EPISODE 33: WALTER HICKEY – TELLING STORIES THROUGH NUMBERS

Ken White

From the College of William & Mary in Williamsburg, Virginia. This is Leadership & Business, the weekly podcast that brings you the latest and best thinking from today's business leaders from across the world. We share the strategies, tactics, and information that can make you a more effective leader, communicator, and professional. I'm your host Ken White. Thanks for listening. Well, in the past few years, we've seen the growing importance of data analytics in business. Well, the combination of data analytics and journalism has become increasingly popular and important as well. Books like Moneyball. Websites like FiveThirtyEight have opened our eyes to the importance data can play in a range of areas, from professional sports to presidential elections. Our guest is on the leading edge of the data revolution. Walter Hickey is the Chief Culture Writer for FiveThirtyEight.com, a website that uses data and statistics to talk about the world. He joins us today to discuss how journalists and others are using data to help people understand and enjoy the world around them. Here's our conversation with Walter Hickey.

Ken White

Walter, thanks for joining us. It's really exciting to have you on campus. You just met with a group of William & Mary students, maybe about eight or ten of them. It was the loudest conversations, a lot of laughter and talking. They were really excited. This is really cool. So welcome.

Walter Hickey

Thank you so much for having me. This is a lot of fun.

Ken White

Yeah, so tell us about what you do today and how you got there.

Walter Hickey

Yeah, so I'm the Chief Culture Writer at FiveThirtyEight.com. It's a data analytics website. And so what I kind of do is I write all about culture, and culture is anything that's not politics, sports, science, or economics. So so, we have a really kind of broad way to approach all these topics. A lot of it is like entertainment, like how do we talk about

movies and talk about numbers in movies? How do we talk about TV in numbers and TV, the kind of stuff that really resonates, not just ratings? And so it's a pretty kind of wide field. We do you everything from like the lottery to predicting the Oscars. And I just kind of use numbers and statistics do what we can to find out cool new things about the world.

Ken White
And a generation ago, if you were to say that, people would turn around and run the other way. Who wants to hear this? Today it's really hot. What I think it's part of the approach of FiveThirtyEight. What is it you do that makes numbers so compelling?

Walter Hickey
Yeah, it's definitely a challenge that we're kind of getting better at. You know, like, whenever you try to talk about numbers with people, it's always a little bit of an uphill because you need to get A people to buy in on the topic, and then you need people to kind of buy an on the approach and in the past couple of years, especially in the politics field which my boss Nate Silver has done a lot to kind of bring data to in the sports field. I mean, ever since kind of Moneyballish kind of stuff, it's been bubbling up. Talking about numbers as a way to kind of understand the world, not the whole story. But just a chunk of the story, it's kind of coming into vogue. So what we're really interested in doing is we're kind of finding new ways to approach older topics when it comes to newer ways of using analytics and whether that's taking approaches from the sports world like Elo or whether that's taking stuff from the politics world like kind of averaging polls and making a forecast and things like that. We're just trying to find out cool new things, you know. So I think once you the way that you hook folks is you kind of talk to them from where they're coming from, right? You want to find out not necessarily the most important thing that's going on when it comes to these numbers but probably like the more interesting thing.

Ken White
Yeah, like the John Goodman piece, it was really fun. Can you tell us about that piece what that was about?

Walter Hickey
Yeah, so that kind of came together, and a lot of this starts look far more informally

Ken White
Yeah, sure.

Walter Hickey
like this was like a lot of them just kind of when you're talking to a friend in a bar about like, oh, that new John Goodman is out this weekend, and they just kind of like have a

conversation about John Goodman who's a really fun person to talk about. Everybody's got a favorite movie that he was in. Everybody's got like a favorite role that he was. And the thing that we just kind of arrived at just like again just among friends was, hey, this is a guy who is like always really good whenever he's like number two or number three like the movies where he was number one, like the Flintstones is not really a cultural touchstone. I don't know about you but. And so then I just kind of set out like, hey, let's find out some cool stuff about this. We looked into how well the films were rated when he was in various billing orders, and we sort of found that he had the films where he was number one didn't do as well as the ones that number two and number three in number four so you want John Goodman as your second banana.

