Uplink

July 1997

Starting Small
Uplink Update

For those of you who have been using the excuse "we're too small to do CAR," this issue of Uplink will not be a welcome sight. It is full of examples of how reporters at small papers have scraped together the resources to do some hard-hitting investigations.

Sometimes that meant doing the work at home, as was the case for Loraine Anderson of the *Traverse City Record-Eagle*.

Sometimes it meant joining with other papers to pool resources. NICAR's Joanna Kakissis looks at how some papers have started coalitions to help fight for data.

Geoff Dutton of *The News-Herald* tells how his paper used computers to investigate tax abatements.

Daniel J. Foley from the University of Tennessee tells how his students graded area schools.

And Jim Toler, a reporter at *The Free Lance-Star*, shares the lessons he learned doing his first CAR projects.

I n s i d e

Compact CAR

Getting by on a shoestring

By Loraine Anderson
Traverse City Record-Eagle

We don't have a CAR post at the *Traverse City Record-Eagle*. It would be a luxury we couldn't afford. We have 11 reporters to cover our 13 mostly rural counties in northwestern Lower Michigan. We have a daily circulation of about 26,000 and a Sunday circulation of 40,000. I am the regional editor and oversee our project reporting as well as our theme beats: business, environment/health, family/education.

Our newspaper recomputerized a year ago, so we are set up beautifully for CAR. We are now completely PC-based in our newsroom with e-mail on all computers. We have Internet access on five of the PC-120 terminals in the newsroom. None of these computers are loaded with spreadsheet or database management software, except for the elementary spreadsheet functions available in Microsoft Word. We do have Excel and Access loaded on computers elsewhere in the building (business department and in the office of our weekly newspaper), so we can take disks to those machines and work with them.

The challenge now is to learn how to maximize the use of our computer system. I've picked it up because CAR has so many applications for a small newspaper with a small staff and large coverage area.

I'm trying to do three things: get myself up to speed so that I can work efficiently with databases; determine for management what our newsroom needs so that we can gather and analyze data

more conveniently; build a front-end system for our databases so that our reporters can easily access the information without having to know the ins and outs of Access and Excel.

Most of our CAR work so far has been quite elementary, designed to teach me how to efficiently use Access and Excel so that I can know it well enough to share it with the reporters. I have both

Joining Hands
Papers help start CAR
by Joanna Kakissis
NICAR

When David Cuillier, an editor at a small daily in Washington state, decided to form a computer-assisted reporting network for journalists in his state two years ago, he was listening — in exasperation — to members of the governor's task force debate limiting access to records.

"I was the only reporter there," says Cuillier, assistant city editor of the *Tri-City Herald* in Kennewick, Wash. "The state had already closed records for gun permits a while ago... I realized then that if more people were asking for data, the

Tax abatements

Abatement analysis

Geoff Dutton

The News-Herald (Willoughby, Ohio)

Computer-assisted reporting magnifies everything, for good and for ill.

A previously indistinguishable mess of details will suddenly zoom into focus, often revealing surprising trends. At the very least, CAR can generate solid numbers to accurately gauge and explain already perceived trends.

That's why I got into it.

Veterans of CAR also had repeatedly warned me about a downside — the tedium involved in database reporting. Seeing the phenomenal results of their work, however, I was willing to endure.

Still, my biggest CAR disappointment — one I was not prepared for — came recently, after months of compiling a database for my first larger scale CAR project.

Industrial and commercial tax abatements were the subject. They had become commonplace over the years within *The News-Herald's* territory of eastern suburban Cleveland. Even *The News-Herald* had received a big one.

The property tax cuts are given by local municipalities to encourage development, retention of existing businesses and job growth.

Never had the program been independently and comprehensively analyzed locally. But the individual tax cuts had been monitored on the local, county and state level since 1994.

I wanted to compile the various individual reports, plug them into a spreadsheet and determine the impact of the tax cuts. How many tax dollars have been forgone? How much have businesses invested? How many jobs have been created? How much do those jobs pay? Which companies weren't living up to their promises?

Unfortunately, my conclusion — after months of hard work — was that flimsy data precluded a solid evaluation.

As it turned out, it wasn't a dead end. The predicament just forced a new approach to the story.

