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Improving accountability reporting: How to make the best of journalism better for audiences

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Improving accountability reporting**

By many measures, never have there been more efforts in journalism to scrutinize and hold powerful people and institutions accountable.

The number of news organizations doing fact-checking journalism has nearly tripled since 2014. Non-profit investigative news has expanded, along with a clearer effort in all kinds of reporting to call out deception and avoid false balance. Add that to the Internet's unlimited distribution system, and the result is that news consumers today have unprecedented access to a massive menu of well-reported journalism.

The unfortunate parallel, however, is the explosion in the distribution of misinformation, attacks on journalists and a free press, and the rise of fake news — material that is intentionally false but designed to mimic journalism. A recent Stanford University study found that fake news stories about presidential candidates were shared 37.6 million times in 2016. An American Press Institute study showed that misinformation shared on Twitter far outpaces any attempts to correct it.

Few journalists would say that their efforts to promote facts and quash misinformation, especially during recent political campaigns, have been wholly successful.

New report from API: How to make the best of journalism better for audiences

"I've written that fact check five times and people are still repeating" the misinformation, one fact-checker said at a post-election conference sponsored by API in January.

At a post-election media forum in Pittsburgh on the problem of misinformation, some panelists advocated for more reporters to produce more content — with no changes in approach.

Is doing "more of the same" really the answer? What if there were a more effective way to minimize political divisions, promote knowledge and understanding of facts?

Recoding and reconsidering stories

In this report, we want to explore a series of ideas people in news are working on that, taken together, will create a different approach to accountability journalism — work that encompasses fact-checking, explanatory and investigative reporting, but more generally applies to the journalistic work of holding the powerful accountable. Our proposals include recommendations about tools and technology, but also about format, tone and presentation.

In some ways the approaches and ideas described here involve what's known as "explainer journalism" or "alternative story forms." But the work and the concepts behind them are broader and deeper. You might call it the *recoding* of information in a more accessible manner: emphasizing the non-narrative, data or visual elements made possible by digital news.

By whatever name, the key goal is to offer a more accessible path for audiences to understand and accept new information, especially when it involves civic affairs and public debate.

The recoding approach also tries to move beyond journalism as a lecture, which can strike many audiences today as a "because-I said-so" presentation. That style and tone are ineffective, says Will Moy, director of the UK fact-checking program Full Fact, in a recent Wired podcast:

> *"Let's imagine you're at a party…and somebody's lipping off at you about their political opinions and somebody else walks in and says, 'Look, I have a Ph.D. in this topic and you're wrong.' Would you expect anyone at that party to be grateful and instantly on the spot change their minds? Of course not.*
>
> *"And if your idea of what fact-checking is that we should turn up, tell the world they're wrong and expect everyone to thank us, then of course that's not going to work."*

The idea of a reconfigured type of journalism, aimed at helping audiences understand facts and avoid confusion, pre-dates the current era of rampant misinformation, says longtime visual journalist Rick Crotts.

He points to the concept of "explainers," which grew from a need in print journalism more than a dozen years ago. Crotts, an Atlanta Journal-Constitution editor who teaches visual communication at Kennesaw State University, said that newspaper art directors and designers were realizing that "readers wanted different speeds and different story forms to make the reading experience more enjoyable."

Crotts, who prefers the term "alternative story forms" or ASFs, said newspaper readers are now more of "a visual society. We're spoiled, impatient, even lazy. When we want information, we say show me, don't tell me."

A more-visual/less-text presentation is an important part of an alternative story form. Particularly in an era of social media, mobile platforms, misinformation and fake news, that format "can make presenting the facts much easier, cutting through the bias," Crotts said.

As the AJC's presentation editor in the mid-2000s, Crotts helped reporters find more visual ways to present complex topics. He put together a catalog of more than 60 alternative story forms — all aimed at "grabbing the reader's attention" before they turned the printed page.

He cited the Poynter Institute's "eye-tracking" research, conducted over the last decade, that confirms the value of news content presented in forms other than large blocks of black type on white paper. From the research:

> *"We found that alt story forms like a Q&A, a timeline, a fact box or a by-the-numbers box helped readers remember facts presented to them. Readers of prototype 3 — the most visually graphic version, without a traditional narrative — answered the most questions correctly."*

Newspapers' digital migration has provided many more ways to present stories online, said Crotts, and fewer excuses to publish a "50-inch, all-text story." This complex story by the AJC on state laws about patient abuse uses data and an interactive grid to present facts far more accessibly than endless paragraphs of text.

Click on these buttons to see how well states do in each category. Click on any state to see how well it protects patients.

Overall rating	Transparency	Duty-to-report laws	Board composition	Criminal acts	Discipline laws

The overall rating for the state is an average of the score for each of the categories.

State rating

Adam Playford, an editor at the Tampa Bay Times where journalists recently explained a controversial building project using Lego pieces, noted that "online storytelling has also opened our eyes to how much readers like consuming stories in different forms. That's definitely not new — [printed publications] have all included those ideas for many years."

"But the degree to which we're moving toward new forms is clearly accelerated by the very real, very concrete data we see online, showing how much more readers respond to news that's digestible, skimmable and speaks to them like real people."

Jay Rosen, an associate professor of journalism at New York University, recalls being "totally blown away" by a 2008 public radio project on the mortgage crisis called "Giant Pool of Money." The broadcast prompted him to start the "Building a Better Explainer Project," a one-year partnership in 2010 with ProPublica and NYU graduate students.

Rosen cites work done by Matt Thompson (formerly of NPR and now at The Atlantic), who maintains that readers need two elements to understand news stories: the latest events and basic facts. Too often, the latter is omitted in a typical news story. Rosen believes that's due, at least in part, to an outdated focus on the traditional printed newspaper and its restrictions on space and time.

"[Newspaper] news is not built to help the user understand," he says. "The news is built for production. ... Everything lines up for this need to have the newspaper land on the doorstep" on a tight timetable.

Giving readers the facts they need — in a format designed to attract and retain them — can be a key to reducing misperceptions and the spread of false information, says writer Siyanda Mohutsiwa.

"One thing that fake news [websites] do that traditional media doesn't do is to explain complex issues in a simple way," said Mohutsiwa, speaking to a group of journalists at a recent international meeting on the problem of misinformation. "The thing with fake news is that it is so easy to digest."

> **"**
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Ideas for reaching the resistant

One of the paradoxes in the growth of accountability journalism is that it comes as the public's trust in media has trended downward, reaching a record low in the most recent poll from Gallup. A Pew Research Center report showed only 18 percent of adults had "a lot of trust" in national media.

Complicit in those sinking levels of trust in media is the prevalence of fake news and misinformation. Nearly two-thirds of those responding to a Harvard-Harris poll this year said they believe there's "a lot of fake news in the mainstream media."

The poll, along with other recent surveys and research, also shows a distinct partisan divide over trust in the media. Eighty percent of Republicans believe "there is a lot of fake news in the mainstream media"; 60 percent of Independents and 53 percent of Democrats said the same. And 84 percent of all respondents said it's "hard to know what to believe online."

In a recent Media Insight Project report (the American Press Institute is part of this initiative), only 8 percent of Republicans said "news from media is very accurate," compared with 31 percent of Democrats.

These troubling figures, we believe, are at least in part a reflection on the way traditional media present information — and a call to actively find better methods of presenting and distributing solidly reported information.

For example, political fact-checking reporting — which in the U.S. has changed little since its modern launch a decade ago — selects politicians' statements and assesses whether they were lying, telling the truth, or somewhere in between. Our "recoded journalism" approach, with its focus on explanatory and issue-based reporting, would dive into facts about *issues*, rather than targeting politicians and the veracity of their statements. The absence of that "who-lied-more" tone can help mitigate political resentment and accusations of bias.

(A separate report, on how these ideas can apply to fact-checking and how to reimagine fact-checking more generally so that it becomes broader and less polarized, will be coming from API later this year.)

Recoding journalism: Some ideas to get started

Changing the way accountability stories are written takes research, preparation, listening and even a bit of psychology. Here are some recommendations from experts we've talked to on persuasion and communications. We've arranged the recommendations into six categories: Audience, Data, Storytelling, Emotion, Words, and Shareability. For each, we've included projects that demonstrate some of the effective ways to report on difficult issues and facts.

1. Your audience

How well do you know your audience? Do you know what they understand, *don't* understand and would like to know more about?

"If someone gave me $10 million to study explainer journalism," says NYU's Rosen, "the first thing I would do is to engage in a massive act of listening."

This "big listen" needs to encompass issues and questions that aren't typically asked, Rosen says. For instance, asking the usual "What are the important issues in this election?" is not the same as "What would you like the candidates to be discussing now?" says Rosen.

At press conferences, skip the bandwagon journalist questions: Ask questions that answer what your audience wants to know.

"Listen in a lot of ways," says Rosen, including face-to-face conversations, polls, and talking to "people who know what people think" such as ministers and leaders of community groups. Armed with that information, you can begin to develop a template for coverage.

And when you choose the topics to explain and fact-check, think specifically about who you're addressing.

"Target the people who are unsure," says Tali Sharot, an associate professor of cognitive neuroscience at University College London and an MIT visiting professor. "The most likely people to be swayed are the people in the middle" — those who aren't sure what to believe.

And, Sharot says, don't assume everything is obvious. For instance, if you're fact-checking the controversial issue of childhood vaccinations and autism, explain which diseases are targeted by vaccinations. "What are these diseases and what do they do to children?"

2. Data and visualization

Sharot for one argues that, in teaching and learning, "Figures are better than text. They're easier to process, they're quicker to process, they grab our attention." And charts made from that data can have more impact on readers, research indicates.

But it's far from foolproof, says Sharot. "All of that is good but that still doesn't solve the problem that if someone comes in with a belief" — for instance, about gun control, childhood vaccines, immigrants, border walls — "I think their reaction will still be the same. They'll think there's other data. Alternative facts."

In that case, she recommends trying to include data from sources across the political spectrum. Find "facts and figures that confirm what both sides believe," she recommends. Try to find reliable data that supports a point on which most people can agree. For instance: "That project will cost us a lot of money."

3. Storytelling and facts

Michael Specter, a New Yorker writer and author of the book "Denialism," says that "facts are not enough."

"You need to connect with people on a basic level about things. And when you do that, they respond. But we don't sit down and talk to them. We just preach."

One way to evoke response and engagement is to surround your facts with a story that sounds familiar. Say you're preparing a story about health care plans. While you might think that most audiences will enjoy an unusual anecdote about a patient, most people want to hear stories that are familiar and relatable, says Dan Gilbert, a social psychologist and Harvard professor.

"...if our listeners aren't already familiar with the topic we're talking about," Gilbert said in a recent interview, "they get lost really, really quickly."

Using facts and data is important especially in controversial or complex stories, but as "On The Media" host Brooke Gladstone said on a recent show, context is just as essential.

"Make sure that those facts can fit into the lives of people who don't agree with you," said Gladstone, author of "The Trouble with Reality: A Rumination on Moral Panic in our Time."

"In other words, you have to place them in a context, you have to explain their relevance and then you have to wait" for indications of understanding.

4. Emotion and impact

Presenting facts can at times be a colorless, sterile endeavor. But emotions can play a part in how or if people will accept facts — and presentations that use videos, photos and interactives can better illustrate those emotions. After all, hyperpartisan sites have long tapped into emotions like fear and anger to engage people on politically divisive social issues.

One of Rick Crotts' favorite explainers is a comic-strip story of an undocumented immigrant, who, as a college student, faced deportation.

WHEN SHE WAS ONLY 10 YEARS OLD, JESSICA COLOTL'S MEXICAN FAMILY ILLEGALLY CROSSED THE BORDER INTO ARIZONA, EVENTUALLY SETTLING IN ATLANTA, GA.

JESSICA WAS LIKE MANY OTHER GIRLS HER AGE. SHE DID WELL IN SCHOOL AND TOOK AP CLASSES IN HIGH SCHOOL. SHE THOUGHT SHE WAS AMERICAN.

The comic strip's reporter, Ryan Schill, said in an interview that "comics allow us to really put a face to the immigration issue in a way that even broadcast can't. Using direct quotes...and incorporating them with art drawn directly from interviews and research gives the story a lot of power."

