writing, "*The New York Times* is currently tracking the state
of tonight's presidential election with what appears to be a pressure gauge...?" Trotter chronicled his
colleague's reactions: "an IV drip of election drugs"; "they figured out how to shoot election heroin into our
veins"; and perhaps the most apt description, "a meaningless representation of nothing."

This particular interactive held no clear takeaway for the news consumer to learn something about the
election. Nonetheless, this "meaningless representation of nothing" kept Gizmodo writers and other
election junkies tuned to the nytimes.com election web page, a boondoggle as far as optimizing analytics for
"time spent on line," and while pennies per person, in aggregate, the graphic itself was likely as much a
money-maker as a digital effort can ever be. This pressure gauge graphic epitomized the worst of what
interactive journalism has become, but Nate Silver's fivethirtyeight, The Upshot, Real Clear Politics, and a
host of other data-visualizing, interactive-generating sites used to chronicle the election also represent the
bastardization of what this form of journalism promised for the news industry and news consumers. Rather
than informing, interactive journalism misled. And instead promoting a culture of transparency in news that
comes from the intersection of programming culture with journalism, interactive journalists instead focused
more on helping journalism reclaim authority through overreaching claims of quantitative certainty.

The emergence of interactive journalism in newsrooms had a markedly different set of associations than the
for-profit big-game clickable election graphics of 2016. Interactive journalism--a visual presentation of
storytelling through code for multilayered, tactile user control for the purpose of news and information—
builds upon existing web and mobile properties and includes more than data visualization (Usher, 2016).
Interactives have indeed advanced digital storytelling: ideally, they provide users with a visual "nut grafs" and
on the other hand, they enable self-exploration and possibly deeper engagement with the content (Geidner
and Cameron, 2014; Geidner et. al, 2015). The programmers in the newsrooms and the data geeks (often
one and the same) were hyped by the industry as ushering in in a world of immersive storytelling and spur a

move toward quantification in editorial content thanks to their ability to render large data sets
understandable.

These interactive journalists also would be translators of a different and admired tech culture (Lewis and
Usher, 2013; 2014; 2016). Their work would bring new users to news sites and keep old ones there,
enabling new forms of storytelling and a way to maximize digital revenue. In fact, early discussions talked
about interactive journalists who were going to "save journalism," positioning these journalists as outsiders
who would supercharge newsrooms with their introduction of open source culture, hacker culture, and
"making." This normative orientation was what initially excited funders like the Knight Foundation and
Mozilla, what inspired grassroots groups like Hacks/Hackers, and promoted evangelism by techies who had
become journalists.

Between 2000 to the early 2010s, interactive journalists were a source of wonder and fascination to
institutional journalism. In 2005, the New York Times "ideas" section, its year-end review of the most
interesting inventions and intellectual contributions, named a Google maps interactive "mashup" with
Chicago crime data made as a crowning achievement. The Knight Foundation articulated a vision of the
"Journalist 2.0" in 2011, an uber-journalist that paired the hacker culture found in technology startups with
the underlying editorial principles of journalism—and even put together a diagram replete with a hacker
wearing a t-shirt with html on the left and a journalist wearing a v-neck sweater on the right to illustrate the
point. (The journalist 2.0 was bearded and wearing flannel.)

However, interactive journalists were also positioned as answer to journalistic authority under threat.
Through quantification afforded by data journalists, news organizations could move beyond the anecdotal
journalism that had dominated news and provide greater certainty to their claims through numeracy.
Quantification was not only a way to respond to accusations about bias, but it was also a way to articulate the
importance of professional journalism—journalists with special skills could make complicated data knowable
and easily understood for people—something ordinary people armed with a cell phone or a blog could not.
Some of the most famous figures in in Internet culture became advocates for data journalism, including
Tim Berners Lee, who argued:

> Data-driven journalism is the future. Journalists need to be data-savvy. It used to be that you would
> get stories by chatting to people in bars, and it still might be that you'll do it that way some times.
> But now it's also going to be about poring over data and equipping yourself with the tools to analyze
> it and picking out what's interesting. And keeping it in perspective, helping people out by really
> seeing where it all fits together, and what's going on in the country (Lee as cited in Gray, et. al,
> 2012, Ch 1).

