LEARNING LAYER

The ethics of big data

The author argues that government data systems should be redesigned so that all public data is available as soon as it is created. That would be a huge change from the current system, where public information, in practice, may be in files that few people ask for or see. After getting a public record, journalists make ethical decisions about whether the public's right to know outweighs an individual's right to privacy. In the age of big databases, however, those decisions are now made involving thousands or millions of people at once.

A case in point: Shortly after the shooting massacre at a Newtown, Conn., elementary school, the Journal News in White Plains. N.Y., published an interactive map of people who had permits for handguns. The map was taken down in 2013 after drawing almost 3,000 comments. The paper disabled its interactivity. Citing gun violence, some wanted more information to be released, such as rifle ownership, the number of guns in a household, etc. But lawmakers were among the others proposing limiting public access to such permits altogether.

In a PBS MediaShift blog post, Kathleen Bartzen Colver argues that data by itself lacks context. Do journalists have an ethical obligation to provide that context? Often, they do. But under our free press system, that's an ethical choice, not a legal mandate. Data projects can be good, as with this package on delays in helping veterans, yet journalists can approach data in ways that don't work as well.

Class activity: Study the links above. Look at the codes of ethics of various news organizations and professional groups. Design an ethics code involving big data sets, using the same principles. What can happen when journalists don't report data ethically?