Jake Halpern, an author of the fully reported graphic narrative, "Welcome to the New World," says in a recent American Press Institute interview that the strengths of strip-style visuals "are these quiet visual moments that speak more than words could."

Cartoon illustrations don't need to be strip-style or completely developed to be effective, however. Mohit Mamoria recently explained the complexities of Blockchain using computer-generated characters and simple drawings

As artists and designers know, even typography can signify certain emotions. Writer and designer Ben Hersh recently looked at the messages sent by particular typefaces and warned: "Typography can silently influence...and it can do this as powerfully as the words it depicts."

These are versions of Blackletter fonts. How do they make you feel?

In London, a group of musicians is translating climate change data into music, hoping to reach people who are resistant to climate facts with their "Climate Symphony."

"These are still hard facts — that's the beauty of it," says one of the creators. "It's still data, it's just using sound as the reporting tool."

5. Words matter

Projects that effectively present complex topics are often short on words, focusing instead on visuals. When a presentation isn't "overwhelmed with large amounts of text and you are more willing to invest the time to read the information...before you know it, you have consumed the entire story and you're surprised you have done so," says Crotts.

Says Tampa Bay Times reporter Caitlin Johnston, who helped create the LEGO project described later in this report: "The writing needs to be tight and precise without being stiff."

Limited text doesn't mean words aren't important; in fact, fewer words means each one should be chosen carefully.

Andrew Newberg, author of "Words Can Change Your Brain," suggests paying attention to the number of "negative" and "positive" words. He recommends using three positive words, statements or ideas for each one that has a negative connotation.

"There's a lot of evidence to show that negative words and negative emotions are detrimental to the brain, while positive words and positive emotions are beneficial," said Newberg, director of research at Thomas Jefferson University Hospital and Medical College, in an interview with Salon. "When you get into a dialogue with somebody to discuss any particular issue, a three-to-one ratio is a relatively good benchmark to think about; you wind up creating the opportunity for a more constructive dialogue and hopefully a better resolution."

6. Designing for shareability

Sharing a story may be the final step in the reader's process, but how the content might be shared should be a discussion that happens early in the creators' process.

Besides ensuring that the project looks good and works properly on social media platforms, Sharot notes that framing information in a positive or solutions-oriented manner will encourage more sharing.

"People are more likely to share a positive message than a negative message" — human nature, really, because positive messages reflect positively on the sharer, she said.

And, Sharot says, remember that "people want to be right." Stories that provide readers with trustworthy, fact-checked information also will make them more likely to share widely.

At AL.com (Birmingham News and Mobile's Press-Register in Alabama), a project called Reckon has launched accountability content specifically for the most shareable of platforms: Facebook and other social feeds. "In an era when journalism is changing faster than ever, we need to FEEL and BE relevant, modern, sharable, interesting, immensely adaptable," says Michelle Holmes, VP of content.

A portfolio of examples

The final section of this report examines 11 works of journalism from news organizations around the country that have found effective ways to present facts on complicated issues. First, an introduction to our list.

Any discussion of 21st-century "explainers" must begin with Vox. The online-only news organization is a pioneer in the use of **cards** or card stacks that function as index cards or "cheat sheets" of background information about complicated, ongoing news stories. Since their development in 2012, the cards have become iconic, copied and iterated by many other news organizations around the world.

While Vox says it's moving on from its original version of cards, the general idea has proven useful in presenting facts around developing and complex political stories. For instance, NPR used cards to illustrate facts about the reported Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Instead of assuming that readers come to the latest incremental story with knowledge of the story's entire history, the cards provide a trove of background facts that goes well beyond the typical one-paragraph summary used in traditional news stories.

"Many readers aren't well served by an incremental news story about a complicated, ongoing issue," says Steve Myers, editor of The Lens in New Orleans. "You learn about the latest development, its effects and people's reactions, but you learn little about what led up to this event and how it fits into the larger picture."

Typical news stories are "80 to 90 percent news and reaction," says Myers. The inverse is true for cards and other such projects: They're 80 to 90 percent context.

In that respect, the cards become an expandable resource for both readers and journalists.

> **"**
> *Cards provide a trove of background facts that goes well beyond the typical one-paragraph summary used in traditional news stories.* **"**

"This makes it easier to collaborate and collect the knowledge of the newsroom, as well as keep the reader up to date no matter their base level of knowledge on the story," former NPR developer Tyler Fisher says.

While **video** was an essential element in Jay Rosen's 2010 "Building a Better Explainer Project" — see this music video on fracking, for example — monetization opportunities and better technology like captioning have made video even more essential. And recent research indicates that short videos "are an effective way of correcting misperceptions" and reducing audience confusion. Video is central to Milwaukee's Journal-Sentinel project, "Just the FAQs." The Associated Press also is incorporating video into its longtime "AP Explains" feature.

Well-integrated **photography** can be more impactful and memorable when used to present facts. This New York Times analysis of protests in Turkey uses photos shot from several angles to investigate the controversy.

A few years ago, **quizzes** and games exploded as a way to entertain, thanks to BuzzFeed. Other news organizations have repurposed those quizzes as a way to inform readers. This Christian Science Monitor quiz presents correct answers along with context and makes the interactive easy to share. Politico's Diana D'Abruzzo creates quizzes that offer context, links, and promotion to other Politico content.

Other accountability reporting projects have been developed for specific platforms, like Purple, which uses SMS and Facebook Messenger to deliver facts and context. Still others use **story stacks** that combine several types of interactives into one presentation, offering readers their choice of entry points into the story. This project from La Nación uses cards, charts, video, annotation and filters to fact-check a presidential speech.

In this report, we've selected some top-quality projects from a variety of newsrooms to illustrate the spirit of "recoded" journalism and the range of possibilities when it comes to tackling tough, fact-filled issues.

We hope you will review these projects and ideas and send us your comments, as well as other examples of journalism that use non-traditional formats to check facts and to hold government and political leaders and institutions accountable. We're interested in making this a conversation that will grow and improve.

The creators of these projects — reporters, designers, photographers, videographers — have generously given us an inside look at the process and results of their work.

We'll offer modifications for media organizations with various levels of resources, along with a list of easy tools to create factual presentations. But, says Crotts, your staff size or skill level "should not factor into the ability to create" these projects. As an editor, Crotts has experienced pushback from staffers who say, "We don't have designers or artists, so we can't do this."

"That simply is not true. Breaking a story into small chunks of information and not the inverted pyramid is easy for any editor or reporter," Crotts says. "Anybody with basic print or online design skills should be able to present that information" in an alternative form.

Here are our 11 examples
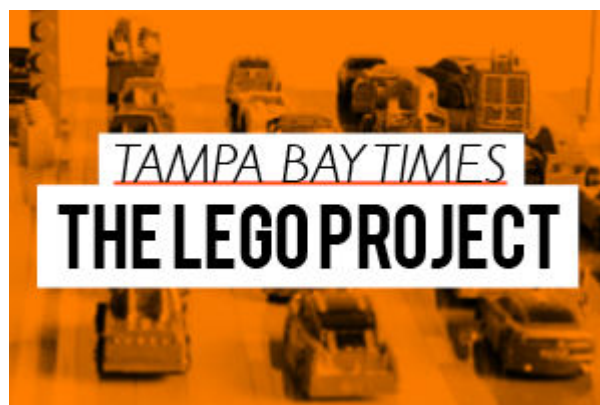
An interactive project built with LEGO pieces helps explain a controversial transportation plan.
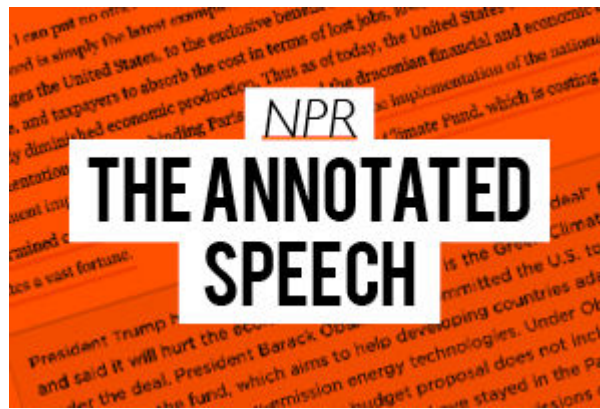
During the 2016 elections and its nonstop news, NPR wanted a better way to cover live events.

Facebook Messenger, SMS and a personal touch add context to complex political news.

A combination of visuals gives audiences several avenues to understanding facts and issues.

Tools including an interactive tour and a quiz help readers understand a local investigation.

A database/tracking tool helps people keep tabs on changes made by the Trump administration.

A Facebook video project sheds light on how redistricting affects North Carolina politics and residents.

An edited series of fast tweets allows reporters and editors to combat misinformation in real time.

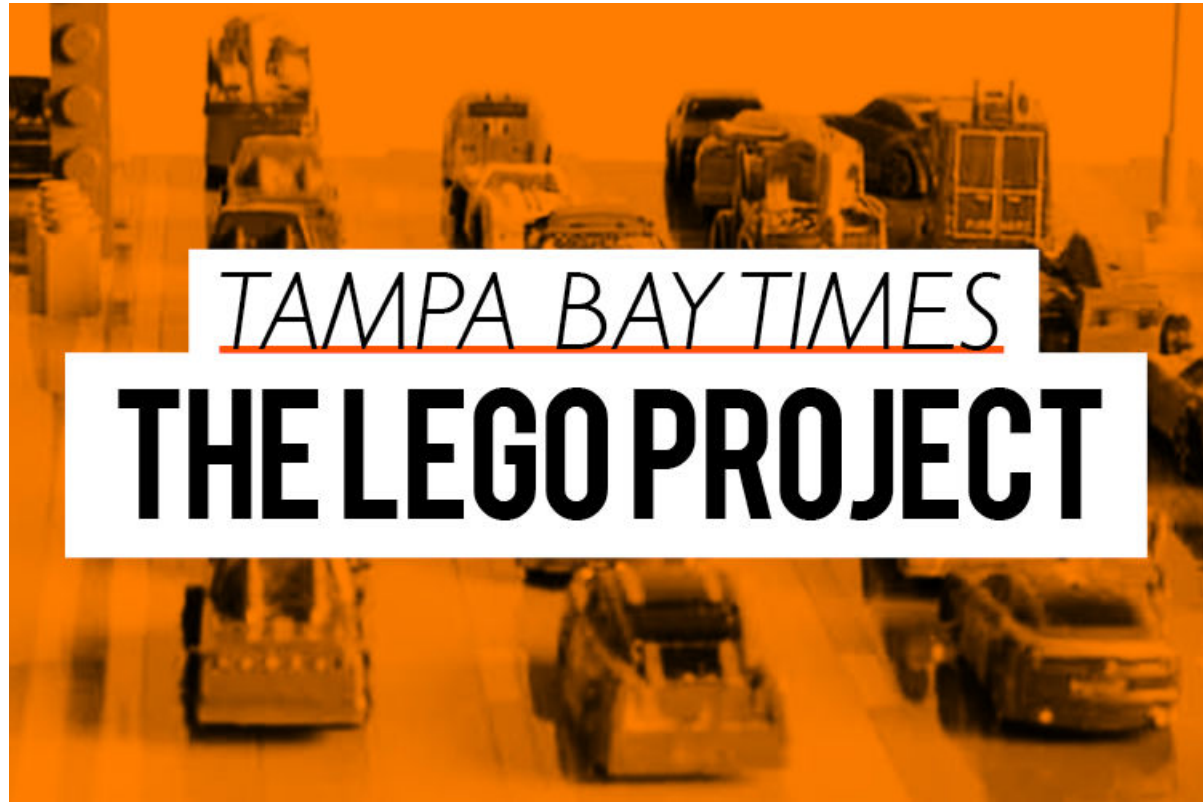A visual snapshot shows how Americans view the nation's most pressing problems over time.

A series of first-person interviews, overlaid with graphics and text, succinctly explain top issues.

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL
CHARTING STOCK AND TWEETS

Charts are positioned alongside Trump tweets to indicate how the stock market reacts.

