

The Times and Sunday Times Data Journalism

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Introduction

For my internship I was working in The Times and Sunday Times data team, who work across both titles on data led investigations on everything from education to politics to the environment, as well as collaborating with other

journalists from all sections of the papers. The data team also work closely with the interactives team, who create charts and interactive graphics, and provide data support for breaking news stories.

Objectives

As a Q-Step intern at the Times I was expected to assist with the collection and analysis of data for the team's on-going investigations. I was also encouraged to think about data-led stories of my own that I would be interested in researching, pitching and potentially writing.

Method

Most of my work was carried out using R, and I was introduced to a number of packages relevant to the typical tasks that data journalists carry out. The process of preparing data for a story typically involved data collection through web-scraping or accessing an API, cleaning messy data and merging multiple sources, analysing for patterns and trends, and creating visualisations.

As well as R, other tools used included QGIS for analysing and mapping geo-spatial data, and Datawrapper for producing interactive tables and charts.

Results and Conclusions

I worked on a number of projects that resulted in stories, the most significant of which was an investigation into pollution in rivers in England. This took up most of my time for the first few weeks, as using multiple large datasets made it a quite work intensive process.

The investigation made the front page of the Saturday paper, leading on our discovery that due to a lack of adequate testing and consistently high levels of pollution, the Environment Agency had not been able to certify a single river in England as safe for bathing.

The paper also contained a two-page spread of articles resulting from the project, including case studies of sewage overflows in a popular swimming spot, a report of how Environment Agency funding cuts had allowed water companies to pollute with minimal consequences, and an article I had written on the effects of the various pollutants found in the rivers. I was also involved in various projects lead by journalists from other sections. Working with business journalists, I carried out an analysis of the large amounts paid to remuneration consultants by FTSE100 companies, resulting in a story highlighting the concerning practices companies use to determine senior executives' pay.

Towards the end of my internship I successfully pitched an article looking into the cost of domestic air fares compared to train tickets. Using data scraped from Skyscanner and Trainline, I was able to show that two thirds of domestic flights were cheaper than taking the equivalent train journey, as well as calculate the environmental damage of choosing to travel by air over rail. My story was published on my last day at the Times, accompanied by a leading article from the paper criticising the government and train companies over the cost of rail travel and the environmental impact of high ticket prices.



The Times front page, 3rd August 2019

Key Skills Learnt

Carrying out so much data analysis in R has greatly improved my coding, as well as giving me a better understanding of how data can be used in a practical context. While I had the basics of working with data and programming before I started, I had to learn a lot in a very short time - the work included everything from web-scraping text to visualising financial statistics.

As well as technical skills, I also gained a really interesting insight into the functioning of a newspaper and the process behind the stories. Writing an article to a deadline for print was a challenge, but definitely improved my time management and ability to work under pressure.

I was very fortunate to be supported by a team who were always happy to help me out or teach me something new, so I never felt any of the tasks I had was too big a challenge.