



Knowledge Design Guides

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Data Myths and Truths

Background	<p>“Data-based” has become the golden standard in the nonprofit and philanthropic sectors. In order to be called valuable and fund worthy, programs and strategies are supposed to be “data-driven,” decisions are supposed to be “data-informed,” and social change outcomes are to be evaluated through data indicators. “Credible” data is increasingly required in grants and by boards, and to demonstrate publicly that any social change approach actually has worked for the intended purposes.</p> <p>To maximize the value of data to social change, we need to be realistic and transparent about what data is and is not.</p>
Myth #1: Information is data.	<p>Truth #1: Information is not data. Data requires a decision.</p> <p>We live in an information society. We are bombarded everyday with information coming at us from multiple directions – TV, social media, friends and family, the government, associations, our jobs and so on. Sometimes these are anecdotes of something that has happened. Sometimes the information is a thought or opinion. Sometimes information comes from a scientific study, a survey, or a poll. We can be swimming in information and not really have anything that helps us understand or move through the world.</p> <p>Information is anything out there that comes at us – whether we seek it out or not. Information is NOT the same as data. To use information for coming to a deeper understanding of the world, we need to make it into data.</p> <p>Data is an active decision where we attach information to BOTH a question and a way of interpreting it. Data requires conscious action.</p>
Myth #2: Data alone equals knowledge.	<p>Truth #2: Knowledge is created through intentional interaction with data.</p> <p>Another myth that needs to be dispelled is that data itself equals knowledge. We often hear people comment “the data says...” This is not accurate, or at least not totally transparent.</p> <p>Making meaning is the essence of knowledge. It takes place in context -- in a time and place. It is always reflective of the people who are making the interpretations, who are asserting that the data means something specific. Data does not have inherent meaning: we give it meaning to transform it into knowledge.</p>

<p>Myth #3: Decentralizing data automatically changes power structures</p>	<p>Truth #3: Decentralized data without access to analysis can preserve existing power structures.</p> <p>There have been calls for decentralizing or democratizing data through philanthropic efforts. Investments in open-sourced software and data sharing platforms have made decentralization of data more possible.</p> <p>Despite good intentions, efforts to “decentralize data” without paying attention to “analytic access” can serve to recentralize power. Being able to touch data does not automatically mean that a person or group can use it to improve life outcomes.</p>
<p>Myth #4: Policy change requires large amounts of data</p>	<p>Truth #4: Data can be used to help shift narratives which is what is actually necessary for policy change.</p> <p>Policy change is the shining goal of many funded social change efforts. However, formal policy change is only one, although very visible, aspect of social change. It is easy to become enamored by policy efforts and believe that more and more data are needed to be effective. Rather, the most important purpose for data in policy change efforts is actually the use of it to shift prevalent narratives toward new narratives.</p> <p>Clarifying the deeper value of data use in policy change helps us to more realistically connect data work to policy impact.</p>
<p>Myth #5: Revealing individual stories inherently leads to positive social change.</p>	<p>Truth #5: Individual stories can be co-opted and used to maintain a dominant narrative.</p> <p>Gathering and sharing stories of individuals who come from marginalized or under resourced communities is often claimed to be a path toward infusing more equity into nonprofit and funded change efforts. We hear about it in leadership programs, foundation grant programs, community organizing, and best practices. However, collecting and sharing individual stories, no matter how moving or reflective those stories are, does not directly lead to more equitable change efforts.</p> <p>Stories are sacred in their own right and can provide important experiential data for broader change. However, the quality of the change that results from them depends on how data is interpreted and by whom. Stories can actually be co-opted if interpreted through a dominant narrative that does not evolve from the lived experience itself.</p> <p>To be used effectively as a source of data, stories must include explicit attention to how the people telling the stories made meaning of their own lived experience. It is also helpful when the stories themselves include the changes desired by those whose lived experience is represented in the stories.</p>