Tampa Bay Times: The LEGO Project

The Lego Project
Creator: Tampa Bay Times
Summary: An interactive project built with LEGO pieces helps explain a confusing and controversial transportation plan.

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Ultimately, it was the Lego game that helped Tampa residents and city leaders bridge the gap between a confusing, state-endorsed transportation plan and a clear understanding of its impact on residents.

By piecing together the small, brightly colored plastic pieces to build a scale model of the heavily used Howard Frankland Bridge, adding stop-motion photography and just enough easy-to-digest text, a team at the Tampa Bay Times transformed a wordy proposal into something readers could actually grasp.

"How the plan to fix Tampa Bay's most important bridge fell apart, told in Legos" — created by reporters Caitlin Johnston and Anthony Cormier, editor Adam Playford, designer Martin Frobisher, and designer and developer Eli Zhang — got its point across loud and clear. After the story was published, the bridge plan was shelved and sent back to the drawing board.

"Transportation concerns everyone, every day," says Johnston, writing via email with input from Playford and Zhang. "Yet most transportation news comes across dry and jargony to a typical reader. The scope of the Tampa Bay Express project is large, and the level of details immense. Even though we narrowed the story to one part of the whole plan, it took a massive amount of reporting even for us to understand it all. It was our responsibility to simplify it and make it clear for our readers."

Playford, the director of data and digital enterprise at the paper, came up with the idea to use Lego pieces — those whimsical toys that jog people's sense of nostalgia — to explain the complications of the transportation proposal. He tapped into Zhang's visual storytelling expertise to figure out how to make that happen. Zhang, an intern at the Tampa Bay Times at that time, had gained insights into experimental storytelling as a graduate student. (Zhang wrote about the Lego project here.)

The story, which took about six months to create, was published as a standalone project online in December 2016. On the front page of the newspaper, a single image and an extended caption drove readers to the Web. Additionally, the story was promoted on social media platforms, accompanied by an interactive GIF of Lego vehicles moving along the bridge.

"We've received very positive feedback from our readers and wide applause in the journalism community" about the story, Zhang says. "It was the top story on our site for days. It even appeared in Spanish and German-language websites. ... Several readers, activists and even politicians tell us that, for the first time, they finally understood the Department of Transportation's plan for the bridge."
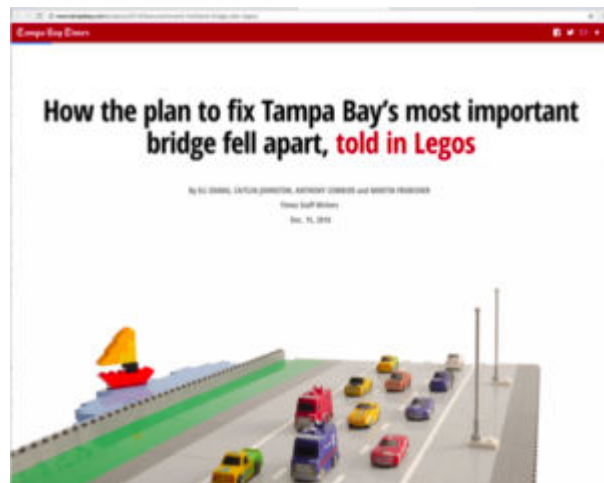
"Explainers," as they are called in the Tampa newsroom, have an edge over traditional story formats when it comes to increasing readers' comprehension of sticky issues. "We focus our interactive journalism on stories with strong local watchdog reporting," Playford says.

"The pairing of graphics and text enabled us to curate the experience with great precision – controlling what we want to appear in front of the readers first, what follows immediately, and what comes after a short pause," Zhang says. "A traditional story form wouldn't give us so much control."

Now, more than ever, the team feels, the alternative approach to storytelling is essential and should be embraced as a way to connect with readers.

"Clearly explaining important topics...has always been a core part of our mission," Playford says. "But the readership case for doing explainers has never been stronger, especially because they can do triple duty: in print today, online today, and online tomorrow and forever."

Technical points and modifications: To create the model of the bridge, the team used a total of $186.39 worth of Lego pieces — and borrowed a few more from newsroom colleagues. Zhang made 336 "hand-crafted stop-motion frames" in the studio, which were then stitched together to create what he describes as a "stretched-out flipbook" of images he could choose from for the final product. Using the resources at www.buildwithchrome.com, a virtual world where you can build with Lego pieces, designer Martin Frobisher was able to better lay out the project's timeline without resorting to more Lego purchases and extending the story's deadline. "Most people didn't understand that the plan called for multiple bridges built over several phases," Johnston says. "This 3D tool allowed us to show the sequence of which bridges would be built (or torn down) and in what order. Some Photoshopping and smart labeling also helped clarify things, making the virtual Lego world an important part of the story."

For newsrooms without the time or resources, Johnston recommends: "Think visually. It doesn't have to be as grand or complex as a stop-motion, in-studio Lego replication. While our staff includes an amazingly talented graphics team, they're usually in high demand and thus not always available. As a transportation reporter, I have to find ways to help my readers understand these complex projects. Maps help. I've slowly taught myself how to use Google Maps and Fusion Tables. Once my readers can visualize the project, it's easier for me to then explain any controversy related to the plans."

— *Julie M. Elman*

NPR: The annotated speech

The annotated speech
Creator: National Public Radio
Summary: Live annotations and fact-checking of political speeches.

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During the height of the 2016 elections and its firehose of nonstop news, NPR wanted a better way to cover live speeches and debates.

At the same time, NPR was looking for a way "to elevate the prominence and usefulness of our fact-checking operation," said Tyler Fisher, then a news app developer on NPR's visuals team.

The visuals and politics teams developed a pared-down version of their current annotated speech process and test-drove it during the Republican and Democratic conventions. Reporters hand-transcribed speeches and annotated them using simple cascading stylesheets (CSS) built by the visuals team.

The annotated speech approach proved to be one of NPR's most-read examples of non-traditional presentations.

"Taken together, our annotations for the debates are NPR.org's most successful digital project of all time. We received more traffic to these than to any other project NPR has ever done," Fisher says. Since then, non-election annotations also have fared well.

"But we're pleased with the performance of these for reasons beyond traffic. We see higher completion rates (scrolling to the bottom of the page) than we see on typical stories, even when the transcripts are quite long. Similarly, we see a much higher time on page with these than with other content."

Working with Fisher were David Eads, Wes Lindamood, Katie Park, Juan Elosua and Clinton King on the visuals team; and Beth Donovan, Amita Kelly and Domenico Montanaro on the politics team.

For the debates, the team wanted to take the structure to the next level, hiring a transcription service so that a team of reporters could focus their efforts on annotation, which got extra development attention from the visuals team. (See technical details below). Then, instead of assigning staffers to multiple issue-based stories on debate night, teams of reporters worked together on the live annotation so the multi-pronged context of the speech was contained all in one place.

Fisher's former editor David Eads (now with ProPublica) calls such formats "turning spectacle into evidence" — taking primary-source material like a live speech or debate and turning it into a rolling resource of facts for readers.

In an era of increasing outcry over fake news, primary-source forms provide transparency for readers.

"Something that connects many of these alternative story forms — transcripts, annotated tweets, promise tracking, etc. — is that it inverts the relationship between reportage and primary-source material," Fisher says. "In these cases, the primary source leads, and our annotation and reportage accompany.

"We think this provides a better sense of context and makes our work more reputable. With so much about news and basic facts being questioned, being as clear as possible about your sourcing is integral to building audience trust."

NPR's newsroom and others often ask about reusing the annotation style or other explanatory forms the visuals team has developed, but Fisher underscores the importance of tailoring the format to the needs of a particular story.

"When it came to President Trump and his ethical conflicts of interest, we did it by tracking the promises he made. When it came to President Trump's Twitter account, we did it by annotating the tweets individually and then collecting them into one resource," he says, noting the value of a visuals team "that can bring design thinking to every situation."

President Trump shared his vision for the "renewal of the American spirit" on Tuesday night in an address to a joint session of Congress. The speech comes a day after Trump gave an outline of his budget plan and also amid Congress' attempts to organize the repeal and replacement of Obamacare. Journalists across NPR are annotating his remarks.

Note: The transcript will be updated. While we are working to make corrections, it may contain discrepancies and typographical errors.

NPR LIVE TRANSCRIPT
Last updated: 11:56 PM ET **32 Annotations**

Mr. Speaker, the President of the United States.

Alternative story forms — the term Fisher uses to describe non-narrative forms — can also be difficult to promote since social networks don't respond well to the same link being posted on repeat. And as information is added to expandable resources such as NPR's log of President Trump's annotated tweets, it takes extra work to direct readers to the newest information when they click, Fisher says.

Despite the hurdles, Fisher says, "The feedback we get from our audience is in line with where we want the NPR brand to be in the news consumer's mind. We see fact-checking, annotation and full context as key pieces that define NPR's digital news presence."

Technical points and modifications: Fisher described the development of the annotated speeches in a blog post: "The system we built ingests a caption feed and dumps the feed into a Google Doc. Dozens of our reporters and editors are in that document, ready to annotate it. We then transform the Google Doc into HTML suitable for our live web page."

Alternative story forms can present challenges to newsrooms, Fisher says, since they often require different structures for collaboration that exist outside the typical workflow. "Sometimes, reporters are writing in a Google Doc, sometimes in spreadsheets, sometimes in Django," a web framework.

This takes reporters "out of their normal flow," he said. "Unless you build deeply into your own CMS, that will always be a struggle."

Web annotators such as Genius and Hypothes.is are another way for news organizations to offer straightforward notations. When The Washington Post's Chris Cillizza — now at CNN — first began experimenting with Genius, he said such tools "hold almost limitless potential as a new avenue by which journalists can add value."