Ken White
Yeah, no doubt. And that's the story online certainly says that and lists all the movies and so forth and how well they did. You mention Nate Silver. Many people know him and what he did, but for those who don't. Can you give us a brief rundown on how he just brought all this on? It wasn't there before him, sort of.

Walter Hickey
Yeah. So Nate started out he was like, I believe, an analyst for a while at certain places. He was involved in some of the sports. Specifically, baseball analytics, and he was one he developed a system called PECOTA, which, long story short, kind of figures out career trajectories for different players. And he had been this analyst for baseball for a while, and then he was tracking the 2008 election just personally. And what he kind of found was that the narrative was that Hillary had momentum in the Democratic primary and that Barack Obama was too far behind. But what he kind of found just averaging polls was that you know, Obama actually stands a really good chance of winning this. So he started a blog called FiveThirtyEight, and he tracked that through, and he ended up being vindicated by the results of that election. Then, when he carried that through to the general, he ended up predicting. I believe all or most of the states. I forget that particular batting average here. He went over to the Times, he leased the site to the Times, and then he did the 2012 election there again had a great degree of success, and in 2013, the site was bought by ESPN. And so we've been there since it's been a lot of fun. I signed on shortly after the sale, and it's mostly we try to broaden that. We take what he did in politics. We take what we've known in sports for a while to be cool, and we try to apply those lessons to other cool things.

Ken White
And making data cool. I mean, that's really what it's all about. You sometimes talk about important data versus interesting data. What do you mean by that?

Walter Hickey

Yeah. So when you approach someone in a room, and you start talking about statistics, they're going to leave you very, very quickly. So if you want to kind of find a way to talk to somebody who's maybe not super well versed on this. Somebody who like the biggest myth is that there are people who are bad at math, right? It's mostly just kind of folks who haven't had the opportunity to kind of talk things out or get things or get an approach that they kind of can believe in right. And so what we try to do is we try to even though there are important things going on in this data. Even though there are things, you can learn about the world, the way that you kind of reach out to folks that you can kind of meet them where they are is by talking about the interesting data. Like, you talk about, hey, here's a cool thing that I learned about John Goodman, and then you can kind of get it to, like, then you talk about like how much money the movie is made, which is probably the one that he actually cares about right. I republishing a post on like Batman versus Superman, right? And the important number for Batman versus Superman this weekend is going to be like, how is it going to do? How's it going to approach? And so what we try to do is we tried to find out the interesting thing like how often have they interacted in comics before. Are they best friends things like that? And so if you can kind of meet folks where they are, if you talk about things that they find interesting like, you know, like the lottery like March Madness things like this, you can talk more sophisticated like you can get into that stuff later. But hooking folks on the interesting data is kind of the first step.

Ken White

It's hooking them, basically. That's what that's really what it's all about.

Walter Hickey

It's all about making an argument right. Like, we read a lot of posts, and I read a lot of posts about movies and stuff. And the thing is, with movies, there's really not like a correct answer like there's no best John Goodman movie. We're using the best data that we have based on critic aggregation, but we're not like we're not solving huge problems here. We're just kind of finding a way to talk about a topic, have an interesting conversation about it, and then maybe find something cool to kind of share and if that gets folks more interested in using data in their own lives or trusting data more or getting or even actually getting more skeptical about the use of data in some of the news, then that's a win you know.

Ken White

Yeah, how about data visualization? I mean, talking about it is one thing, but for some people, they really need to see it. What are you? Are there discussions at FiveThirtyEight about data visualization?

Walter Hickey

Yeah, we have it's very core to kind of what we're doing. We have a whole interactive team, and they put a ton of thought into how we approach this information, and a lot of times, it's a very collaborative process. The reason that you want a lot of folks working on like how do we process how do we do this right is that you have different ways of like learning and reading. And the key is you want to reach a lot of people you don't want to. We were talking before this before the podcast started about like do you use data is, or data are.

Ken White

Yeah, right.

Walter Hickey

And so, like data are is like grammatically the correct way to do it.

Ken White

Right.

Walter Hickey

But like you want to meet folks where they stand. You don't want to come in like, hey, here's the way that it's done. You want to say, like, hey, here's an argument we're gonna make. Here's the way that we're gonna make it, and here's just kind of a new way to approach this kind of stuff. You want to meet people where they are. And a lot of that kind of comes down to how do you visualize things in such a way. How do you write about things in such a way that you can kind of hit those folks?

