

Visualizing for Data-driven Advocacy

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Introduction

JumpStart Georgia is submitting this proposal in an attempt to build on the successes of Visualizing the News in Georgia (VNG).

Since launching Feradi Info, the face of VNG, in January 2013, we have become convinced more than ever that visualizing is the tip of the iceberg when it comes to engaging an audience with facts and information. However, it is the tip that everyone sees and ultimately all the hidden work up to that point is there to support a concise message to encourage people to take some form of action or change some behavior.

It is our hope to refocus VNG to take what we have learned about data-driven advocacy and the role that visualizations play in communicating messages to another level. JumpStart Georgia seeks funding to improve on using visualizations, design, and the Web to engage Georgians about important issues with facts in alternative and increasingly consumable ways.

Goals

Visualizing for Data-driven Advocacy (VDA) seeks to:

1. continue to communicate important issues visually using alternative forms of media and creative approaches to “increase public conversation around important issues, increase the quality and frequency of computer-assisted/data journalism and storytelling, put facts before rumour, and increase the demand for more open, accessible, and relevant data and innovation critical to understanding the important issues in Georgia.”
2. raise local CSOs' expectations of how they can integrate data, technology, and art and creativity to achieve goals and have an impact
3. strengthen local CSOs' ability to carry out strategic data-driven advocacy activities using alternative forms of media and technologies

4. strengthen JumpStart Georgia's core capacity to implement projects and to partner with CSOs to apply innovative and creative approaches to communication using data and open-source technologies

Continue to visualize news and issues

Our approach in VNG was experimental in nature and we tried a number of approaches to see what tended to have the most impact in terms of engagement. This is evident in the variety of topics covered. We often saw ourselves as an online newspaper and tended to choose topics that were diverse in nature yet socially relevant or “newsworthy”. The diversity allowed us to explore and experiment with different approaches to techniques, albeit limited to infographic design and interactive web applications. This also led to a lack of overall coherence in the work we were doing. We weren’t focused on any particular issue for longer than a three-visual story arc.

We did try to elicit the participation of the public to choose topics, but did not find that manner to be productive. Our efforts, while mostly prohibitive, to convene people to discuss what is newsworthy did not end with any tangible results. What seemed to work best was eliciting input directly from CSOs or simply monitoring their work as a source of material to work with. However, the infographics’ reception was mixed and the underlying reasons why are not always clear.

Ultimately, what seems to be most successful is when research and data are visualized and the timing coincides just right with current events to make the content relevant. Simple packaging with a straight-forward message, in this case using infographics or interactive web applications as the medium, works best. Complicated packaging works for a smaller, niche target audience, but since we are trying to reach a larger audience, we did not see the complicated examples being as successful.

However this is a reactionary approach and a good communications (advocacy) strategy can create the right context so the timing isn’t a random variable at all.

Strengthen local CSOs' ability to carry out strategic data-driven advocacy

In VDA, we will increase our partnership with CSOs. While still leaving some room for choosing our own stories, we will seek to collaborate more with CSOs long-term to not just add “edible evidence” to their projects, but see how we can improve their data-driven advocacy strategy outright for specific projects with deliverable outputs from our technological toolkit.

Part of this means discussing with CSOs why advocacy is important and how technology can not only streamline the process of managing information, but can also help leverage that information to support strong, targeted messages to maximize their resources for the biggest impact.

Ultimately, JumpStart advocates a backward-design approach by starting at the message and working back towards the data-gathering/research activities. Many complex visuals are predicated on the existence of specific information. It might even be only contextual, but in terms of communication it might mean the difference between something that has traction among a specific audience and something that

falls flat or collects dust.

Working backwards from the message allows CSOs to work that information into the process either by ensuring it already exists or by collecting it themselves. What we often see is that organizations get to the end of a project and want to do amazing animated visuals or make a powerful statement and find they can't because they didn't plan properly from the outset and don't have the data to support it.

Raise local CSOs' expectations of how they can integrate data, technology, and art and creativity

It is clear the VNG is filling a void in the CSO space in Georgia that many CSOs do not even know exists until they see what is filling it. Since January, we have met with several CSOs who want to use infographics or web applications in their projects, but just don't know where to start to make it happen. They just know it will make their messages more consumable to a larger audience. They saw the work we created under VNG and wanted something like it too.

It was the cases when CSOs approached us directly to add some "flare" to a report or project they were working on that we learned where one of VNG's strengths lay. What became clear to us was that what we were doing was much larger than cool infographics or web design. It was inspiring CSOs to want to communicate better. Unfortunately, that also shed light on the fact that their projects were poorly designed to do that. Most of the projects we came across were designed to write a report and hold a press release.

We want CSOs to expect more even if they don't always know what to expect. Messages can take many forms and there isn't always a clear approach. Often, creativity can make the difference between what works and what doesn't. There is no formula to create a message to cause people to sign a petition, block a construction site, change their vote, or buy a different brand. It could take the form of an infographic, a website, a video, or some performance activity. It could be a combination of all of the above. We want CSOs in Georgia to expect more from a project than just a thirty-page report and a press release.