— Lori Kelley

Purple: The Political Messenger
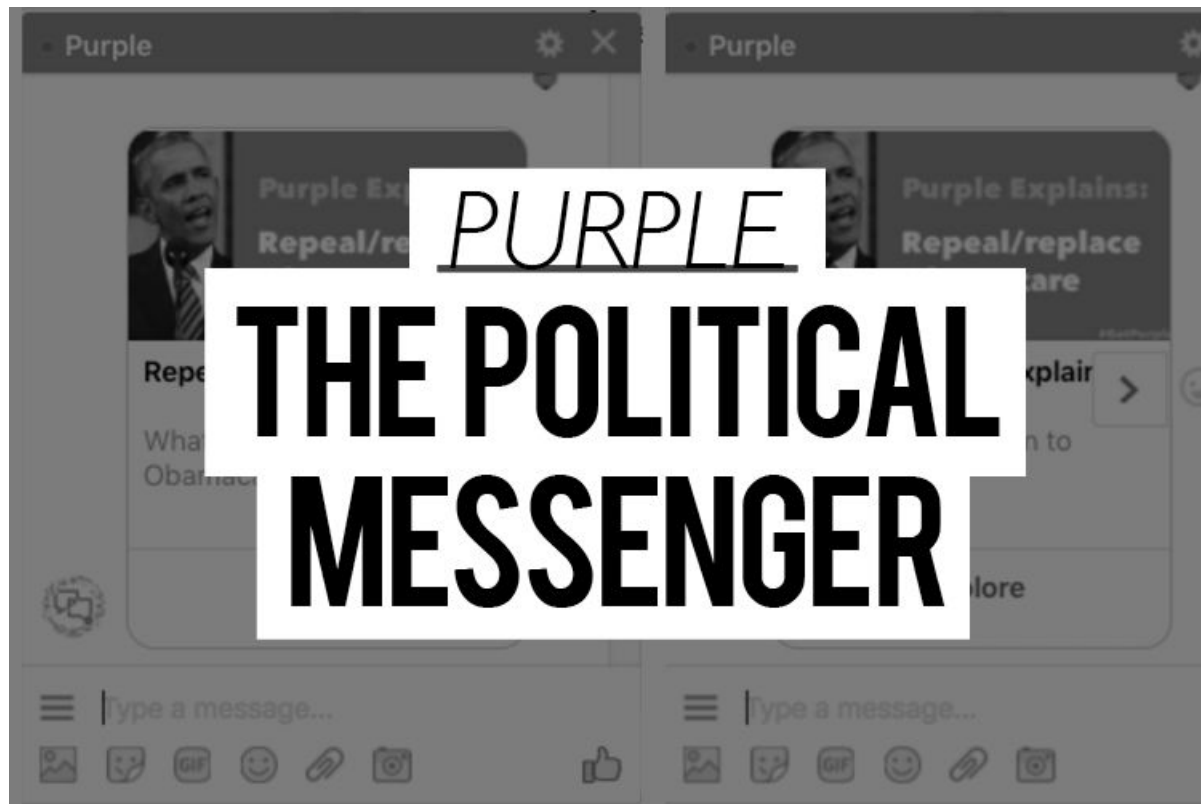
Purple: The Political Messenger
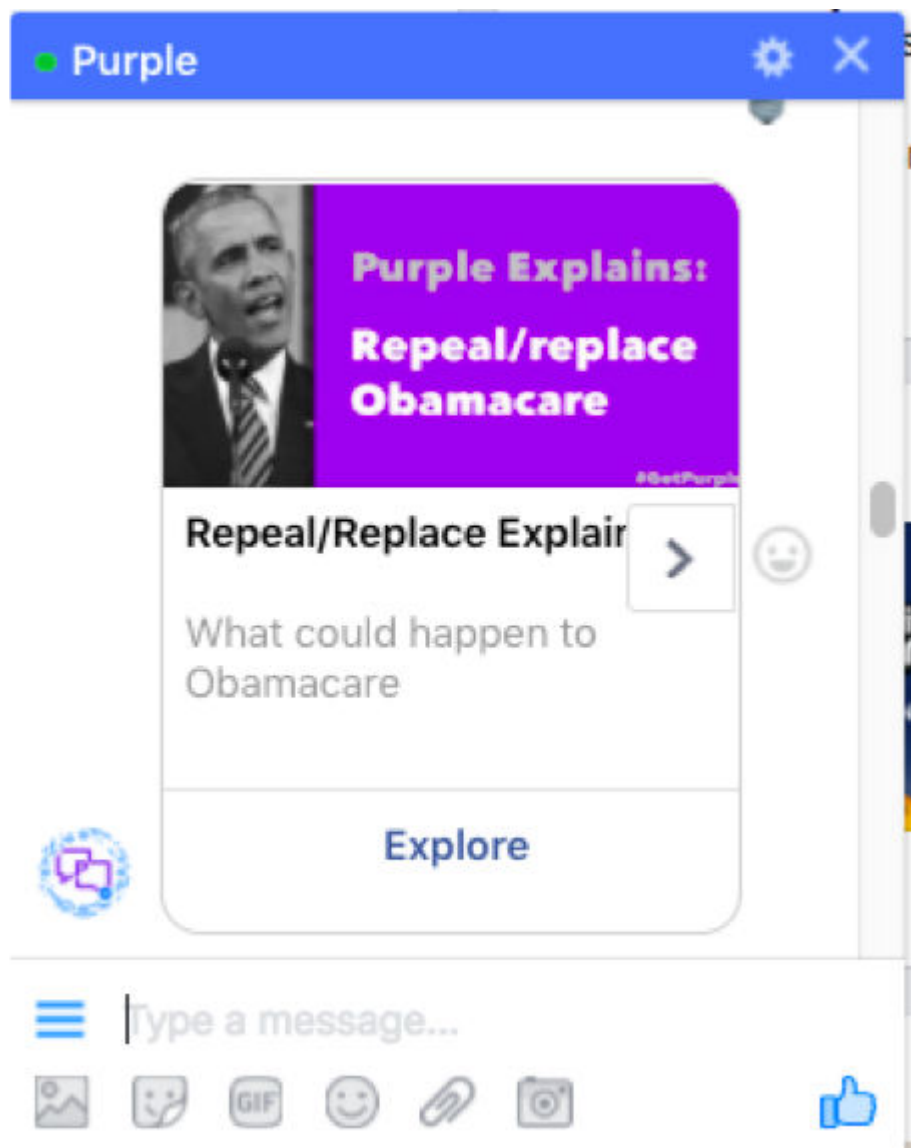**Creators:** Rebecca Harris and David Heimann
Summary: Uses Facebook Messenger and SMS to add context to complex political news.

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The concept behind Purple is simple: Get explanations about complicated political events or issues as if you were asking a smart friend. No jargon, just a bit of wonkiness, and more information only if you want it.

In fact, the idea for Purple came to its co-creators Rebecca Harris and David Heimann in "a lightbulb moment" when they realized their friends were constantly texting them for explanations about the latest political controversies rather than reading lengthy news stories. "Unless you're a news junkie, the amount of information is overwhelming," says Harris.

In its initial launch Purple worked like an online concierge service — Mezi or Magic, for example — not for clothing or travel services, but for political information.

First, people signed up for Purple on Facebook Messenger or SMS. Particularly during breaking news or planned political events — such as a debate — subscribers received a message like this:

● Purple ⚙ ✕

Purple Explains:

Repeal/replace Obamacare

#GetPurple

Repeal/Replace Explain > ☺

What could happen to Obamacare

Explore

☰ Type a message...

🖼 🏷 GIF ☺ 📎 📷 👍

The message typically contained a bold-type keyword, a link, or an "Explore" or "Next" button. Users clicked one of those buttons to get more information. Or not.
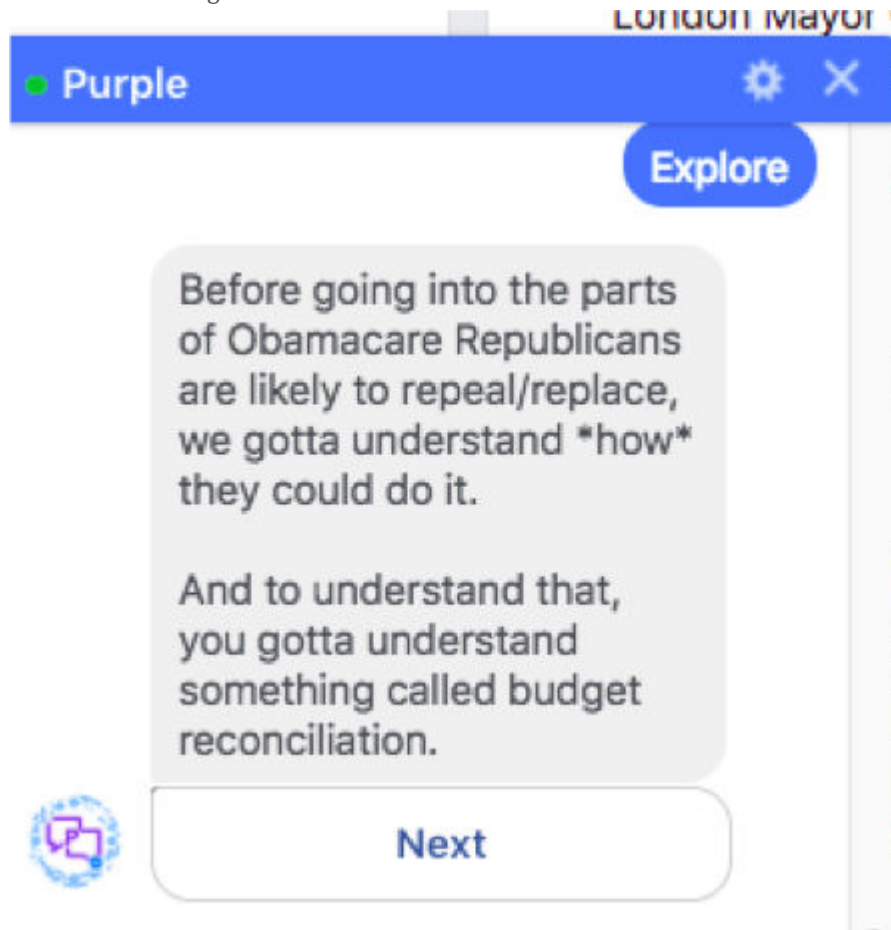
Purple began as a Tumblr blog called "Purple Politics" while Harris was a graduate student at CUNY's journalism school. ("Purple" represents the color combination of "red" politics and "blue" politics.)

Later it became a website "that did explainers in a non-partisan way." Harris says the site "was popular, but not growing." So Purple began signing up users for SMS, and later, Facebook Messenger. (Harris is considering Slack and WhatsApp as well.)

"It's really powerful to have a platform that people use naturally," she said.

Today, Harris and Heimann are beta-testing a built-out platform that allows other writers to offer their political expertise through Purple. "What we really want to do is build a new model for media that emphasizes quality over quantity," she said. "No one will be sending you to fake news or false content."

Harris said she's vetting the writing applicants for quality and trustworthiness; so far, the authors include political reporter Philip Rosenstein "and bloggers who don't work for large organizations."

Purple will retain the concept of having real faces behind their information, says Harris. "People connect more naturally with other people, rather than faceless sources. When you engage with people the same way you'd engage with your friends, it creates incredibly high levels of trust and loyalty."

Technical points and modifications: Purple uses Twilio to handle its SMS (text message) communications. The biggest challenges to using SMS, says Harris, is cost and segmentation. "There are unique challenges when you're communicating with a lot of people via SMS," she says. However, Facebook Messenger is "pretty simple and straightforward; not too many technical challenges there."

Newsrooms including The Virginian-Pilot also are testing the Facebook Messenger platform to distribute links to news stories. At the Pilot, Facebook users can choose how, when and what types of content they'll receive — all facilitated by an automated assistant named Ginny. Another resource: Melody Kramer's recent list of news organizations' creative uses of messaging platforms.

— Jane Elizabeth
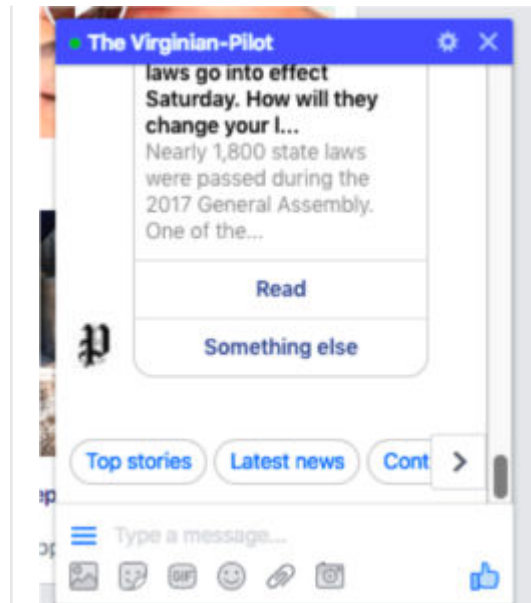
Los Angeles Times: Story stacks

Story stacks
Creators: The Los Angeles Times
Summary: Uses a vast combination of visuals to explain issues loaded with facts, such as the country's national monuments now under review.

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At the Los Angeles Times, the invention of simple templates called "story stacks" allows journalists to tell complex stories in ways that can be more effective than pages of text.

Here's one example of this stack approach: A roundup of national monuments under review by the White House. A straightforward headline — "Here are the national monuments being reviewed under Trump's order" — anchors the top of the page and is placed above a dominant visual, a grid made up of 16 small images.

Video, photos, graphics, social media embeds and other elements offer storytelling options to "provide a more digestible experience and keep an audience reading," says Len De Groot, director of data visualization. These alternative story forms, also referred to as "Q&A stacks" "and "timeline stacks," move away from the traditional long-form narrative.

Facts in the national monuments story, which became politically controversial, are presented simply. A short introduction provides context and emphasizes some key facts; for instance, that only monuments created since Jan. 1, 1996, will be part of this order.

Scrolling down through the story, readers can quickly scan through a labeled list, single images and short paragraphs. Updates at the end of the page show updates to the story.