I made a list of roughly a dozen interesting story angles and disparate conclusions. With the help of an insightful editor, I grouped the pieces into what would become a five-part series.

Ironically, one of the strongest parts of the series focused on my biggest stumbling block — the lack of credible data. It became a topic for the final day of the series.

The series broke down this way:

Day 1

The headline perfectly captured the essence of the first part: "Movers and Takers." It focused on companies that were given tax abatements to relocate.

There had been 70 tax abatements granted in Lake County since the program began in 1990, forgiving more than $56 million in taxes. Most of the 70 tax breaks were to help companies expand. But of the 23 given to bring in new companies, an obvious pattern existed.

Most of the relocating companies — 18, to be exact — had moved from one local community to another. Nine of those 18 actually moved within the county. As it turned out, some communities felt they were being caught in a tax abatement "bidding war" with their neighbors.

Day 2

The second part focused on a little-known type of tax abatement called Community Reinvestment Areas. In 1977, Ohio authorized communities to create CRAs, within which all real estate improvements are tax exempt for 15 years. The intent was to encourage the improvement of inner-city housing.

But CRAs can be used on all types of development.

They don't attract controversy, though, because they are handled solely by administrators. They don't require legislative approval, so the public never hears about them.

I gathered information from each community and created a separate countywide database for CRAs. There were 71 in Lake County exempting more than $4 million in taxes. A large pending deal with one company would double that amount.

Day 3

Part three focused on the perception of local school districts, which rely heavily on property taxes but have no authority over cities granting the property tax breaks.

Some were predictably opposed to abatements. Others were not, noting that the abatements are

Newspaper coalitions

state wouldn't be so quick to close things down."

The Washington connection

Shortly after the meeting, Cuillier called every one of the 23 newspapers in the state, speaking with reporters who were interested in obtaining and using computerized data in their publications.

About 10 of the newspapers Cuillier contacted have become regular contributors to the CAR network, which Cuillier has named "CARwash."

By mid-August, Cuillier plans to have a Web site with information about the network as well as a library of CAR stories done in Washington state.

"It's helped a couple of papers get rolling on using CAR in smaller stories and building up to using it in bigger projects," he said.

Joining forces in Wisconsin

Smaller newspapers face high costs and limited resources when trying to incorporate computer-assisted reporting and often don't have the money or time to fight extended public information battles.

As a result, several journalists from small newspapers — and even journalists from newspaper corporations like Knight Ridder — have formed networks to coordinate CAR training and data acquisition.

In Wisconsin, journalists from the Associated Press and the *Wisconsin State Journal* have joined forces with other state reporters and editors to acquire state data in electronic form, have a third party clean up the data and then distribute it to members of the informal CAR network in the state at significantly reduced prices.

"So far, this (consortium) hasn't had a regular meeting schedule," said Andy Hall, an investigative reporter with the *Wisconsin State Journal* and a founding member of the state's CAR network. "It's just been an erratic series of phone calls and faxes . . . But we've made progress.

"We're in the process right now of acquiring a huge database from the state department of transportation listing traffic accidents in the past seven years . . . Information like this could be used for anything from in-depth projects to quick hits."

Cross-country connection

That CAR methods could help enhance both spot and investigative coverage in part motivated executives at Knight Ridder news service to sponsor a CAR network for all their newspapers.

The newspaper chain currently sponsors KRICAR, the Knight Ridder, Inc. Computer Assisted Reporting Task Force.

KRICAR's coordinator, the *Philadelphia Inquirer's* Neill Borowski, said the task force's goal is to nurture a "big brother, big sister" program where bigger newspapers whose journalists are already trained in CAR techniques help journalists from smaller Knight-Ridder papers.

"We want to create a network where small newspapers don't feel intimidated by calling the bigger newspapers and asking questions about computer-assisted reporting and analysis," said Borowski, who heads CAR work at the *Inquirer*. "And so far, it seems to be working.

"About once a month, we get calls from smaller papers and journalists who want to know if we have any suggestions on subjects ranging from data analysis or to how to do certain queries."

KRICAR also operates a listserv that is accessible to all Knight-Ridder papers.

