

Bridging the Gap Between Agencies and Citizens: Performance Journalism Offers A Practical Solution to Communicate Performance Results

By Daniela Bremmer and James H. Bryan, Jr.
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The Washington State Department of Transportation (WSDOT) has been using its *Performance Journalism* approach to communicate performance results to diverse audiences including the public, the media, legislators, the governor, policy-makers, and transportation partners around the world. WSDOT has developed this approach based on experience gained over six years of reporting comprehensive transportation system performance information in the agency's quarterly performance report, *Measures, Markers and Mileposts*, also referred to as the *Gray Notebook*. These efforts resulted in enhanced public credibility and supported two subsequent funding increases. *Performance Journalism* is the combination of quantitative reporting using charts, tables, and measurements, along with narrative storytelling. The goal is to share the performance of WSDOT's most complex and diverse programs and projects clearly and concisely in a format that everyone can easily understand and explain to their neighbors.

The Seven Principles of Performance Journalism

1 Stories

Good Stories Combined With Good Graphics - Use Narrative Reporting To Make It Real And Tell The Story: Clear, concise, unbiased writing using the what, why, who, and when approach is the key to this first principle. This requires you to be an investigative reporter. And remember, candor builds credibility, so tell the story of when things go right and wrong.

A Perfect Storm: WSDOT Learns From Its Mistakes
WSDOT's Winter Maintenance programs have continued to develop over time in order to improve road conditions when severe winter weather strikes. However, on November 27th, 2008 a series of winter weather conditions hit the central Puget Sound region that ended up temporarily paralyzing drivers on highways and local roads in some of the worst conditions possible. The situation brought forth an opportunity to evaluate Winter maintenance performance and where improvement was needed.

WSDOT utilizes a private weather forecasting organization throughout the year in order to prepare for severe inclement weather. Predictions called for one inch of snow, followed by rain/snow mix. WSDOT usually uses a sand mixture to improve traction when conditions include snow and rain mix. Unfortunately, before freezing (32°F) temperatures and four additional inches of snow arrived. The storm hit central Puget Sound beginning at 4:00 pm, the traditional start of rush hour.

The last complication came after 10:00 pm, when a Monday Night Football game ended at Qwest Field in Seattle. More than 50,000 people immediately entered the freeway system, and were quickly isolated in congestion and decreasing temperatures. Some ended up spending cold evenings in their cars before weather conditions let up enough for WSDOT and King County maintenance vehicles to improve conditions.

After the storm WSDOT publicly addressed its maintenance performance and indicated where it could improve. Although all plans were operational and sand and deicer were well stocked, WSDOT learned that these tools are only effective when storm conditions are analyzed correctly. WSDOT must also accurately communicate to drivers about commutes, driving conditions and preparation recommendations. Such changes were implemented in storms that arrived later in the winter season, with better performance results.



On November 27, 2008, a snow and ice storm paralyzed central Puget Sound. WSDOT's maintenance efforts fall short but gave the department an opportunity to learn and improve performance.

2 Writing

Good Writing: Use a reader friendly approach. Use plain English that is clear, concise, and free of industry jargon. Could someone take that information presented in graphical and text form and explain it to their next door neighbor over the weekend barbeque? However, good writing does not mean "dumbing down" the narrative.

Before - First Draft
Intersection that are projected to operate with especially long delays or overcapacity during the PM peak hour are identified as "congested intersections". These intersections are those that operate under LOS F conditions (average vehicle delay greater than 80 seconds) or ICI greater than 100 percent. Congested intersections are further identified as "highly congested" if they exceed 110 seconds of average vehicle delay and have an ICI of greater than 100 percent.

After - What Printed
What are congested and highly congested intersections? Congested intersections are intersections that cause drivers considerable delay. A driver might wait between one and two minutes to get through a traffic signal at a congested intersection. At a highly congested intersection, a driver might wait two minutes or more to get through the traffic signal.

Before - First Draft
SR 4, Swanson's Curve - Realignment
This project is on hold as the result of a recent court ruling. Washington County Circuit Court ruled against WSDOT's necessity to take an entire adjacent parcel for use as a construction waste site for an estimated 80,000 cubic yards of excess, excavated and material. The advertisement date has been deferred to the 2012-2017 biennium, providing time to (1) investigate potential alternative waste sites, (2) determine right-of-way and construction cost impacts and, (3) if required, secure additional funding. It is projected that the right-of-way and construction costs will be higher as there are very limited options for other nearby potential waste sites. When final cost impacts are determined, WSDOT will ask for legislative direction on whether to proceed with the project.