De Groot estimates the L.A. Times has produced at least 100 stories using the stack templates, which were first launched in the newsroom in April 2017. Other stack-form stories that tackle controversial and complex topics include: a brief history of net neutrality, which highlights game-changing moments in a number of ways, including videos and social media posts; and a timeline that compares the U.S. and Chinese space programs, illustrated with photographs and timelines.
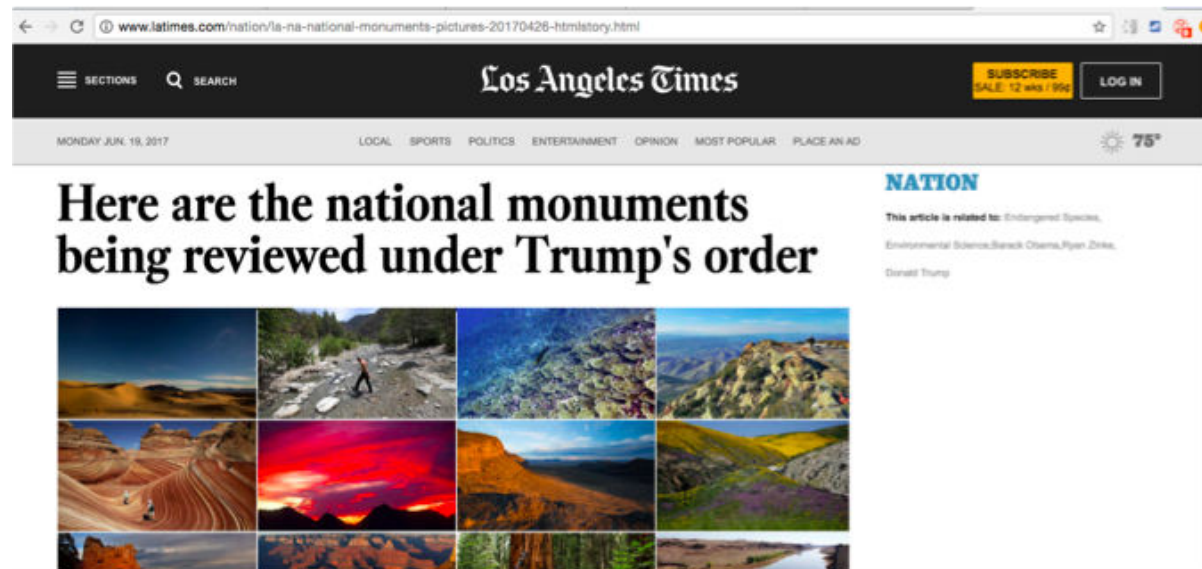
The L.A. Times "story stack" model.

Editor-in-Chief and Publisher Davan Maharaj and Deputy Managing Editor of Digital Megan Garvey "advocated creative storytelling for years before I arrived at the Times," says De Groot. "I was brought in to rebuild a print-only graphics department as a digital team in 2013, and creative storytelling was a natural extension of those efforts."

Staffers decide on whether to use a stack form for a story on a case-by-case basis. First and foremost on everyone's minds: how to best tell a story so readers understand the underlying issue. "People will offer ideas, both visual and narrative, that may include the incorporation of data, video, social, lists," says De Groot. "Format is not the primary concern, but if something is an obvious stack, like a timeline, that may be suggested."

Buy-in from staffers to use alternative ways to tell complex stories is a non-issue, says De Groot, as "most journalists want as many people as possible to see their work and are eager to try things that prove effective."

"Our engagement team has helped lead the efforts, trying to push people past thinking about a 'stack' to thinking how to tell stories in an unexpected ways."

De Groot says the stack format "is among our most visited content every year. There's usually at least one project that ranks among our top 10 stories each year — and several reach the top 20."

Research on reading and visual processing, combined with analytics, have provided "insight into what prompts readers to engage. We try to use these tools to provide content in forms that a [majority] of our readers want."

Technical points and modifications: The Los Angeles Times uses a news story editor called SNAP (Simple News Assembly Platform). It simplifies the process of publishing online. "SNAP has a WYSIWYG (what you see is what you get) editor, and writers are able to copy and paste the formatting to build out a story," said De Groot. SNAP was built by the editorial staff on the Data Desk, explains De Groot, whose team built the story stack templates using this system. (The newsroom soon will be migrating to Arc, a content management system used by The Washington Post.)

De Groot's team also set up a Slack channel called "#storytelling-911" particularly for troubleshooting. "It was important to address problems quickly," he says, "so that reporters didn't feel as though they had been pushed into water without a life vest."

If you don't have the resources to create a template, De Groot says much can be done without one. Breaking up a story into smaller chunks, or using photos, graphics and social media in order to explain it better, can be created with basic HTML, and can include subheads, lists and tables. "Having basic elements predesigned and readily available means reporters can focus on explanatory storytelling instead of design."

— Julie M. Elman

Baltimore Sun: 'Dismissed': Focused on solutions

'Dismissed': Focused on solutions
Creator: The Baltimore Sun
Summary: Uses multiple tools — including an interactive 360 tour and a unique quiz — to help readers understand a controversial investigation.

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Last year, The Baltimore Sun set out to untangle the city's "widely misunderstood" housing court process — the first in the nation to establish a system for inspectors to hold landlords accountable for fixing substandard living conditions. Evictions had been a big problem in the city for years, and the newspaper hoped to go beyond the anecdotal assumption that low-income tenants' delinquency was to blame.

The Sun hired an outside organization to scrape data on nearly a decade of cases in Baltimore City District Court and put that information into a searchable database. From there, the Sun's reporting team could separate evidence from anecdote to discover whether the housing court was meeting the requirements of the law.

"It was a sweeping story that aimed to determine if an entire justice system (the busiest docket in the state) was fair to tenants. It isn't," says Doug Donovan, one of the lead reporters on the project. "But given the complexity of the topic — landlord-tenant law, housing inspection rules, implications of poverty, city programs to help low-income tenants, etc. — we knew we needed to take a multi-pronged storytelling approach: data visualizations, graphics, photographs and traditional storytelling."

Working with Donovan were: writer Jean Marbella; Adam Marton, Jin Kim and Caroline Pate on data visualization; and editor Matthew Hay Brown.

The resulting package still put heavy emphasis on a typical investigative narrative as the anchor of the project, but that was broken up by multiple entry points, including a video, a podcast and photo galleries. Other explainer features embedded in the story brought readers directly into the cases that they were reading about to see firsthand evidence of the court process and rental conditions in a way that a traditional story alone could not.

A video quiz titled "You Be the Judge" presented the facts of three real-life Baltimore City Rent Court cases and allowed readers to select how they thought a judge might rule.

After selecting the answer, readers would see the actual results of the case and why the court ruled one way or another.

The news staff "needed to explain what could be boring, complicated government systems: the eviction process, the tenant-complaint (rent escrow) system and housing inspections," says Donovan. "[The quiz] gave us another way to present our reporting and connect with users, particularly those who might not typically read an in-depth story."

Watch the video about the Jesse Buckner case in rent court. How would you judge his case?

Give it all to the tenant. He had to live with a bedbug infestation for nearly a year.

Give it all to the landlord. He tried to eradicate the bugs but the tenant didn't fully cooperate.

Both sides made valid points. The fair thing to do is divvy up the money.

The story also incorporated a 360-degree view tool similar to what you might find on a real-estate website, which allowed readers to navigate inside a rowhouse and see evidence of 20 violations found by city inspectors.

Donovan sees the use of multiple tools, rather than just one device, as critical to explaining such a complicated story.

"There is a tremendous amount of social and legal undercurrents at play in the day-to-day crush of housing court cases. Overlay our investigative findings and there is a potential to plunk a text-heavy dissertation that would not capture or keep the attention of readers," Donovan says.

Although "gamifying" the housing courts process had its pluses in terms of improving engagement on a complicated subject, the Sun got pushback over promotion of the tool.

"Avoid calling it a game. Avoid thinking of it as a game," Donovan warns. "Otherwise you run the risk of offending readers if the presentation isn't somber enough."

Technical points and modifications: Newsrooms that lack the bandwidth to comb through troves of data or develop complicated online tools should get creative to build resources. "Find someone who can do it at a university or nonprofit who is motivated by a mission to enhance transparency of government and courts," Donovan says. "Every university has a data analysis program of some sort. Such folks are out there."

The Sun worked with Solutions Journalism Network, a nonprofit that helps develop reporting on complex social issues, often through nontraditional storytelling. Although the Sun team decided that a more traditional approach was right for the housing courts series, the collaboration with Solutions Journalism Network helped the newsroom experiment with and brainstorm future interactive projects.

— Lori Kelley

Washington Post: Tracking Trump

Tracking Trump
Creator: The Washington Post
Summary: A database/tracking tool helps keep tabs on changes made by the Trump administration. Charts and cards, rather than pages of writing and rhetoric, can distract from partisanship and instead focus on learning.

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With a new president elected on a promise to overturn the work of the previous administration, The Washington Post needed a way to keep tabs on those promises, something that went beyond the typical drip-drip-drip of regulation reversal stories.

White House reporter Juliet Eilperin, who covered the Obama administration and the creation of rules that President Trump was dismantling, worked to document changes by the new administration. She and her editors talked out the findings with the Post's graphics department — including graphics editor Darla Cameron — in hopes of developing a tracking tool for the information.

The resulting project covers a range of ways the Trump team can change Obama policy — via executive actions, Cabinet-level decisions, Congressional Review Acts and legislation. (Cameron was assigned to the project after her work on a similar tool that charted the scope of President Obama's executive actions to give readers a sense of what it might take to overturn them.)

How Trump is rolling back Obama's legacy

During President Trump's first year in office, Congress and his administration plan to review, revoke and overwrite key parts of his predecessor's domestic legacy.
As of June 19, here are the Obama-era rules and regulations impacted by:

15
Executive actions
issued by Trump, which have the full force of law. One is in the works. One was tried and failed.

33
Cabinet-level agency decisions
from Trump's executive branch. 15 more are in the works.

14
Congressional Review Acts
targeting recently issued regulations. 20 were tried and failed.

1
New legislation
passed by Congress, which could affect old laws. Two more are in the works.

Cameron notes that such explainers don't take the place of a traditional narrative; a "daily story" is typically still written about each regulation change as it happens. The database simply offers readers an umbrella tool to understand all the changes the administration is trying to make, where each effort is at in the process and which ones have succeeded so far – all in an accessible, navigable way.

Readers can sort the database of Trump-era changes by topics such as environment, civil rights and health care. The results offer a running tally of which Obama regulations the Trump camp is targeting and what their status is. Each change or proposed change is presented as a summary card, often with links to a more descriptive story that readers can go to for more context.

☐ 9 cancellations in the works   ☑ 22 rules canceled   ✗ 17 tried and failed

REGULATION
ENVIRONMENT   ☐

☐ Proposed

Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke proposes in interim report shrinking boundaries of Bears Ears National Monument, having Congress reclassify protections in some areas and grant tribes co-management authority.

Read more: Interior secretary recommends Trump consider scaling back Bears Ears National Monument

REGULATION
ENVIRONMENT   ☐

☐ Proposed

Scientists from three federal agencies will review a massive and controversial federal plan to protect the dwindling population of greater sage grouse in 11 western states.

Read more: Trump administration to review a controversial plan to manage sage grouse

REGULATION
ENVIRONMENT   ☑

☑ Issued June 14

The EPA announced it would postpone for two years a 2016 rule limiting methane and smog-forming pollutants from oil and gas wells.

Read more: Trump administration delays rules limiting methane emissions

REGULATION
ENVIRONMENT   ☑

☑ Issued June 12

EPA Administrator Scott Pruitt signed a final rule delaying the effective date of the agency's Risk Management Program, which aims to prevent accidental chemical releases and aid first responders, until Feb. 19, 2019. The nearly two-year delay came after two industry groups, the American Chemistry Council and the American Fuel & Petrochemical Manufacturers, petitioned the agency.

CONGRESSIONAL REVIEW
ENVIRONMENT   ✗

☑ Never considered, expired on May 11

Targeted a rule on mitigation policy

Original Fish and Wildlife Service rule: Mitigation Policy

CONGRESSIONAL REVIEW
ENVIRONMENT   ✗

☑ Never considered, expired on May 11

Targeted a rule relating to requirements for drilling in the Arctic.