Ken White

We'll continue our discussion with Walter Hickey on data and journalism in just a minute. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you and your organization by designing and delivering a customized leadership development program that specifically fits your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education, check out our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Now back to our conversation with the Chief Culture Writer for FiveThirtyEight.com, Walter Hickey.

Ken White

You've been with FiveThirtyEight, and if and for our listeners who aren't aware of what it is, it's spelled out FiveThirtyEight as though you spell it dot com. Just a really interesting website. It covers politics, sports, science and health, economics, culture, significant digits

feed every day is pretty cool. Just a number there, and you see a 17 or what have you, and you read it, and then we read some of the things you've written. Looking back, you've been there two and a half years now. Is there a story or a series of stories that stands out to you as man that was just really fun to do that?

Walter Hickey

Yeah, I got a chance to do a lot of really cool stuff. It's been a real blessing, you know. There's a couple really ones that stick out in my head, like when it comes to you actually like getting something done and making something like making a change in the world. We did this whole feature on Fandango and rating sites, and what we kind of found was that there's actually in their code there were they were artificially rounding up scores that shouldn't have been rounded up, and such movies look better than they actually, in fact, were. And as a result of us finding this, we contacted them, and they fixed it, and now like the ratings are now real on this site. And so that's like when you talk about like writing a story that actually changes, you know, the world and whatnot. Obviously, movie ratings are not the end all be all of society but like it was kind of cool. You know, you found something cool, and then it got fixed, and now people are essentially better for it. Right. But the most fun one, though, was probably we did a story about Madden, the videogame series for the NFL, and what they do is they give assigned ratings to every single football player out there. And what we wanted to know is, and again I know that this is a podcast and podcasts are not a visual medium, but I am not a football player-looking fella. What we want to find out what a normal type dude like this guy who doesn't exercise too much would actually perform in the NFL, and we were able to. I went down to Florida. I ran drills they gave me a number. They assigned my throwing ability, passing ability, running ability. Out of 100, I was a 12, which was very, very humbling, and as a result, we got to find out cool new ways about, like, here's how you actually are able to rate people, evaluate people, and simulate like one of most sophisticated simulation engines that we had out there for football. Here's how they do it right.

Ken White

Yeah, and I'm sure you got incredible feedback.

Walter Hickey

I got the best picture that has ever been taken of me. It was definitely during that process. So yeah, we had a fun video series on it. I wrote it with my colleague Neil Payne who ended up actually going into like here's how the individual ratings are constructed, and then I got to guinea pig it. And it was a lot of fun. It was definitely. As far as features go, that were just kind of a hoot to do. That's up there.

Ken White

So how did you get to this job? I mean, it's sort of journalism. It's data. It's sort of a mix. How do you get here?

Walter Hickey

So in school, I studied applied math with a focus on probability and statistics, and again William & Mary is a great liberal arts institution, so you get to do a lot of other stuff too. You don't need to stick strictly in the Applied Math. So I kind of I took a lot of courses. I took an accounting course actually here the business school. And but in my free time, I was at the Flat Hat. I was their online editor. I was writing stuff for them, I was doing newsy stuff for them, and that was just kind of it was, you know, was the yin to the yang. Right. Like if you're doing math all the time, it's nice to write a bit, and you kind of get to flex all the muscles that you have without going too hard in one direction. And so when I was a senior, I wasn't really a hundred percent sure of what I was going to do. I applied to a site Business Insider that I had been reading for a while.

Ken White

Yeah.

Walter Hickey

They're a really cool company. They started about maybe five or six years ago, and they just got bought by Axel Springer last year. So they hired me on as an intern, and I just kind of worked there, and what I'd basically try to convey was like, hey, you see this data journalism stuff going on, I can try to do that again. It's very much always you learn by doing kind of thing. So they gave me a shot, and it ended up really kind of working out, and that's how Nate ended up kind of getting familiar with my stuff, and he reached out.

Ken White

So I'm sure there are college students and people in their 20s, maybe people in their 90s, saying to you this looks really cool. I would like to pursue this. What kind of advice do you have for somebody who would like to do this kind of work?

