

The Future of CAR: Declare Victory and Get Out!

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By Philip Meyer

The time has come to abandon "computer assisted reporting" – CAR. It's an obsolete concept that is starting to get in the way of our understanding of the real battles that we need to fight and win if we are to save the soul of journalism.

CAR is an embarrassing reminder that we are entering the 21st century as the only profession in which computer users feel the need to call attention to themselves. All of the other professions take computers for granted.

For example:

My cousin Bob Meyer is a retired accountant, and he uses a computer to audit the books of his boat club, the Marco Island Sail and Power Squadron. He doesn't call himself a computer-assisted accountant.

My daughter Melissa Meyer is an environmental designer in Coral Gables, Fla. She does her creative work on a computer. She doesn't call herself a computer assisted designer.

My cousins Max and Richard Benne are farmers in St. Joseph County, Mich. They use computers to calculate depreciation on their equipment and to calibrate the fertilizer applications for their corn and soybean fields. They don't call themselves computer assisted farmers.

Let's forget about the computer and start talking about, and organizing around, what we really want to do. Here's what I think that is:

Journalism today is in a battle for survival against the forces that would merge it with entertainment, advertising, and public relations. The information age has created such a confusing buzz of voices that it tempts us all to sacrifice almost anything for attention – including truth.

What the practitioners of CAR have been after – whether consciously or not – is a higher standard of truth-telling. Our response to the information age has been to learn to manage larger bodies of information with increasingly powerful analytic tools, leading to a more exact definition of truth. As it happens, a computer is helpful in doing that. But the computer itself is not the goal, nor does it define what we are trying to do. We are trying to push journalism toward science. Almost everybody else, it seems on most days, is trying to push it toward art.

Pushing journalism toward art can justify or mask the merger of reporting and advocacy. It can facilitate the entertainment function of journalism – and we should never deny that entertainment is one of our functions. It can lead to a subjective form of truth in the postmodernist, phenomenological sense. But it will not, in the long run, lead to the building of credibility and trust that journalism needs if it is to survive as an independent information specialty.

One response to information overload has been the elevation of spin. When attention-getting is more important than discovering and imparting the truth, the



marketplace rewards those who are skilled at creating appearances. Our goal needs to be to find a way to help the marketplace reward the truth-tellers. The demand is a given. With so much effort devoted to crafty distortion, the market value of truth has

to rise as a function of its scarce supply. All a media company has to do is find a way to brand it and sell it.

Our little piece of this action should be the application of scientific method to the practice of journalism. We need to focus on the time-tested methods of overcoming wishful thinking, superstition, selective perception, and the other human frailties that hinder the acquisition of knowledge. We need to build a force in journalism that rewards critical thinking and the skeptical testing of conventional wisdom. Yes, the computer is a tool that can help us do that. But that's all it is. Focus on the goal, and then we can take the computer for granted, as the farmers and accountants and designers already do.

My first computer encounter was with the IBM 7090 at the Harvard Computation Center in 1966. Having failed miserably at two successive attempts to predict Ohio election outcomes for the *Akron Beacon Journal*, I was using my Nieman year to study social science research methods. I started with a course for sophomores in which each student was allotted two minutes of the 7090's CPU time. My 120 seconds produced several crosstabs and significance tests from a survey of junior college students, using Harvard Data-Text, a higher-level programming language that was the harbinger of Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

For the second semester, I did advanced work in a graduate course after negotiating a deal with Dwight Sargent, curator of the Nieman Foundation. He gave me \$100 to buy computer time in exchange for writing an article for *Nieman Reports*.

I was back on the job in the Knight Newspapers Washington bureau only a few weeks when the Detroit riot broke out, and I was dispatched to help the staff of the *Free Press*. The call came at noon, and that night I was riding with the National Guard amid the burning buildings and sniper fire of 12th Street. When the shooting ended and the fires were out, I proposed a survey of the riot neighborhoods to discover the riot's underlying causes, applying the principles I had just learned at Harvard.