What was overlooked, however, was that data is laden with assumptions and is itself socially constructed—
problems with data would result in problems with its presentation, too. The extent to which data, visualized
in interactive, clickable, and customizable ways, could misinform as well as inform was rarely acknowledged.

What started as an effort to rethink journalism through new ways of storytelling became something else got
pushed to the side, while the opportunity for a source of alternative revenue and a reclamation of
jurisdictional dominance became more important. Both of these motivations deserve serious criticism.
News economics may have resulted in the oversaturation of election-focused interactives. Elections have set
dates known in advance for years, and as such offer a chance for interactive journalists to engage in the long-
term planning required to create sophisticated interactives. There was ample support for this inside
newsrooms, as the the 2008 and the 2012 elections provided support that election interactives and
predictions would and could drive traffic. According to Digiday, when Nate Silver left *The Times* in 2013 to
found fivethirtyeight, his work was responsible for 20 percent of nytimes.com traffic and accounted to 71
percent of visits to the site's politics coverage; moreover, The Upshot, *The Times'* replacement, was
responsible for ten of the most read stories in 2014 (Bilton, 2015). David Leonhardt, the head of The

Upshot, was quoted by Digiday saying, "Among readers, there's really big appetite for smart stuff that isn't words."

The 2016 election would be a chance to show off and make money, then. Even local newspapers were in the game: top teams from Gannett, McClatchy, the AP, and beyond were working from Washington and New York to syndicate their interactives across company and client sites. A whole constellation of digital-native blogs and news sites also added to the mix of interactive elections content. Ultimately, these interactives could be sticky—or encourage time spent online engaged with the content, as well as spreadable—shared across social networks, and drive traffic to other parts of the site (Jenkins, et. al, 2013). For some news consumers, some interactives were even an obsessive ritual, "election heroin."

This stuff that wasn't words were often numbers, maps, stats that portended to have predictive power to accurately forecast the outcome of the election. This particular claim to certainty that news organizations invoked, though implicit, set apart their unique contribution to understanding the political landscape, arguably absent accusations of bias or anecdotal cherry-picking. While some of these interactives represented sophisticated polling aggregation, the interactives obscured their complexity. The blues, light blues, and shades of red that one could scroll over, as well as the sliding horizontal shaded lines that rejiggered electoral combinations, however, masked the sophistication of the underlying methods used to make these predictions. It is not that Nate Silver, Ezra Klein of Vox, or the political scientists and statisticians contributing for The Upshot whose work was then visualized, and beyond, didn't know there were issues with these polls—they wrote about (some of) them. However, these doubts did not seep into the interactive visualizations, which for some partisans may have provided a false sense of security or a driving rationale for action.

Even into the night of the election, Nate Silver's NowCast had Hillary winning by more than 70%. The lack of certainty could only be seen in various shades of red and blue, some not visible on mobile devices or on screens set to a particular darkness ratio. *The New York Times* live election crack certainly didn't give a sense of what was happening throughout the night. And in the days after the election (and to present), the misleading interactives continued to come from newsrooms that have since published post-mortems and hot takes about how the "news media got it wrong." On *The Washington Post*, an electoral map showed red and blue states, with Virginia a solid blue. The story accompanying the map, however, underscored the slim margin of Clinton's victory in the state.

You can find a representation of misleading data interactives on almost any site, but the most pervasive might be the large map of county-wide results across the United States. On first glance, it appears that essentially, the entire US is red save for a few (yes) more coastal areas (and the African American blue-belt in the Deep South). But this map misleads too, and one would have to scroll over these counties to see that these red counties have very little population (in fact, populations low enough to lead to poor sampling)—and the fewer blue counties represent huge cities with large populations.