Original Interior Department rule: Oil and Gas and Sulfur Operations on the Continental Shelf —Requirements for Exploratory Drilling on the Arctic Outer Continental Shelf

CONGRESSIONAL REVIEW
ENVIRONMENT   ✗

☑ Never considered, expired on May 11

Targeted a rule on the management of oil and gas rights within National Park Service lands

The Post plans to maintain the database tool for the first year of the Trump administration.

The device has a lot of longevity and exposure with links promoting it from related stories on any Trump administration change. Cameron pointed to a slate of similar tools The Post has built to keep tabs on the new White House:

- Tracking how many key positions Trump has filled so far

- Here's what we know so far about Team Trump's ties to Russian interests

- In 137 days, President Trump has made 623 false and misleading claims

"This tracker format is a useful way for us to follow the rapid changes taking place in Washington," Cameron said.

Technical notes and modifications: The Post's team set a watch list on the legislative tracking tool Fiscal Note to follow bills as they made their way through Congress. Other changes, such as cabinet-level agency decisions, are predominantly tracked through reporting, so the team keeps in touch with reporters covering each federal agency. When something new happens, information is added to a Google spreadsheet and a script is run to re-generate the data and publish the updated graphic. Cameron said the database uses open-source tools created by the New York Times to streamline the publication process: ai2html and Archie Markup Language.

Cameron cautions that smaller newsrooms shouldn't feel an urgency to unearth the perfect interactive tool or create a one-size-fits-all approach for future graphics. "It starts with conversations between designers, reporters and editors about what a story really needs to be effective," she said. "From there, teams can slowly build up an environment where they can create more customized content." She recommended this NPR blog post explaining the visual creation process. "It's important to remember that no single explainer format will work for every story, and not everything can, or should, be made into a reusable tool. It's more important to build a system that allows for creativity in storytelling."

— Lori Kelley

Asheville Citizen-Times: Explaining redistricting
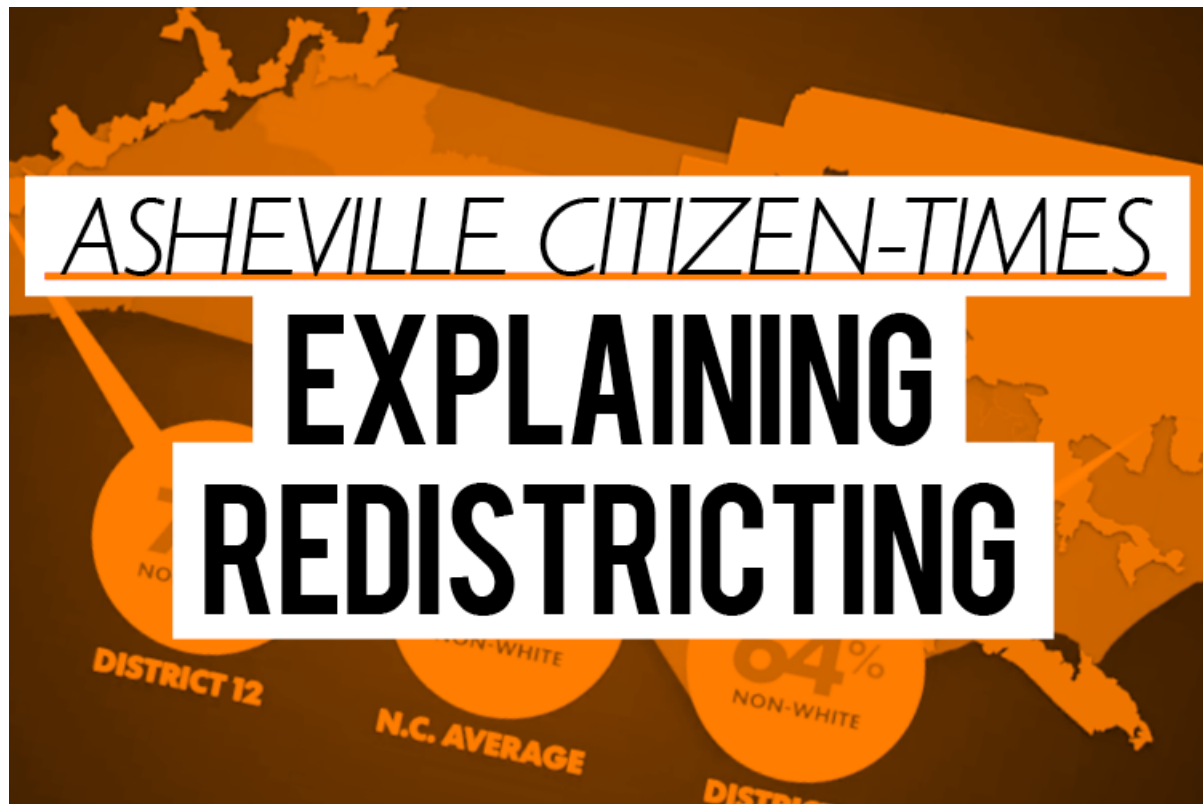
Explaining redistricting
Creator: The Asheville Citizen-Times
Summary: A Facebook video project on how redistricting affects North Carolina politics.

At the Asheville Citizen-Times a couple years ago, a group of journalists gathered in the lounge area in sight of displays tracking real-time audience metrics on the paper's website. They could see that a critically important story about redistricting wasn't doing so hot. Josh Awtry, then executive editor, and his team decided to try something that wasn't often used in small newsrooms at the time — incorporating motion graphics into Facebook native video.

Awtry created a video using simple graphics, stock illustrations and an approachable voice-over to quickly explain recent redistricting in North Carolina ahead of election day.
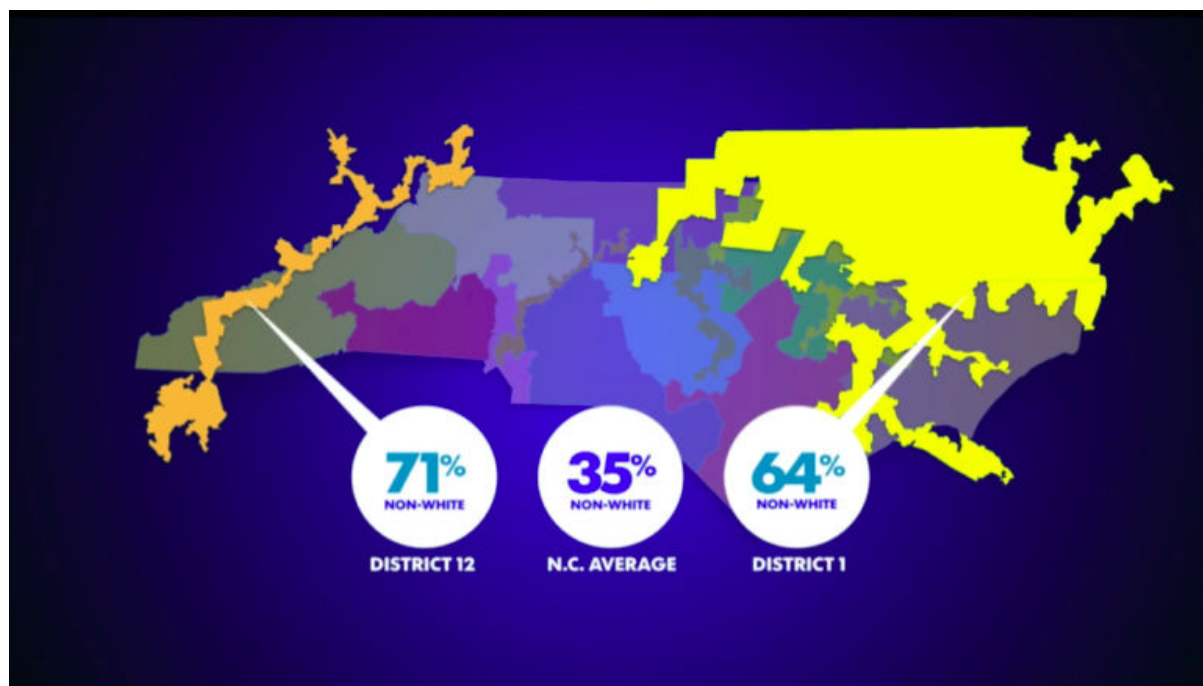
"The hardest part is in ensuring you're conversant enough in a topic to truly translate it conversationally," says Awtry, who relied on Asheville's government reporter Mark Barrett to help get him up to speed. "You need to understand the subject. … You can't fake it."

Instead of a traditional story with a declarative headline like "Redistricting to change Asheville's landscape," the video helps the reader understand the methodology that journalists used to reach that conclusion.

A headline like "How redrawing our political borders changes Asheville's character," says Awtry, "tells you you're not going to get declarative facts, but rather the reasoning behind those facts."

The experiment paid off with the Facebook video attracting more views than similar videos on the newspaper's website.

"For us, this was the first example of the shape of things to come," Awtry says. "To see a video reach its intended audience that much quicker and wider-spread was a powerful lesson. ... It helps civically activate people who might otherwise gloss over this kind of 'institutional but important' topic."

Now senior director for content strategy with Gannett, Awtry says audience metrics show the value of such content. "Sure, there's the high-volume, fast-burning celebrity news and breaking stuff," he says, "but right below that is a strata that should be our strongest franchise: helping people make sense of their communities."

Awtry cites evidence showing that stories with "how" and "why" headlines do roughly 17 to 25 percent better than their counterparts. He's encouraging Gannett journalists not just to recraft headlines to fit this mold but to think of stories and story forms that spur those types of headlines.

Awtry says readers are "hungry for explanatory work on topics they care about. If we can shift more of our time to that sort of work, we'll be performing a huge public service."

Technical notes and modifications: "People think you need a thousand dollar piece of editing software and certification to produce motion graphics," but Awtry relied on "creative trickery" with Powerpoint, iMovie and a bit of Adobe Illustrator to pull it off using standard-issue tools. The audio was recorded hunched over a laptop speaker.

Gannett is developing a tool to better uncover what its member audiences are engaging with most, both in terms of page views and engagement time — and what they spend little or no time on — in hopes of redirecting journalists away from unnecessary work and toward more worthwhile projects.

— Lori Kelley

ProPublica: A tweetstorm of facts


A tweetstorm of facts
Creator: ProPublica
Summary: An edited series of fast tweets designed to allow facts to combat misinformation in real time.

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On Thanksgiving weekend 2016, President Trump's Twitter activity spurred ProPublica to embark on a new form of explainer journalism for the non-profit — the tweetstorm.

Faced with a tweet from the president-elect saying he would have "won the popular vote if you deduct the millions of people who voted illegally," ProPublica weighed how to combat the false claim — one that the news organization was uniquely positioned to disprove. ProPublica had just organized a massive project called Electionland, which tracked voter issues on Election Day using a team of more than 1,000 people across the country.

Given the holiday weekend, a traditional long story was deemed too complicated. "Actually what you want to do is respond in real time. What's the vehicle for responding in real time?" says deputy managing editor Eric Umansky, recalling the discussion."Let's just do a tweetstorm."
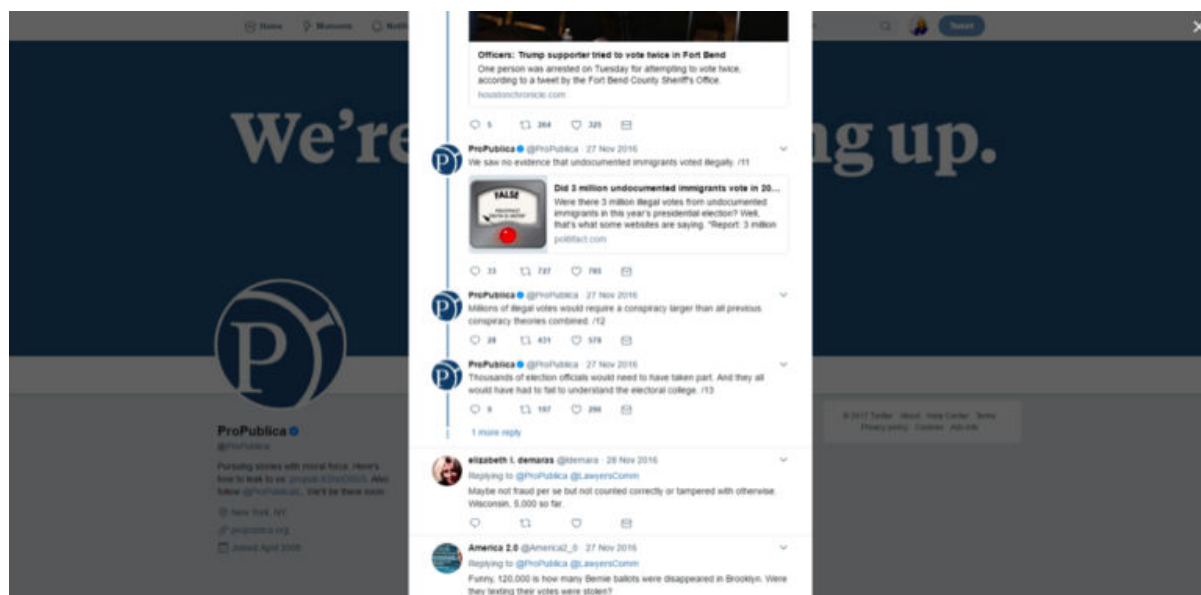
The ensuing 15-tweet thread went viral, drawing thousands of retweets and likes, and a new mission was born for ProPublica. Umansky and his self-described "no-bullshit" engagement team put measures in place to better use social media as a platform to tell stories rather than just promote the so-called "real story" on the website.

