

Secondary Research Guiding Questions

1) Define your topic or problem space (data is material / you decide the story)

What are all of the topics or topic areas that your team has researched individually?

N/A

What are the strongest overlaps in topic interests?

N/A

How might you combine two or more topic areas to add focus to your research?

N/A

What is your combined issue or problem?

Information on the existing and proposed operations of oil companies in the Great Lakes basin—including the location of refineries, pipelines, and transport routes—is not readily available to the public, or presented in a manner that is understandable.

What is your perspective, your hypothesis, or your point of view?

The lack of clear and understandable information inhibits civic participation in discussions and decisions regarding Great Lakes protection. Citizen groups who possess a lot of collective power to protect the lakes (such as the citizens of major urban areas, like Chicago) are unaware of oil spills, the toxins released in those spills, the potential for proposed oil pipelines to disrupt their local water supply, and of the risks posed by outdated equipment at oil refineries.

What is at stake? Why does it matter?

The Great Lakes are an interconnected water system, which means that any issues affecting one lake tend to affect the whole basin. Major concentrations of people, such as the population of cities like Chicago, thus have significant influence over the health and livelihoods of the 26 million people in the United States and Canada who get their drinking water from the Great Lakes. Although the Great Lakes contain 4 quadrillion gallons of water—a seemingly inexhaustible resource—researchers have predicted that areas like Chicago could face water shortages as soon as 2050. Due to climate change and other environmental threats, water sustainability is an increasingly pressing problem, and Chicagoans will soon become aware of this in a manner that other, drier regions of the world have already experienced. The Great Lakes contain 20% of the world's fresh water, and we need to protect them from whatever threats we can, including the risk of oil spills.

2) Define your audience

Who is affected by your issue/problem?

Everyone in the Great Lakes basin. That is a very large group (37 million people, at least), so I am narrowing my focus to the people of Chicago, since it is the largest city on the Great Lakes.

Who is affecting your issue/problem?

Oil companies. Policy makers. Citizens of Great Lakes region.

Who can make a change?

Oil companies. Policy makers. Citizens of Great Lakes region.

What is their perspective? Why would they resist change?

Oil companies would resist change because it is expensive for them to do so. For example, although the oil that is being extracted from Canada and delivered to refineries in the US could be transported by rail, it costs 75% less to ship the oil over the Great Lakes (risking spills). Of course, halting or diminishing oil production in general would also be expensive in the sense that the oil companies would lose revenue.

Policymakers might resist change because they may be weighing the benefits of water preservation against the benefits of allowing the oil companies to operate as efficiently (cost-effectively) as possible. For example, if the oil companies have to pay more to transport their oil, they may pass that cost onto customers, who purchase the many many products that are made from oil (such as plastic). There may also be arguments that undermining the profitability goals of the oil companies will cause a loss of jobs. I am not sure how many jobs are providing by oil refineries, the construction of tar sands pipelines, the transport of oil, etc, but it is possible that the oil industry on the Great Lakes is good for the economy in the area, and that jobs could be threatened. Finally, I imagine that some resistance could come from a political-philosophical dislike of government "intervention" in the free market (i.e., resistance to government regulation of oil operations on the Great Lakes).

Citizens might resist change for many of the same reasons as policymakers (jobs, economy, philosophical opposition), in addition to ideological opposition of environmental protection (e.g., the same ideological issue that prevents conservative citizens from buying "green" lightbulbs when they are labeled as such, even though they will buy those same lightbulbs when "green" is not included on the label). Citizens might also resist change because they simply don't believe that oil spills are a problem, or even that water shortages are a problem, since the Great Lakes seem to offer such abundance.

What are the competing perspectives/issues from those involved in the topic?

I think I just summarized a lot of that in the above answer.

Who is an expert on this issue/problem? What do you think is his/her point of view?

Oil company representatives. Conservation ecologists in the Chicago area – such as those employed by the Chicago Field Museum, who are working to encourage citizen attention to climate change (perhaps they also know about water issues, and oil spills).

People in the Chicago Metropolitan Water Reclamation office who work on water management issues. I am not sure what their point of view would be.

Activist groups who are interested in reaching citizens (perhaps through non-profit media firms) and encouraging social change. They may be aware of some of the barriers to communication and awareness.

The citizens themselves. They would be able to say what they know or don't know, how they understand the issue of oil operations on the lakes, and how (if at all) they feel they are affected by it. They would be able to explain how (if at all) they participate in the conversation, what they would want or need to know in order to care, and how they feel they can take action (if they feel they can at all).

Who can give you insights into what this issue/problem is like in daily life?

People who live in areas that have been affected by oil spills. For example, the people living near the Kalamazoo River, who had to be evacuated when BP spilled in 2010.

Who can give you insights into a perspective that you don't share?

All of the people I've mentioned. I have not personally experienced the effects of a spill, nor am I ignorant of the issue, nor do I work for an oil company, an activist group, or as a conservation ecologist.

Who doesn't care about your issue/problem but should?