Of course we used a computer to analyze the results. I recruited University of Michigan professors John Robinson and Nathan Caplan and computer programmer Judith Goldberg to help with the design and analysis. Goldberg did the crosstabs with Filter Tau, a program more primitive than Harvard's but good enough. It ran on an IBM 360/40.

The response to that project inspired a long-term commitment by me and my management to this new form of journalism – defined not by the computer, but by the

application of social science research methods to reporting. Executive editor Lee Hills later wrote to me that the survey was an important factor in the decision of the Pulitzer jury to give the 1968 prize for general local reporting to the staff of the *Free Press*. The Kerner Commission called the survey one of the few “brilliant exceptions” to the generally dismal performance of the news media in covering riots.

While based in Washington, I became a roving local reporter, helping members of Knight’s then-small group of newspapers with stories, mostly relating to the civil rights and anti-war movements, that needed bigger investigative power than conventional methods could muster.

The first description of this as computer reporting that I can remember was when a *Newsweek* profile in 1968 called me “a computer reporter.” The application of social science research methods was too complicated a frame. Computers were familiar, in concept if not in general use, and so that became the popular definition of what I was doing.

By this time, I was writing my own programs in Data-Text. Harvard had produced the software on a government grant and placed it in the public domain. I bought it for \$10, the price of the 7-track tape. And I located several computer centers that offered 7090 or 7094 time at cut rates while the 360 generation of machines was capturing market share. My statistical skills increased. For a 1968 study of black attitudes in Miami, I used factor analysis to sort out the varieties of black militancy with guidance from CNN’s Bill Schneider, then a Harvard graduate student.

In the 1969-1970 academic year, I took a leave of absence from Knight to write *Precision Journalism* with money from and under the watchful eye of The Russell Sage Foundation. The book covered polls, field experiments, and analysis of public records. The title was suggested by Everett Dennis, who had coined the expression to contrast with “the new journalism” being practiced by those who applied fiction techniques to reporting.

That led to another error in framing. Because my most visible work had been with various forms of survey research, precision journalism became identified primarily with polls. While more accurate than the computer frame, it still did not capture the broad sweep of the concept as described in the first chapter of the first edition of *Precision Journalism*. Polls, when done correctly, are part of scientific method, but the concept is meant to cover all applicable forms of scientific method, including public records and

experiments.

My first public records application came in 1972 when I took time out from election coverage to help Donald L. Barlett and James B. Steele with their criminal justice investigation. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* was by then a Knight newspaper, and I worked out a coding scheme and rudimentary sample design, then wrote the analysis program in Data-Text. By that time, IBM 7090 cost was down to \$75 per hour – by the wall clock, not CPU time – and the three of us did the analytic work at a private computer center in suburban Maryland. In the tabloid reprint of their story (although not in the newspaper), Barlett and Steele included a sidebar crediting me with a “sophisticated computer analysis.” The criteria for distinguishing it from an unsophisticated computer analysis was not defined, but, once again, the computer was used to define the work. My field experiments came much later, after I switched to journalism education. At the University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, I have sent student reporters into the field to measure the courtesy of motorists, the racial prejudice of pedestrians, underage alcohol sales, and the knowledge of pharmacists about the AIDS protection capabilities of different brands of condoms. In each case, we used computers without feeling the need to mention it.

To emphasize that what I was doing was social science as well as journalism, I did two things. I archived data, starting with the Detroit riot survey, with the Institute for Research in Social Science at Chapel Hill to make it available for secondary analysis by scholars and graduate students. And I found opportunities for my own scholarly publishing, starting with a reworking of my Miami civil rights stories for *Public Opinion Quarterly* (33:2 1969).

After three decades, the time has come to move away from the CAR frame and toward a social science frame. I don’t know what label to substitute for CAR. “Precision journalism” sounds dated. We need something that captures the notion in a fresh way. As reporters, we seek to draw generalizations that have more power than anecdotes or casual interviewing. “Scientific journalism,” which is how one French translation of “precision journalism” comes out, sounds too pretentious.

Whatever the new term, let’s give up on CAR. Computers are used in so many different ways, even in the newsroom, that it no longer defines us, if it ever did. The time has come to declare CAR victorious and move on to a fresher, more ambitious concept. We need it, and so does the world.