Now, a reporter writes a tweetstorm, then runs it by an editor and an in-house lawyer to get approval, a process that can take a few minutes but which has proven an essential safeguard after an early misstep in one piece of the voting tweetstorm.

ProPublica's approach was further validated after Sean Spicer "blessedly" called ProPublica a "left-wing blog" in response to a story about the president changing his trust to enable him to take money from his businesses.

That thread had upwards of 24,000 retweets. ProPublica gained 100,000-plus new followers and donations rolled in.

One key to ProPublica's tweetstorms is a conversational tone that doesn't dip into opinion or bias, a style that Umansky said can be hard to pull off. "We encourage voice but not irresponsible voice," he says. A news organization must trust its social team to toe this line since a top-heavy editing structure risks "losing the magic" of social.

Also, rather than using a solo siloed staffer who may not have as much journalism experience, ProPublica draws from a team of reporters and editors who rotate into the role for a week at a time, which Umansky says helps avoid the "Twitter hamster wheel" and keeps the team intellectually engaged.

Working with Umansky are engagement editor Terry Parris Jr., and reporters Adriana Gallardo and Ariana Tobin. Another reporter, Jessica Huseman, also pitches and writes tweetstorms, including this one on climate change and President Trump's claims about the Paris Accord.

Umansky considers tweetstorms just as likely to offer information retention as a typical story. He notes that Chartbeat data show that readers don't often read very far no matter how many thousands of words a regular story is.

"At the end of the day, we want to tell the truth and for that truth to resonate. I think this is just another vehicle for that."

Technical details and modifications: Plenty of individual journalists use standalone tweetstorms to dispel misinformation. (Follow the New York Times' Rukmini Callimachi on terrorism and Politico's Michael Grunwald on policy and the environment.) But ProPublica is one of the few that uses its main Twitter handle this way. Umansky notes that the nonprofit has the benefit of not monetizing page views on its site, so telling some stories solely on social doesn't hurt its bottom line. Still, other news organization can use tweetstorm summaries to link to longer stories; or use the platform to tell stories that advance its brand, building its subscriber base.

— *Lori Kelley*

New York Times: Visualizing America's problems

Visualizing America's problems
Creator: The New York Times
Summary: A visual snapshot of the nation's problems.

The New York Times visualized the main issues on Americans' minds using an understated, yet highly effective presentation: nested pink, yellow and blue boxes of varying sizes.

The graphic presentation based on the Gallup poll question, "What do you think is the most important problem facing this country today?" gives readers a hierarchical, at-a-glance view of what presidents faced while in office from 1935 to the present day.

The concept is as simple as it gets — bigger rectangles mean bigger concerns — but the path toward completing this graphic wasn't as easy as it looks. The final presentation evolved over time.

"We were going to originally run it before the election as a story about what voters care about," says New York Times Graphics Editor Alicia Parlapiano. "Gregor Aisch, who programmed and designed it, visualized the data as one long streamgraph over time. I collected quotes by presidential candidates that illustrated how they spoke about the biggest issues during their campaigns.

"We kind of ran out of time before the election, so we decided to wait to publish it. Eventually we decided to peg it to Trump's inauguration and organize it to show what Americans cared about as each new administration came into office. We changed the chart form to treemaps that showed snapshots of the data at certain points in time, which helped solve some of the issues we had with the lack of consistency of categories from poll to poll."

The story garnered positive feedback in the newsroom and with readers, Parlapiano says. "I think [the visuals] handle well the messiness and variability of the dataset over time, and does a good job of pointing out interesting moments and building a narrative to walk people through it."

The visual presentation of the Gallup polling roundup consists of:

- a main headline

- short introduction

- 20 panels of varying sizes and colors that indicate the broad categories of "economy" (blue), "domestic issues" (yellow) and "international issues" (pink)

- brief descriptions under each panel, adding context about what was happening at that time.

Had The Times approached this story using a more traditional form, Parlapiano acknowledges that numbers — and lots of them — would be needed, which she believes would make it difficult to make comparisons between administrations.

"It would be much harder to understand the trends without seeing the charts," she says. Comprised of color-coded nested rectangles and short labels, the story provide a wealth of context at a glance.

Within The Times newsroom, the term "alternative story forms" is applied to anything that is not a traditional narrative, including fact checks, live chats, lists, videos and a roundup of visual forms, which are created by the graphics department and other teams in the newsroom.

A more alternative-storytelling route presents a few challenges, Parlapiano says. "The biggest barrier is probably getting reporters to try a new form when they are accustomed to the rhythm of writing a traditional news story," she says. "While we try to collaborate with reporters and get them to contribute to alternate story forms we are working on, there is also a paper-wide initiative to encourage new forms."

And sometimes, she says, presentation decisions boil down to the sheer scope of the project and how that plays into time and technology. Working across platforms, for example — and translating the same project for print, desktop, Web and mobile — must be considered.

"People engage with stories in a newspaper much differently than they do on their computers or on their phones," Parlapiano says. "Mobile stories tend to do better when they are quickly scannable, while in print we can present stories in a way that requires a little more time for exploration."

Technical details and modifications: Most of the New York Times' online graphics are built with HTML and javascript. Parlapiano notes that many staffers use D3, a visualization library. Print graphics are created in Illustrator.

Parlapiano offered a couple of tool recommendations for newspapers with more modest resources than The New York Times: ArchieML, a Google Documents-based markup language developed by Times staffers, used to structure nearly every project; and ai2html, an Adobe Illustrator script created by one of the Times' editors, which turns illustrator documents into HTML code. "They both allow people without advanced coding skills, like me, to publish well-designed pieces in a short amount of time," she says.

— Julie M. Elman

Axios: 'Smarter Faster' videos

'Smarter Faster' videos
Creator: Axios
Summary: A series of first-person interviews with experts overlaid with graphics and conversational text to succinctly explain an issue to the viewer.

Axios, which launched earlier this year with a platform geared toward "smart brevity," is making a mark as a media disruptor. Politico veterans Jim VandeHei, Mike Allen and Roy Schwartz are behind the project.

A showpiece of the new site is its "Smarter Faster" video series made up of quick but educational interviews with experts on often-controversial topics.

"Our readers and viewers are interested in hearing from trailblazers with innovative ideas leading the top companies and organizations around the world," says Axios executive vice president Evan Ryan, who conducts a majority of the interviews in the series. "... We make sure to focus on one worthy idea from an influential person in 1:30 or less — and Smarter Faster was born."

Co-founders VandeHei, Schwartz and Allen created the series, along with managing editor Bubba Atkinson.

Axios casts a broad net to find voices for Smarter Faster, Ryan says. "We are seeking leaders who can offer insights into navigating a particular issue, industry or challenge."

Sources and subjects have included Obama senior adviser Valerie Jarrett on "working with the enemy;" former Secretary of State Robert Gates with leadership advice for the Trump administration; and Cleveland Clinic CEO Toby Cosgrove on what's killing health care in America.

Ryan says that the series' format "allows our audiences to focus on the most interesting and impactful moments of an interview, and gives them the opportunity to dive deeper and find creative solutions."

The "smart brevity" of the series is given credence by quick visual evidence of each expert's credentials, which allows the interviews to move along at a quick, conversational clip without getting bogged in exposition.
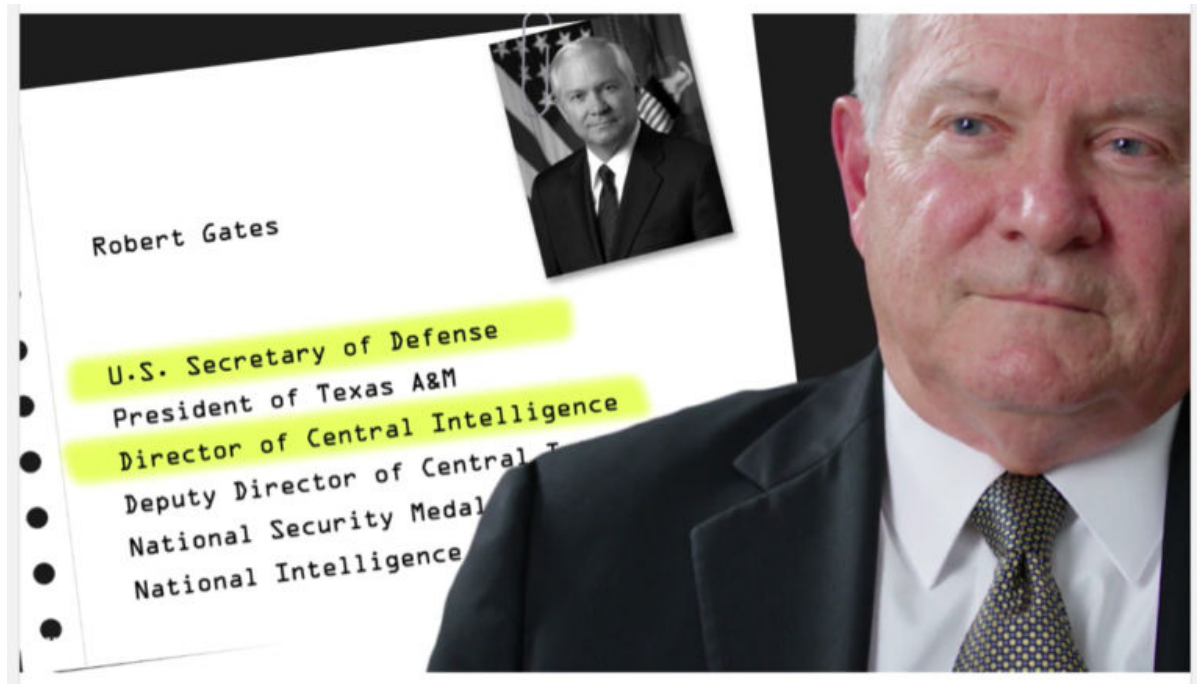
Graphics and stats provide backup for the interviewees' statements.

