

How to work with Excel or other analytical software

Many public bodies and commercial companies publish data in statistical form (for example annual figures on bed numbers in public sector hospitals, numbers of patients receiving specific treatment, or allocations of finance to specific services and treatments), but it is not organised in such a way as to highlight stories and issues for health journalists.

An ability to access, criticise and organise this information and to present it to tell a story can be a useful skill for journalists. General courses in the use of Excel and other similar software are widely available, but the specific use of this software for journalistic investigation is becoming a specialised field, known as “**data journalism**” or “**data mining**”.

Courses in these skills need to begin from the wider issue of searching for reliable information and data on the internet, before using software such as Excel, SPSS, Microsoft Access and MySQL to manipulate and analyse the data, and find stories.

Publications:

Analysing data is the future for journalists, says Tim Berners-Lee, Charles Arthur, *The Guardian*, Monday 22 November 2010

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2010/nov/22/data-analysis-tim-berners-lee>

The **Centre for Investigative Journalism (City University, London)** offers a brief introduction to data mining with Excel <http://www.tcij.org/training-material/car/data-mining/3474>

More detail on data mining is available in an online CIJ presentation by Elena Egawhary at: <http://www.tcij.org/training-material/data-journalism>

Sources:

More relevant material is available from the CIJ at: <http://www.tcij.org/training-material>

The **AHCJ** (US) offers tip sheets for members on the use of spreadsheet data, at <http://www.healthjournalism.org/resources-tips.php>

Critique:

While carefully setting up a range of RSS feeds and other alerts can ensure that the data is available, the systematic analysis and processing of the data can be complex and time consuming, and may not necessarily lead to a newsworthy story that could not be found by other means.

Journalists should develop the skills needed, but not lose their nose for news and their awareness of the need to back up data mining with interviews and interaction with people to make stories relate to a wider audience.

Skill is also needed to take detailed statistical information and popularise and explain its significance in a general news setting.