

Big data in small organizations: Strategies from setting up data teams in developing countries

1. Don't reinvent the wheel.

Even though globally, only a small percentage of journalists are doing data journalism, there are a whole lot of places to look to for inspiration. Healthcare, education and unemployment are universal issues that data journalists have tackled in different ways that can be adapted to your context. One activity I suggest is to model a story after [IndiaSpend](#) or [Nation Newsplex](#) in Kenya. Many are simple data-driven public interest stories that don't involve complex analysis to get started. Get a few of these under your belt and you will be on your way to building up a data journalism portfolio at your newsroom. Then move on to [air quality](#) and [police killings](#).

2. Start with the data you have, not the data you would like to have.

Journalists all around the world like to complain about lack of access to quality data and information. That's a great excuse to cross your arms and give up. However, if data journalism can happen in Afghanistan, like at [Pajhwok News Agency](#) and Egypt at [InfoTimes](#), it can happen wherever you may be. Use [global databases](#), find publications from local universities, check out the research being produced by local think tanks. If government data is unreliable, find alternative data sources to get the most accurate data available, just like you would when interviewing different sources. Data journalists often waste a lot of time looking for the perfect data set and won't settle for less even though at the beginning, practicing data journalism skills and publishing regularly should be the priority.

3. Start with the question, not the data.

As the US elections proved to us, a lot of data journalism can be published without actually addressing fundamental issues that should inform decision-making. In the end, it's not about polls but about informing citizens on issues that they are asking questions about and plan to vote on. [This story](#) from Pakistan used public data to show parents that children graduating from private school score only slightly better on standardized tests than children in public school. [This story](#) from Armenia shows the public health consequences of the widespread use of expired x-ray machines in public clinics. The "news you can use" concept is vital to proving the value of data journalism to small news organizations with tight budgets.

4. It's about the story, not the visualizations.

There is a lot of corruption in Kenya. There is a lot of violence in Afghanistan. Citizens don't need a budget visualization or a map to tell them what they already know. Unless there is something new to report about [following the money](#) in Kenya or a new pattern detected in [violence in Kabul](#), it's not a story worth telling and by extension, worth visualizing. Make sure your visualizations [tell a story](#). Make sure the text [clearly explains](#) what the story is in the numbers. The closer that data journalism comes to explanatory journalism, the more accessible the issues become to the public and the more likely the story is to break through the filter bubble.

5. Don't do it alone.

For a profession whose job it is to ask questions, journalists tend to shy away from asking questions about numbers. Local civic hackers and data scientists are a valuable resource for double-checking findings of a data story and can often be persuaded to pitch in with data scraping, cleaning and analysis.