"The format allows us to have the versatility to convey in-depth, big ideas in a brief amount of time utilizing B-Roll, graphics, data points and audio clips," Ryan says.
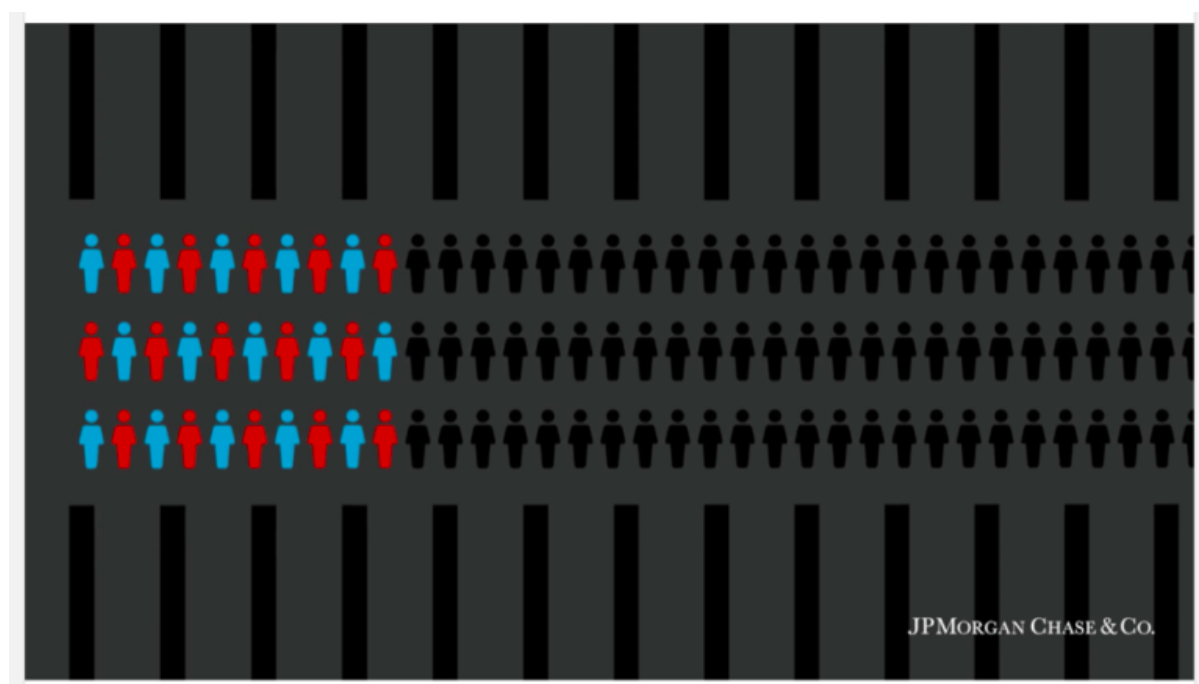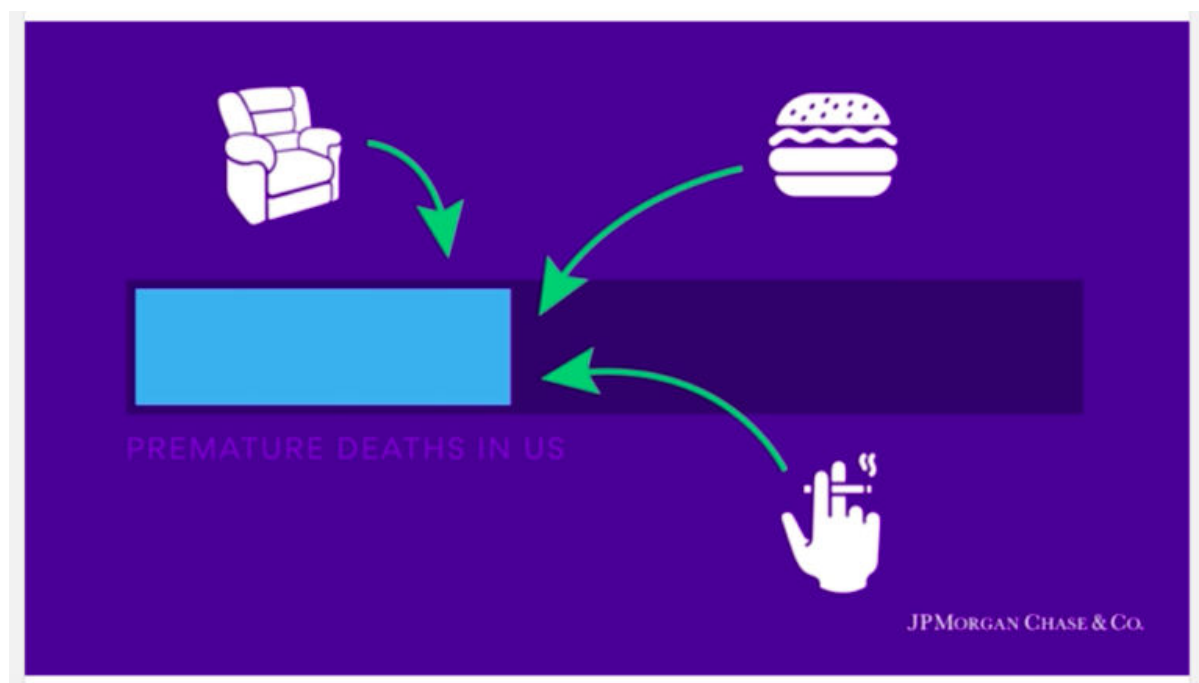
The video series is sponsored by JPMorgan Chase, a business model similar to one used at Politico magazine in its "What Works" series.

In an interview with Digiday before the launch of Axios, VandeHei described the importance of sponsorships to such endeavors: "I think the easiest way right now to monetize video in the serious-news space is to have it sponsored or presented by someone, as opposed to long, tedious pre-roll. A lot of our stuff we're pushing is all about shorter, smarter, something I have time to watch and can engage with."

The biggest hurdle to the short, digestible videos is time, Ryan says. From start to finish, each video takes about 40 hours to produce, from booking the interview to writing the questions to editing and adding graphics.

"At the beginning, it was a challenge to explain to our interviewees why we needed 30 minutes of conversation to get to approximately 90 seconds of video," Ryan says. "Now that the series is 'out there,' so-to-speak, they get it."

Technical details and modifications: "All you need is one idea or comment that sparks," Ryan says. "The equation for achieving that over and over again at scale is more challenging. A smaller news group could do something similar but would likely need to compromise on production value."

— *Lori Kelley*

Wall Street Journal: Charting stock and tweets

Charting stock and tweets
Creator: The Wall Street Journal
Summary: Fever charts are played alongside tweets by Donald Trump to reveal how a company's stock and its major index performed after a mention from the president.

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Even before Donald Trump was elected president, news reports covered his attacks on companies like Carrier, Nordstrom and Boeing, speculating that his loose lips could sink stocks.

But sometimes conventional wisdom needs a reality check.

Wall Street Journal data reporter Shane Shifflett "wondered what impact, if any, [Trump's] negative, protectionist-flavored tweets had on investors."
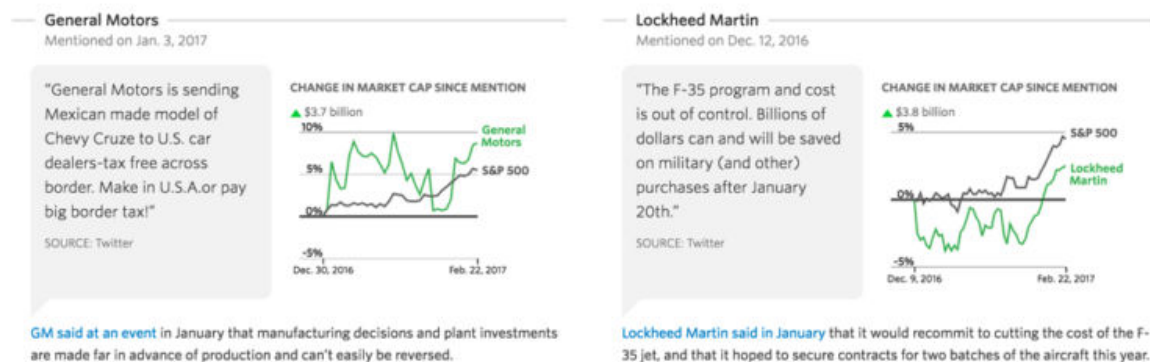
"I questioned how those companies as a group were performing against the market since it seemed like the Dow was either perpetually approaching or setting new records after the election."

The Journal created a "Trump Target Index" made up of all the companies that Trump had mentioned to compare their performance against the Dow and S&P 500 as a whole.

"I would go right now to Carrier and I would say, 'I am gonna work awfully hard. You're gonna make air conditioners now in Mexico. You're gonna get all of these 1,400 people that are being laid off--' they're laid off. They were crying. They were-- it's a very sad situation."

"To think that Ford is moving its small car division is a disgrace. It's disgraceful. It's disgraceful that our politicians allow them get away with it. It really is."

"Toyota Motor said will build a new plant in Baja, Mexico, to build Corolla cars for U.S. NO WAY! Build plant in U.S. or pay big border tax."

Apple shares dropped 10% over three days after the company reported its first quarterly sales drop since 2003.

Trump Target Index: 32.5%
Dow Jones Industrial Average: 30.1%
S&P 500: 26.7%

0%
Feb. 12, 2016   Election   Feb. 22, 2017

(Shifflett is quick to point out that he wasn't the only one checking the markets — Axios and Reuters both published pieces looking at the change in stock after Trump targeted a company.)

The Wall Street Journal's visualization strips out embellishment and analysis and lets fever charts do the talking, showing how companies and the major index each one was in performed post-tweet. While some companies' stocks showed an initial dip, the longterm trend was overwhelmingly upward.

General Motors
Mentioned on Jan. 3, 2017

"General Motors is sending Mexican made model of Chevy Cruze to U.S. car dealers-tax free across border. Make in U.S.A.or pay big border tax!"

SOURCE: Twitter

CHANGE IN MARKET CAP SINCE MENTION
▲ $3.7 billion
10%   General Motors
5%   S&P 500
0%
-5%
Dec. 30, 2016   Feb. 22, 2017

GM said at an event in January that manufacturing decisions and plant investments are made far in advance of production and can't easily be reversed.

Lockheed Martin
Mentioned on Dec. 12, 2016

"The F-35 program and cost is out of control. Billions of dollars can and will be saved on military (and other) purchases after January 20th."

SOURCE: Twitter

CHANGE IN MARKET CAP SINCE MENTION
▲ $3.8 billion
5%   S&P 500
0%   Lockheed Martin
-5%
Dec. 9, 2016   Feb. 22, 2017

Lockheed Martin said in January that it would recommit to cutting the cost of the F-35 jet, and that it hoped to secure contracts for two batches of the aircraft this year.

Shifflett worked with the WSJ Market Data Group to figure out how indices are created. He built the visuals soon after and reporter Akane Otani, whom he discovered was already crafting a separate story on the same topic, jumped in to add context.

WSJ has done similar stock visualizations on other topics, using them to describe fluctuations in markets like crude oil or CEO pay. The newsroom also produces "What We Know" stories for breaking news projects that round up all the facts and accompanying imagery to succinctly explain the latest information as it happens rather than re-topping a more traditional narrative.

One downside of such formats, Shifflett says, is their lack of emotion and human connection.

"There is a so-what factor. Explainers lack tension, and the characters are often abstract or thin so it can make it hard to get a reader interested," he says.

The stock-tweet piece drew a fair amount of traffic, however, and was especially buzzy online in newsletters and on social. Shifflett attributes shareability and success in conveying information to the story's straightforward approach.

"It's transparent. The numbers are right there for you to see and nothing is hidden," he says.

Technical points and modifications: The WSJ's version included an interactive component with "hoverable" fever chart bars providing more data. While Shifflett noted that it might be possible to build such layout templates into a CMS, a static version of the images would convey the same information and might be easier for a newsroom with a smaller online staff to produce.

— Lori Kelley

Your turn

In this report we've endeavored to demonstrate alternative ways to write and present complex, fact-filled content in a way that can be more effective in reaching audiences — even those who are disinclined to believe the information.

We've also offered some recommendations for software and tools, and taken you behind the scenes in the creation of some of these presentations.

Now we'd like to see how you might use the advice from researchers, reporters, editors and visual artists. If you have created projects to more effectively present your accountability work — fact-checking, investigations, ongoing coverage of controversial or political issues — we'd like to showcase those in updates to this report. Please send a note to API's Jane Elizabeth with a link to your project.

And if you'd like to create a new way to present accountability reporting but aren't sure how to start or the best methods to use, or if you lack the necessary resources, **we can help**. Contact us to get started.

Acknowledgments

Jane Elizabeth is the American Press Institute's senior manager for accountability journalism. Lori Kelley, a veteran visual journalist, is the art director at Seattle Business magazine. Julie M. Elman is a professor in Ohio University's School of Visual Communication and author of Fear, Illustrated: Transforming What Scares Us.