Strengthen JumpStart Georgia's core capacity

Ultimately, VNG has helped JumpStart find a niche that is well suited to its technical capacity and open data interests. By focusing on specific communication goals, we ensure that the data work we do has purpose. We also see what we need to work on to add value to the work we do. While most of the work is data-driven, creativity and design play a large role in how we choose to communicate messages.

The more media that we have in our "toolbox", the more creative we can be. VDA seeks to add a number of skills to our toolbox, the main one being video. We did one video under VNG and it turned out really well. We would like to be able to do more video and animation when the project calls for it.

We also would like to increase the number and quality of interactive data-driven web applications we

do and tools we make. That is what organizations want and that is what we would like to see more of too.

Activities and Outputs

1. JumpStart will partner with 4 CSOs on 4 projects. With each CSO we will:
 - a. hold workshops about data-driven advocacy strategy
 - b. collaborate to integrate visuals to communicate specific messages within an advocacy strategy for a specific project or program
2. JumpStart will produce at least 2 stories a month (excluding the work with partnering CSOs); we have decreased the overall number because we know that 4, which is what we are doing under VNG, is too many to do them well especially if we want to do more interactive visuals; currently we are working at a frenetic pace
3. JumpStart will hold at least one workshop a month open to the public; each workshop will focus on a topic related to data-driven advocacy including information management, from message to data design, design for advocacy, data visualizations, data is for repurposing, technical management in projects, project design with advocacy the star, and more
4. JumpStart will produce well-designed data-driven advocacy educational material in Georgian and English that can be downloaded freely; these documents will cover in a clear, concise, and consumable format the main issues related to data-driven advocacy
5. Organize an exhibition of the creative work we are doing
6. Learn how to produce advocacy videos and integrate animation into videos

Monitoring and Evaluation

We want to measure two things within the scope of this project. How successful is the media we create? How well are CSOs internalizing the concepts of data-driven advocacy strategies.

Firstly, we know that in its current form, VNGs current audience is limited to Internet users. We do know that Feradi Info¹, the face of VNG, is known among local CSOs and even outside that network, but how far is unclear. JumpStart needs to employ better tools to better understand the network of followers and sharers and to better understand how the users are consuming the content.

Mostly, we think this involves taking better advantage of Facebook's Insights, a tool that allows users to track parameters related to a page's activities, including posts, shares, etc. While only quantitative in nature, we still think that monitoring the reach of content on the Internet and the growth of networks is an important part of the big picture.

Demographic statistics are sorely lacking and it is one thing we wish we had access to to better understand why certain content communicate better than others and who is consuming it. We intend to explore Facebook's ability to provide this information until a better mechanism is found. We think as the media landscape improves in Georgia, there will be increasing demand for this type of information as communicators attempt to better communicate with specific demographics.

¹ <http://www.feradi.info/>

In the end, however, an advocacy strategy, and all the media created to achieve those goals, is only successful as it achieves its goals. The success of each partnership will largely depend on each project and goals. The effect of media created to help achieve specific action or behavior is often elusive, but we will attempt to measure changes in behavior and response to a call to action as best we can.

Each CSO we collaborate with within the framework of this project will complete a pre- and post-collaboration questionnaire to help us ascertain change in regards to understanding what a data-driven advocacy strategy is.

During workshops, we will provide evaluations to assess the quality of the workshop and to make improvements going forward.

JumpStart Georgia will continue to track organizations that approach us without solicitation as well as how our content is reused.

Project Design

JumpStart requests six weeks at the start of the project to

- update Feradi Info to handle new media types
- prepare educational material for workshops
- train designers in video production

- select the CSOs it will work with over the next 12 months

Position/Role	Months	Percent on Project
Project manager / editor	12	80.00%
Data journalist / researcher	12	100.00%
Designer 1	12	80.00%
Designer 2	12	80.00%
Animator	3	100.00%
Lead developer	12	60.00%
Assistant developer / designer	6	70.00%
Front-end developer	12	90.00%
Director	12	50.00%

Sustainability

Like in VNG, the code, data, and content we create will be open source and licensed for reuse. The same goes for the educational material which will be accessible and downloadable.

The training we give and that we receive (video) will have an impact long after this project is over. The inspiration we give for using alternative media to communicate for change cannot be undone or uninspired.

Organizational Information

JumpStart Georgia was formed in Tbilisi, Georgia in October, 2009 with the purpose of creating open-source digital maps of Georgia using a network of community organizers and volunteers. JumpStart Georgia has built more than digital maps, however. It has evolved to embody the spirit of open information, improved communication, and increased citizen participation in the world around.

JumpStart Georgia believes a society with free-flowing information is crucial for a healthy democracy.

Past projects which centered around data or data visualization include our country-wide mapping project, OpenTaps, TbiliCity, Visualizing the News in Georgia², mapping CARE International's village saving and loan program in Africa, aggregating and visualizing Georgia's election and voter list data³, making MP votes public⁴, IRI's election training evaluation visualization, and more.

JumpStart Georgia works currently to increase the amount of quality data, increase the demand in Georgia for more quality data, and improve how organizations and individuals use data to better achieve their goals.

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² <http://www.feradi.info/>

³ <http://data.electionportal.ge/>

⁴ <http://votes.parliament.ge/>