

Private Responses to Public Goods: Database Journalism in the Historical Context of  
Privatization

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## Abstract

This paper indicates how the politics of personalization are reflected in the work of database journalism. Personalization refers to the process – and to a normative preference towards – the transferal of social responsibilities from the state and other public institutions to the private individual. Databases are tools that speak the language of personalization because of their technical capacity to produce granular, that is in other words personalized, information. In terms of the press’s political role, then, databases are tools that allow for the off-loading of monitorial responsibility from the press *to* the public. Through an investigation of the Pulitzer Prize winning Wall Street Journal’s database investigation “Medicare Unmasked,” this paper suggests that the road to a more meaningful public life crisscrosses with the press’ approach to databases as a profoundly political and public matter.

*Keywords:* database journalism, privatization, media ethics