After - What Printed
SR 4, Swanson's Curve - Realignment
The advertisement date has been deferred from January 2008 to April 2012. The project is on hold as the result of a recent court ruling against condemnation for an entire adjacent parcel needed as a construction waste site for an estimated 80,000 cubic yards of excess excavated soil material. The deferral is necessary to provide time for investigating alternative waste sites and determine right-of-way and construction cost impacts. It is projected that the right-of-way and construction costs will be higher as there are very limited options for other nearby potential waste sites. When final cost impacts are determined, WSDOT will ask for legislative direction on whether to proceed with the project.

3 Data

Good Data: Data forms the basis of an organization's performance report. Thus, it is critical that organizations apply the highest standards for data analysis. This requires an unyielding pursuit of data integrity and quality. Organizations must balance this need for data perfection against a need to publish in a timely manner. In addition, an agency must address the issue of incomplete or data limitations.

Highway Safety: Annual Update

Traffic Fatalities in Washington State

The highway safety report compares the report published in the November 2008 issue. The following table provides the 2007 fatality rates for fatal and disabling injury crashes by roadway type and time of day. The 2007 data is presented in the 2008 report on the following page.

2008 Data Shows an Increase in Traffic Fatalities

Washington State's highway safety report shows that the number of traffic fatalities increased from 2007 to 2008, with an overall increase of 11 percent. In 2008, there were 1,043 traffic fatalities, compared to 939 in 2007. The increase in fatalities was most significant on rural two-lane roads, where the number of fatalities increased by 25 percent. On urban roads, the number of fatalities decreased by 10 percent. On interstate highways, the number of fatalities decreased by 15 percent.

Washington State Traffic Fatalities, 2000-2008

Year	Total Fatalities
2000	939
2001	939
2002	939
2003	939
2004	939
2005	939
2006	939
2007	939
2008	1,043

Comparison of Fatal and Disabling Injury Crashes and Vehicle Miles Traveled

Vehicle miles traveled (VMT) is a key indicator of traffic volume. The number of VMT in Washington state increased from 2007 to 2008, with an overall increase of 1.5 percent. The increase in VMT was most significant on rural roads, where the number of VMT increased by 2.5 percent. On urban roads, the number of VMT decreased by 1.5 percent. On interstate highways, the number of VMT decreased by 1.5 percent.

2008 Fatality Rates by Roadway Type

Roadway Type	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Interstate	0.0001	0.0001
Urban	0.0002	0.0002
Rural	0.0003	0.0004

2008 Fatality Rates by Time of Day

Time of Day	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Day	0.0001	0.0001
Night	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Vehicle Type

Vehicle Type	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Passenger Car	0.0001	0.0001
Truck	0.0002	0.0003
Motorcycle	0.0003	0.0004

2008 Fatality Rates by Age Group

Age Group	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
18-24	0.0001	0.0001
25-34	0.0002	0.0003
35-44	0.0003	0.0004
45-54	0.0002	0.0003
55-64	0.0001	0.0001
65+	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Gender

Gender	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Male	0.0002	0.0003
Female	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Education Level

Education Level	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
High School or Less	0.0002	0.0003
Some College	0.0001	0.0001
Bachelor's Degree	0.0001	0.0001
Postgraduate	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Marital Status

Marital Status	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Married	0.0001	0.0001
Divorced	0.0002	0.0003
Widowed	0.0001	0.0001
Never Married	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Race

Race	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
White	0.0001	0.0001
Black	0.0002	0.0003
Hispanic	0.0001	0.0001
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Language Spoken at Home

Language Spoken at Home	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
English	0.0001	0.0001
Spanish	0.0002	0.0003
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Birthplace

Birthplace	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Foreign Born	0.0002	0.0003
Native Born	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Citizenship

Citizenship	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
U.S. Born	0.0001	0.0001
Foreign Born	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Military Service

Military Service	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Active Duty	0.0001	0.0001
Reserve	0.0002	0.0003
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Religion

Religion	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Christian	0.0001	0.0001
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Disability

Disability	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Disabled	0.0002	0.0003
Not Disabled	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Employment Status

Employment Status	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Employed	0.0001	0.0001
Unemployed	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Income

Income	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
\$0-\$10,000	0.0002	0.0003
\$10,000-\$20,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$20,000-\$30,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$30,000-\$40,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$40,000-\$50,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$50,000-\$60,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$60,000-\$70,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$70,000-\$80,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$80,000-\$90,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$90,000-\$100,000	0.0001	0.0001
\$100,000+	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Insurance Status

Health Insurance Status	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Medicaid	0.0002	0.0003
Medicare	0.0001	0.0001
Private	0.0001	0.0001
None	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access

