

Data tells a compelling story

June 25 2013, by Matt Collette



From left, Chris Marstall, Creative Technologist at the Boston Globe, Steve Wilmsen, Senior Assistant Metro Editor, Father Richard 'Doc' Conway of St. Peter Parish in the Bowdoin-Geneva neighborhood in Boston, and reporters Akilah Johnson and Meghan Irons at Data Day. Credit: Brooks Canaday

The journalists behind The Boston Globe's "[68 Blocks](#)" series, which takes an in-depth look at life in the city's Bowdoin-Geneva neighborhood, knew they wanted hard data to play a key role in their work. But they didn't want the series to read like a rundown of facts and figures, according to Steve Wilmsen, enterprise editor for the Globe's

Metro section. "We wanted it to seem like a story," he said.

Wilmsen and a team of Globe journalists behind the series served as the keynote speakers at this year's Data Day, an event held on Northeastern's campus Friday and organized by the Massachusetts Area Planning Council, the Boston Indicators Project, and the School of Public Policy and Urban Affairs. Their panel discussion on how data figured into the groundbreaking series kicked off a day of events for policymakers, researchers, and advocates aimed at teaching them how data can help guide and inform better public policy.

"Getting these numbers was taxing," said Maria Cramer, a crime reporter at the Globe, describing a grueling process that went far beyond simply requesting public information from local officials and city agencies. "We had to make calls, we had to set up meetings. There is the assumption that this data is simply accessible through a few keystrokes, but it's a lot more complicated than that."

Globe journalists spent more than a year tracking down data on the Bowdoin-Geneva neighborhood from city, policy, and education officials. That information played a huge role in the series and is now being made available to outside researchers, said Chris Marstall, the Globe's creative technologist. Ryan Cordell, an assistant professor of English at Northeastern, recently led a team of [digital humanities](#) scholars and students to the new Globe Lab to learn more about how that data, and other information collected by the newspaper's reporters, can live on in the higher education realm.

Stephanie Pollack, one of the event's organizers and the associate director of research in the Dukakis Center for Urban & Regional Policy, said Data Day is an important opportunity to showcase the policy school's commitment to contributing more than pure research.

"One thing that I think separates our policy school from others is that we really engage in policy issues," said Pollack, a leading expert on transportation policy in Massachusetts and across the nation. "We're not just here to study policy. We're here to make change."

Faculty members showcased research at Data Day. During an afternoon panel discussion, for example, Neenah Estrella-Luna, an assistant academic specialist in the College of Professional Studies, and doctoral candidates in the Law & Policy program discussed how interviews, documents, and national databases could be used to address local and national policy issues.

Data plays a key role in public [policy](#) because it can be used to combat decision-makers who cherry-pick facts that best serve their own interests, noted Marc Draisen, executive director of the Massachusetts Area Planning Council. A strong commitment to sound data that is clearly presented can help turn the tide against the partisanship and dogmatism that defines much of American politics today.

"Sometimes we feel as if we are awash in data, but what we need to do is channel that data, put it together in an accessible form, and make sure people making decisions look at the numbers," Draisen said.

Provided by Northeastern University

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