I'm not sure. I think my point is that more people (citizens) should care about taking a stance in defense of their own natural resources. Local stewardship of local resources is important; I think people should pay more attention to the way that their elected officials handle water management, and to the way that private industry often seeks to operate in its own interests.

How is your topic/problem specific to Chicago or different in Chicago?

It isn't specific to Chicago, but Chicago is one of the largest concentrations of people on the Great Lakes. It is the largest metropolitan area in the basin, and it uses the most water on a daily basis. There are more people here who are affected by the health of the lakes, relative to other cities.

3) What information would influence a decision to make change? (data → information)

What data do you have on your topics?

I have data related to the increasing significance of water resources worldwide, including in the Chicago area. I am starting to gather data about oil spills (historical data about location of spills, amount of oil spilled, cost of cleanup, local people affected). I need to continue that process and become more specific about it.

What appears to be most relevant at the intersection of two or more topics?

What data would you love to have but don't?

A consistent dataset regarding oil spills in the Great Lakes basin. The oil spill reports are not always consistent.

How might the data be seen through another topic's lens (i.e., from crime to cost of incarceration)?

The issue of a spoiled water supply of course has health and environmental effects, but I suppose it could also be framed in terms of cost. Water is cheap right now in Chicago, for example, because there is a lot of quality water readily available. As water shortages increase, the value of water will increase. There will be a lot of thirsty people, and the price of water could skyrocket.

What impactful projects have you seen in this problem space (could be non-data related)?

Hm. Not much in terms of oil spills. There have been some compelling projects about the amount of water pollution produced by the United States relative to other countries. It is often clear in these projects that the United States produces a HUGE amount of pollution, but that the United States typically doesn't suffer the consequences of that pollution (rather, the poorer regions of the world suffer most).

4) How to best reach & affect your Audience (context/media/form)

Where do you think your audience finds data/information on your topic?

The media. I assume people become aware of oil spills on the lakes when (perhaps "if") they are reported by the news media, such as the Chicago Tribune or local TV.

What media/communication forms do you think they use most?

Television. Media studies suggest that television is still the dominant media outlet in the United States. I suppose the Internet is catching up, but that is a broad net: I'm not sure what areas of the Internet are most popular.

I also think that people obtain their information from social media, word-of-mouth, and their friends. Especially the younger generation who are less likely to participate in community organizations (church, volunteer groups, etc).

Where in their daily lives does the topic/problem affect them most?

It could affect every aspect of their daily lives, if water pollution or water shortages become a massive problem. Showering, washing, drinking, health, shopping...we need water for everything.

What kind of information could influence decisions?

Information on oil spills and the effects of those spills on the lake and surrounding communities. Information on proposed oil pipelines and transportation routes that increase the frequency or likelihood of spills.

Where is that information now?

Buried in infrequent, text-based news articles that do not present a visually-compelling summary of the spills, nor the associated costs of the spills (in terms of \$, health, the future).

Where could it be? Where would it be best positioned to affect decisions?

I think it could be online and publicly accessible.

Who controls data/information on this issue/problem?

Oil companies. Scientists from governmental organizations like the EPA or the IJC (partnership between US and Canada to protect the lakes) who are called in to assess spills and issue reports.

What new, novel, or emerging technology might be able to help deliver info on your issue/problem?

I think interactive digital media could tell this story in a unique way. Reading numbers in a news article about a certain number of gallons spilled into the lake does not sufficiently "bring the issue home" for people; it does not make the problem relatable enough, or emphasize its severity in terms that people can understand.

What would be totally inappropriate?

I'm not sure what this means. I think it would be inappropriate to completely villainize the oil companies.

What would be the best place, media, and method for convincing people to stay with the status quo?

Not sure about the best place. Probably reporting on Fox News that frames the issue in this manner: Environmental activists are trying to impose regulations on the oil industry that could threaten local economies in the Great Lakes region.

If you could convince one person to do a single thing related to this issue/problem, who would it be and what would it be?

I think what matters to me most is that people pay attention to and participate in the conversation regarding the management of water in the Great Lakes. I don't necessarily care if they vote the way that I would--I don't care if they are conservative or liberal, or somewhere in-between--but I do care that it seems like the people's decision. I am concerned that something as (increasingly) precious as fresh water is being managed (indirectly, perhaps, through lobbying and deregulation) by private companies whose interests are not always aligned with those of the local people who are affected by water policy.

5) Relate your project to the OPL (purpose)

What do you think a 21st Century Library should be or do?

What kinds of resources should a Library make available? For whom?

How could/should people access a 21c Library?

How can technology play a role in increasing accessibility of Library resources?

What's the most radical idea you can come up with for a Library program/event/resource?

What do you think is the most successful public infrastructure in Chicago? Anywhere else in the world?

Why is it successful? Who uses it? What do they gain? What do they contribute?

How could your above example be applied to your issue/problem?

How is your issue/problem be applicable/relevant to the OPL?

How is your issue/problem totally NOT applicable/relevant to the OPL?