Walter Hickey

Definitely, and I would say the main thing that you need to do is, like, you don't necessarily need to be a pro at this. It's very much like when if you look at the stuff that I was putting out when I started. If you look at the stuff that I was putting like towards the end of my time at BI. Even at the beginning of my time at FiveThirtyEight, you can definitely see like I feel like I'm getting better at this right. And you can start right now. You can start like all really comes down to is asking a cool question and then doing everything that you can to kind of find an answer and whether that's just kind of pulling

like going to a site with that has information on it whether it's like pulling from IMDb like you just got to have a cool question. And once you start that, it's really just throwing spaghetti at the wall until you see what sticks right.

Ken White

And that cool question is really what's going to resonate with other people, right? What works for them? I mean, if you and I think it's cool, but no one else does. So what, right? But it's one that will resonate with others.

Walter Hickey

Yeah, and you don't find that by like trying to pull the Internet. You find that by just having conversations with your friends. Think about like I do not want to tell you the percentage of article pitches that I have that we're that we developed in one-star bar in Manhattan, just me and my friends throwing back and forth about movies coming out right. Like it's a lot of very much just like talk to your friends, like if you have if you had an argument about how much you should tip, you know. Like that's the thing that you can start looking into. That's a way that you can start approaching data in the real world and that kind of thing. It's really just think about what makes you passionate, what you have really good conversations about, and a lot of the time, that's going to end up resonating.

Ken White

Well, that's where all the great ideas come the back of the napkin, right?

Walter Hickey

Exactly, yeah.

Ken White

It's a conversation with somebody in the car or on the train or what have you. Yeah. So what's it like at FiveThirtyEight during March Madness?

Walter Hickey

There's lots of serendipitous yelling going on. Like, I'll be working on a piece about, like, I don't know, batman. And I'll just hear screams from someone at the office, and I'll just be like, well gosh, I guess that that bracket is busted like it's a really fun place to be. I think one of my favorite sport times at FiveThirtyEight was during the World Cup because ESPN was covering the World Cup, and it was the policy of essentially just, like yeah, you should just go watch the games. It's fine. Like, just kind of take off and go watch the games, and watching that just happen was absolutely amazing.

Ken White

Yeah. Where do you think the future of the business is going? What what's coming down the pike? Will we see more will it be? What do you think?

Walter Hickey

Yeah. So data journalism, in particular.

Ken White

Yeah.

Walter Hickey

Cool, because I know the future of journalism is a question far above my pay grade, but for data journalism right now, it's not a mature market, I would say. Like somebody was asking me earlier about, like, who do you consider competitors, and what I'm saying at this point is just like, you know what every even if like other folks are resonating in the data visualization space. Its kind of like a rising tide carries ships right.

Ken White

Right, right.

Walter Hickey

Still definitely growth. There's still like increasing interest. People are getting new and interesting ways to look at this. And the more folks who get interested in it, the more mature it gets. So it's really going to be at this point it seems like a rising tide phase like it seems like a lot of folks are increasingly reading up on this kind of stuff. People are becoming sympathetic to it. It is very much like Moneyball kind of stuff for a while, that was the outsider, and then it was like now people are getting interested in it, and then within two years, every single team had a Bill James right. Every single team now made it happen. And so you're going to kind of see people increasingly getting credulous when it comes to data visualization, and then you're also going to see, I think a lot of people kind of like kind of backing off a degree like at least the skepticism is such a big part of this when it comes to like how much credibility do you assign to this study and one thing that makes this so fun is that you can actually kind of make your data available and put it out there, so there's definitely kind of we're in a growth phase. People are getting increasingly interested in it. The grassroots of it are fascinating. Like there's a bunch of kids in dorm rooms making really cool visualizations now, and you know the future of our field is strong. I think it's going in a good direction.

Ken White

That's our conversation with Walter Hickey from FiveThirtyEight.com, and that's our podcast for this week. Leadership & Business is brought to you by the Center for Corporate Education at the College of William & Mary's Raymond A. Mason School of Business. The Center for Corporate Education can help you, and your organization get to the next level with business and leadership development programs that specifically fit your needs. If you're interested in learning more about the opportunities at the Center for Corporate Education for you or your organization, check out our website at wmleadership.com. That's wmleadership.com. Thanks to our guest this week, Walter Hickey, and thanks to you for joining us. I'm Ken White. Until next time have a safe, happy, and productive week.