Health Care Access	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Access	0.0001	0.0001
No Access	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Quality

Health Care Quality	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
High Quality	0.0001	0.0001
Low Quality	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Cost

Health Care Cost	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Low Cost	0.0001	0.0001
High Cost	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Type

Health Care Type	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Primary Care	0.0001	0.0001
Specialty Care	0.0002	0.0003
Emergency	0.0001	0.0001
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Location

Health Care Location	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Home	0.0001	0.0001
Work	0.0002	0.0003
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Provider

Health Care Provider	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Physician	0.0001	0.0001
Nurse	0.0002	0.0003
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Setting

Health Care Setting	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Office	0.0001	0.0001
Home	0.0002	0.0003
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Duration

Health Care Duration	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Short	0.0001	0.0001
Long	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Outcome

Health Care Outcome	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Improved	0.0001	0.0001
Worsened	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Satisfaction

Health Care Satisfaction	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Satisfied	0.0001	0.0001
Dissatisfied	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Barrier

Health Care Access Barrier	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Cost	0.0002	0.0003
Distance	0.0001	0.0001
Language	0.0001	0.0001
Other	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Need

Health Care Access Need	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
High Need	0.0002	0.0003
Low Need	0.0001	0.0001

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Availability

Health Care Access Availability	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
High Availability	0.0001	0.0001
Low Availability	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Quality

Health Care Access Quality	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
High Quality	0.0001	0.0001
Low Quality	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Cost

Health Care Access Cost	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Low Cost	0.0001	0.0001
High Cost	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Type

Health Care Access Type	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Public	0.0001	0.0001
Private	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Location

Health Care Access Location	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Urban	0.0001	0.0001
Rural	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Distance

Health Care Access Distance	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Close	0.0001	0.0001
Far	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Time

Health Care Access Time	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
Fast	0.0001	0.0001
Slow	0.0002	0.0003

2008 Fatality Rates by Health Care Access Availability

Health Care Access Availability	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
High Availability	0.0001	0.0001
Low Availability	0.0002	0.0003

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Health Care Access Quality	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
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Health Care Access Quality	2007 Rate	2008 Rate
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The Seven Principles of Performance Journalism (continued)

5 Content Driven Design

Good Format/ Presentation: Good formatting and presentation is an essential principle of *Performance Journalism*, as the design of a report should entice the reader to engage with the material, allow a quick grasp of the message, and not distract from the content. Apart from this, it should employ a reader-friendly page layout and group relevant information together.

6 Quality Control

Quality Control: It's Your Credibility. This requires critical thinking and a good sense and eye for numbers. This also includes ensuring an audit trail in addition to questioning data and text. Executives should be prepared to edit the performance report as needed - performance reporting is not a spectator sport.

7 Timing

Good Timing: Lead - Don't Follow. Timing is everything. It is important to start performance reporting now and to report frequently and consistently. While there is a sense of urgency, it is important to be selective. It is not necessary to start reporting everything immediately; rather, start small. Gradually cover all of the most critical systems and delivery issues.



General Observations and Lessons Learned

WSDOT's strategy for effective communication of performance information, employing the seven principles that are collectively called *Performance Journalism*, has been successful in gaining public support for increased funding. Seattle Mayor Gregory Nickels comments in April of 2007 provide a succinct summary of the results obtained from the *Performance Journalism* approach to performance reporting that was instituted by Secretary Douglas MacDonald: "Under [Doug MacDonald's] watch Washington State increased funding for state highway projects to an unprecedented degree. He consistently emphasized accountability to the people of Washington State." In light of the importance of effective performance reporting methods in effectively informing the public and supporting cases for increased funding, more in-depth work in researching, testing and validating the effectiveness of various performance reporting approaches needs to be done.

Where to Find Performance Information

WSDOT's Accountability website, <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/accountability/>, has a number of transportation performance reporting resources. This includes a Performance Measurement Library, <http://www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/Publications/Library.htm>, which contains an inventory of performance measurement practices of various local, national, and international organizations and agencies.

WSDOT's performance information, including the Gray Notebook, the Governor's Government Management Accountability & Performance (GMAP) Transportation Forums, WSDOT's Strategic Plan, and Performance Audits relating to WSDOT, can be easily accessed from the accountability homepage, visit: www.wsdot.wa.gov/Accountability/.

For more information, contact:

Daniela Bremmer

Director, Strategic Assessment Office
Washington State Department of Transportation
310 Maple Park Avenue SE
P.O. Box 47374
Olympia, WA 98504-7374

Phone: 360-705-7953

E-mail: bremmed@wsdot.wa.gov



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