

Spending Stories

PROJECT	GRANTEE	INNOVATION	GRANT
Spending Stories	Open Knowledge Foundation	A tool for contextualizing government spending data and improving fiscal literacy among journalists and the public	\$250,000

News stories about government spending are commonplace, but without the appropriate context, it's often difficult for readers to understand what the spending data means. The UK-based Open Knowledge Foundation, an international leader in organizing and interpreting open data, won Knight News Challenge funding to create the Spending Stories project. The goal of the project was to develop software applications to connect news stories to government spending information to provide quick access to much-needed context on public finance figures, thereby improving fiscal literacy for citizens and journalists alike. SpendingStories.org was to be the key application that resulted from this effort.

THE INNOVATION

The ultimate objectives of Spending Stories were threefold: to give additional context to government spending numbers in the news; to make available more and higher-quality data about public spending; and to help people use that data once it becomes public. To achieve these objectives, the Open Knowledge Foundation introduced upgrades to its existing OpenSpending.org site, as requested by community users, and developed a free-standing Spending Stories application.

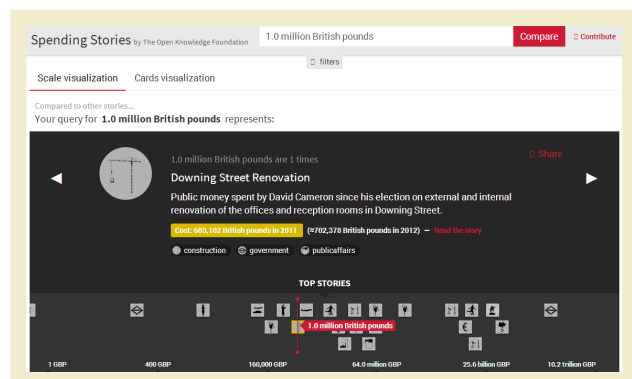
In practice, Spending Stories puts public finance numbers in perspective by allowing users to compare spending figures cited in one news report with amounts reported elsewhere. For example, entering "1.0 million British pounds" into the search function in Spending Stories informs the user that that is the amount David Cameron has spent renovating Downing Street since his election. It is also five percent of the cost of the 2012 wedding of Prince William and

Kate Middleton. Users can visualize relationships between public spending figures on a scale or laid out in a card format with the most relevant stories appearing first. Users can also filter stories for those relevant to their interests, click to the original news story behind any number listed, and contribute stories to the database.

IMPLEMENTATION

Although the goals for Spending Stories have remained constant, the format of the project has changed significantly over the course of the Knight Foundation grant. For the first year and a half of their grant, the Open Knowledge Foundation primarily focused on upgrading OpenSpending.org, the site which would serve as the hub for Spending Stories' source data.

Originally, the team planned to create a browser plug-in for journalists to embed in media sites that would systematically link spending figures to their source data. Doing so would have made Spending Stories one of the few media outlets linking public spending numbers back to their primary sources, rather than to other websites. For both technical and practical reasons, a browser plug-in to gather and source public spending data would not



have worked as well outside the United Kingdom, where such data is more readily available than it is in other nations. As a result, the project team decided to shift the site design to a human-generated matching system, in which users find news stories that mention spending figures and submit them for inclusion in the website. The revised design makes the site functional internationally while also creating a personalized filter so users aren't overwhelmed by the number of stories on the site.

The intended audience for Spending Stories has shifted as well. When it was conceived, Spending Stories was meant to be a resource for journalists. The project team expected that reporters would regularly visit the site to add context to their stories and conduct investigative work. With this in mind, the Spending Stories team budgeted to pay for a rotating team of journalists to contribute to a blog that would contain short videos and detailed commentary on spending in key issue areas. For several reasons, this model proved more difficult to execute than the team had anticipated. Most journalists had only minimal time to contribute to the project, and few were willing to invest the substantial training and effort required to work with Spending Stories' complex datasets. Journalists also expressed greater interest in the browser plug-in idea. As such, the Spending Stories creators decided to focus on advocacy and non-governmental organizations whose interest in Spending

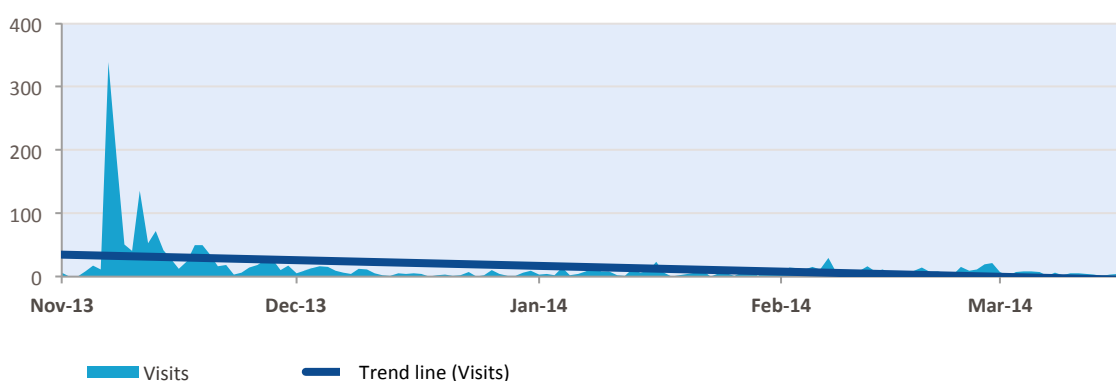
Stories stemmed from the fact that the app could be used to help with budgeting decisions in the developing world. Unlike journalists, these groups were also much more willing and able to partner with Spending Stories to explore and manage the project's datasets.

The changes to the project resulted in a significant alteration of the project timeline. After several internal reboots, including staff changes at the beginning of 2013, the Spending Stories application launched on November 21, 2013. Since then, efforts to attract users have involved promotion at in-person events and paying an outside contributor to populate spendingstories.org with an initial set of stories to generate interest. As of March 2014, the Spending Stories team was exploring other, less labor-intensive methods for adding stories, such as enabling any story tagged with [#spendingstories](https://twitter.com/spendingstories) on Twitter to be placed in a queue to be posted on the site, potentially by volunteer moderators. The team was also applying for additional funding outside of the Knight Foundation to support a set of targeted workshops on using Spending Stories and to evaluate the possibility of adding a leaderboard to the site to further incentivize user contributions.

REACH AND OUTCOMES

In the first two weeks after spendingstories.org launched, the site averaged 69 visits a day. From December 2013 to March 2014, visitors

Spending Stories Site Visits



dropped to about eight per day. Beyond basic tracking of site traffic and bug reports submitted by users, the Spending Stories team has had difficulty collecting information about its users, and team members acknowledge that this is an area where the project has room for improvement.

As of March 2014—only four months after launch—it was too early to judge the ultimate success of the Spending Stories site. Traffic to spendingstories.org has so been light. But visualizations created through OpenSpending.org—the hub for Spending Stories’ source data—have been embedded in prominent outlets including the *Guardian*, *Le Monde*, and *Liberation*, among others.