There are more pernicious effects of data presented as more certain and with less nuance than it deserves. Trump made it perfectly clear that he thought the polls were fake. The visualizations were particularly far from Trump's favor—the NowCasts and The Upshot and Real Clear Politics poll aggregations strongly favored a Clinton win, as told in images of blue states across the country. When we live in a political environment where facts are under assault, news organizations simply can't afford to screw up quantification—and more specifically, present certainty in visualizations of data when certainty cannot be claimed.

With risk of sounding as inappropriately nostalgic as the Trump campaign itself, it's worth thinking about how interactive journalism can reclaim its roots. Interactive journalism was fundamentally about innovating the way journalists think about storytelling, their relationships with audiences, being risky and experimenting

without worrying about failure, and fundamentally, taking the risk to be transparent about how they work. These underlying values of open source culture are not nostalgic however, they've just been pushed to the side in exchange for emphasis on other concerns.

Interactive journalists from newsrooms all over the world share their work on GitHub, the largest repository for open source code. There are professional groups around the world, from Hacks/Hackers meetups and Online News Association affiliate groups that bring together interactive journalists and also facilitate dialogues with startups, programming experts, and data visualization professionals. The NICAR annual conference, which now draws an international audience of interactive journalists, facilitates "tinkering"—with workshops on how to build sensors for news, how to rapid prototype a news game, and beyond.

What was –and continues to be—most interesting about interactive journalists is their alignment with open source values. Open source culture at its best presents an alternative model for collaboration and innovation from proprietary cultures focused closed-system practices. Though only some aspects of open source are truly non-commercial, showing work, sharing code, and inviting community to build upon ideas is at the heart of open source programming. Unlike anti-social hackers, most hackers use the term to express their commitment to solving problems (often, at least initially, in inelegant ways) and making frustrating processes simpler (Coleman, 2013). The hacker ethic is closely aligned with maker culture, with the aspiration of trying and creating something new because it is fun and because it just might improve the world. Transparency is a key commitment in open source culture; open source code is not only shared but also documented—how and why things have been implemented and how they should work is open to anyone who is looking to use this code. Extreme perversions of this culture are what makes the news, though, from WikiLeaks hacks of politician's personal emails to hacking and exposing users of Ashley Madison, a dating site for philanders.

Nonetheless, however, it's worth thinking about how some of this normative influence on newswork can be claimed—and in fact, positioned as a different way of securing journalistic authority. Sadly, post-2016 election, that seems quaint. Concerns about journalists' bias and insularity and fear about "fake news" and partisanship dominate the conversation about problems with journalism. But interactive journalism once offered more than sticky web-traffic—rather, a fork in traditional normative preoccupations for the rest of the newsroom. These journalists are still very much engaged in open source culture, but their influence as normative translators has yet to be felt within most newsrooms. Interactive journalists (despite their flaws) are now respected members of major newsrooms—and as members of the in-crowd have an opportunity to start explaining how what they do is not just provide an alternative for storytelling and economic revenue but also represents a different normative framework.

What is needed most in journalism's relationship with its audience is a conversation about how stories come to be made, what facts, data, and interpretations drive story creation, and the process through which journalists go about doing their work. This sort of transparency and dialogue is endemic to the work interactive journalists do every day—but it remains siloed within the subprofession's own culture. Now, however, as news organizations look once more for answers to the latest "media failure" (Carlson, 2014), interactive journalists are well-poised to explain how they benefit as professionals from a culture of transparency and how the newsroom is already benefitting, unwittingly to some, from open source values. While efforts to "regain trust" of those who have abandoned mainstream media as an information source are dubious, efforts to keep the trust of those who remain are meaningful—and thinking more broadly about how to create "open journalism" that translates beyond interactive journalism may facilitate a better public understanding of how news gets made.

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