BBC North West:
Data-based News Stories

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Introduction

I completed an eight-week internship at BBC North West, which produces the regional news programme BBC North West Tonight. I was responsible for finding and analysing data which would support and provide context to the stories featured that evening. I was able to research different areas everyday as BBC North West reports on current events and I particularly enjoyed working on anything related to politcs in the North West.

Objectives

The purpose of my internship at BBC North West was to help journalists at the organisation to incorporate data into their stories and to actively find stories within different datasets.

I did not have one long-term project, as BBC North West is interested in current events, but assisted journalists reporting on many different stories, from crime rates to women working Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics.

Method

As I worked on many different stories, I did not operate with a single methodology.

I usually started by trying to understand the story and considering which statistics might be used to illustrate the story, for example, when journalists were reporting on pressures on the NHS, I looked for data on hospital bed figures in the North West.
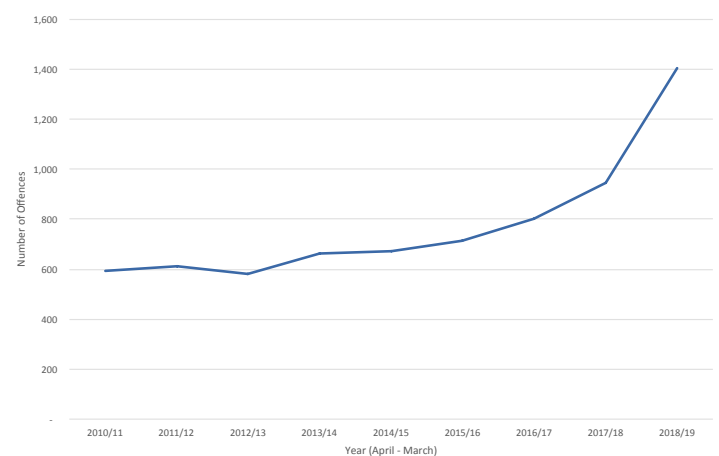
It was important to research the methodology used to collect the data as the BBC has a reputation for quality to uphold. When I was analysing data related to knife crime in the North West, I had to mention that Greater Manchester Police had recently changed the way it recorded knife crime and that the data wasn't comparable with previous years. I found that most of the data I used was from official sources, such as Police.UK or NHS Digital, or had been requested from official sources using Freedom of Information Requests.

I then analysed the data using Excel, mostly generating pivot tables and then passing along my findings to the reporters. I spent a considerable amount of time narrowing the data to local authorities, hospitals, police forces, etc., in the North West as BBC North West is mostly interested in the regional figures.

Results and Conclusions

The results of my analyses were that journalists could support their stories with data, for instance, stories about women working in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) were given wider context with relevant figures. I found it very satisfying to analyse some data and then watch those figures appear on BBC North West Tonight later that day.

I also concluded that data is an increasingly important aspect of journalism. More and more information is being made available everyday and this information can be used to provide deeper insights into current events. Data journalism, while not a cure-all, can also be used to combat 'fake news' and maintain trust in the media.

Statistics on Knife Crime in Merseyside

Key Skills Learnt

I feel more confident using Excel after completing the internship. I was confident using SPSS Staistics before beginning the internship, as I have used this programme while studying, but wasn't as confident with Excel. This will be very useful in the future, especially since Excel is probably more widely used by businesses and organisations than SPSS.

As a result, I have chosen to take more quantitative modules in my final year than I probably otherwise would have. I have also realised that the ability to analyse data is a very employable skillset and is in demand by businesses and other organisations.

In addition to feeling more confident analysing data, I have also developed 'softer' skills. I have improved my time-management skills by working in such a fast-paced environment as the newsroom. I believe my communication skills have improved as I frequently assisted journalists with finding guests to appear on the programme, this involved speaking to many organisations and calling the relevant individuals.

BBC

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