



GIVE ME YOUR DATA

DAVID YANOFSKY creates stories out of company data for *Quartz*. He thinks you should help him

YOU HAVE THE DATA THAT I WANT. I don't care what your industry is or who your customers are or how much revenue you have. I promise you, there is a story to be told in your data, and my readers want to know what it is.

They want to explore its nuances and see the quantitative evidence presented in interesting ways. They want to learn something new, and helping them has never been easier. Far too often, however, companies are unwilling to let this type of collaboration occur.

You see your data as sensitive and proprietary. Perhaps your data is your competitive advantage. If you're a closely held company, your data could reveal business metrics that you want to protect as they would affect your valuation. If you're a publicly traded company, sharing certain data could be regulated by disclosure laws.

None of these concerns are insurmountable because, let's get one thing straight, the data that you want and need to protect and the data that I want you to share are typically different things.

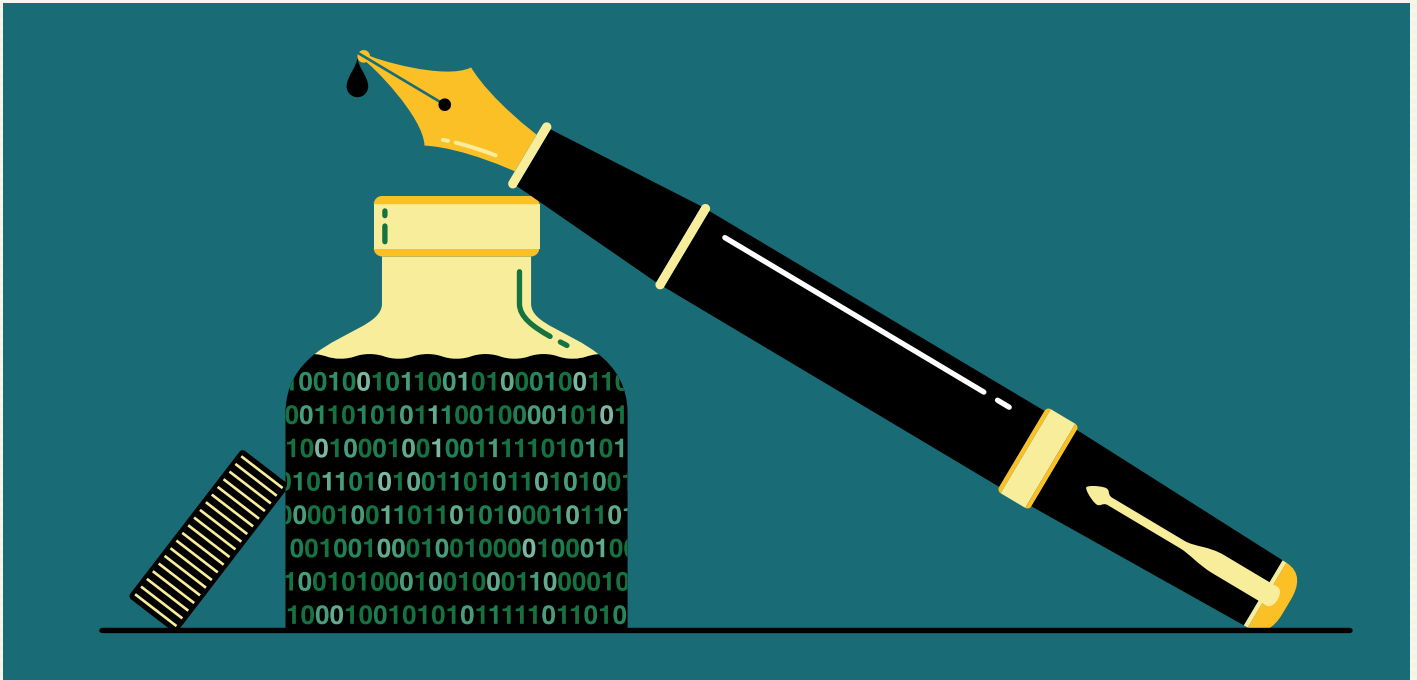
I'm not asking for direct access to your databases or to read your CEO's emails. I don't even care for your internal financial statements. I want the data that is about the data that is about your business, not the data about your business.

For instance, *The New York Times* worked with Netflix to show the most popular rentals by ZIP code in 12 major US cities. I've worked with SeatGeek to talk about the pricing of Major League Baseball tickets on the resale market over the course of a season. Both of these were extremely compelling to readers.

The *Times* piece gave definitive confirmation to regional stereotypes and neighborhood rivalries. *Paul Blart: Mall Cop* was easily shown to be popular in the suburbs and shunned in the city centers. *Mad Men: Season 1* was shown to be just the opposite. Does this information deteriorate Netflix's competitive advantage? No.

Do these rentals sound dated? They should. The article was published in January 2010. Last I checked, Netflix was still in business – and it still remains a market leader.

My SeatGeek story was able to show the cheapest days of the week and cheapest times of the year to get into the ballpark: avoid opening day and weekends, and wait until the end of the season. We were even able to show the visiting team's effect on ticket prices. It was everything a prospective buyer needed to know, ready for the first day of the season. Did SeatGeek – which acts as a search engine for the secondary ticket



market – risk any competitiveness by sharing the data with us? Absolutely not.

This type of data is only marginally useful to competitors. It’s the kind of thing that ends up in the corner of a slide in PowerPoint, not the executive summary of a business plan.

Some companies have realized this and have become so comfortable in sharing certain cuts of their data that they’ve launched self-service portals to access it (aware that in most cases, competitors are collecting nearly identical information on their own).

Google gives away what was once thought to be some of their most important data: the popularity of search terms at any point in time. Simple tools are even provided to analyze the results.

Governments and NGOs have shared this kind of information for decades. But those organizations are typically lumbering and update their data slowly. Business can beat government by giving insights about the current state of the world faster. The information collected from smartphones can now tell us more about migration, connectivity, spending and mobility than we ever knew before. We used to have to rely on government or research papers to learn about those things. You have the data to prove the conventional wisdom or, better yet, disprove it.

Sharing your data is not without risks. In April 2014, Pornhub was taken to task by statisticians and journalists for its sloppy analysis in the report “Who Watches More Porn: Republicans or Democrats?” Uber – already in the midst of a public

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relations crisis – saw one of its blog posts from years ago resurface, in which the company gleefully chronicled its ability to track the sex lives of users.

Of course you are the experts on your data. As such, I can’t do anything with it unless you also offer your insights and expertise. But you’re also very close to the information, perhaps even too close to see its limitations. Most definitely, you’re too close to realize it’s not as precious as you think, and you have more to gain by sharing it than letting it waste away in some database never to be looked at again.

DAVID YANOFSKY

David Yanofsky is a reporter focused on data-driven journalism and visual storytelling for *Quartz*. A self-taught computer programmer, he previously worked for Bloomberg, creating interactive stories for its websites, television stations, radio broadcasts and magazines. Prior to Bloomberg he was a freelance graphic designer, screen printer and book maker.

QUARTZ

Founded in 2012, *Quartz* is a digital-only news outlet, tailoring global business articles for mobile devices, email and web browsers. The staff features veterans of some of the world’s most well-respected news organizations. Its main offices are in New York City. qz.com