Any questions about data acquisition or analysis can be posted to this list as well, said Borowski.

An *Inquirer* news researcher recently used the list to distribute Uniform Crime Report data — which she had converted into spreadsheet form — to Knight Ridder newspapers. Two newspapers — one large and one small — scooped their competition because of access to that information, said Borowski.

For more information on the KRICAR, see the Web site at http://CARA.phillynews.com/KRICAR/KRICAR.html

For more information on CARwash, check out the Web site (after August 15) at http://www.wnpa.com

Joanna Kakissis can be reached at (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to joanna@nicar.org

The Philadelphia Inquirer has a Web site devoted to CAR. The site includes tools for analysis (adjusting for inflation, calculating growth rates and percent change), downloadable data, tips on how to use Census data and statistics lessons. Go to: http://161.188.250.24

Cultivating CAR

Access and Excel on my computer at home, where I've done a lot of the work. It's meant an incredible amount of my own time, but I don't mind too much because I'm teaching myself.

Here are some of the things we have done:

Congressional campaign finance

Our biggest CAR project this year has been the campaign finance records for our three congressional districts and six state legislative districts for the 1994-96 election cycle.

Last fall, I used the American University site to download congressional data and spent many a weekend cleaning the data and checking business directories and Web sites so that I could correctly categorize them using codes listed in Larry Makinson's book, "Follow the Money," published by the Center for Responsive Politics, which has an excellent Web site.

This enabled me later to do sorts to find out how various special interest groups — health, oil and gas, etc. — gave to our congressional leaders. I did the number crunching and gave them, as well as the assignment, to the reporter who had two days to report and write his story. Our stories were quite basic because we didn't have enough time to analyze the data and question some of the donations.

State campaign finance

Getting the data for the state representatives was more involved because Michigan's election data are not online. It all had to be typed and categorized.

We used information found at the FECInfo page (www.tray.com), looking up all of the over $200 contributors by ZIP code and sifting through the information for anyone who gave more than $5,000. This provided not only an interesting story, but the beginning of a better understanding of the politics and business of our coverage area.

We also have downloaded state health statistics, school proficiency scores and EPA Toxic Release Inventory figures for in-depth reports. I also have all of the 13-county demographic information on disk in Excel files, plus area tax base statistics obtained from county equalization offices and area construction permits obtained from county building departments.

My long-term goal for all this information is to build a front-end system and get it networked into our newsroom computers so that our reporters can easily use it without having to understand all the ins and outs of Access and Excel. I am in the process of learning how to do that now, using *Baltimore Sun's* electronic news editor Mike Himowitz's front-end tutorial, which I downloaded from his site (http://www.clark.net/pub/mikeh/mike/car.htm). In order to do this, I've needed to learn more of the intricacies of Access, so I am currently going through the Que Access 95 Tutor book and CD.

Tips

If you are from a small newspaper and want to learn CAR, here are some things that will help:

• A real desire to learn CAR and a willingness to spend lots of your own time and possibly even some of your own money. I attended the week-long NICAR boot camp at the University of Missouri in May 1996. Though our editor and publisher are supportive of CAR, I had to pay for it myself because there is little money for training.

• Have patience, but be diligent. You can't learn everything overnight, but you have to keep at it. Learn what is in front of you and the next part will make itself clear to you. When I started out, I surfed a lot, finding and bookmarking sites that would be good research sources for data, reporting projects and editorials.

• If you don't have it, get good spreadsheet and database manager software on a computer with Internet access. I got Access and Excel because our office word processing is Microsoft Word and our systems people were most familiar with that.

• Get on the NICAR listserv and monitor it daily.

• Find other CAR sites that explain some of the basics. In addition to the handouts page at NICAR's site (http://www.nicar.org), I've learned a lot at these sites: Mike Himowitz's Home Page (http://www.clark.net/pub/mikeh/mike/mikehome.htm), the *Detroit Free Press* training tips page (http://www.freep.com/jobspage/academy/intel.htm), CAR/CARR (http://www.ryerson.ca/~dtudor/carcarr.htm).

Loraine Anderson can be reached at (616) 933-1468, or by e-mail at loraine@traverse.com

Class Project

Students rank schools

By Daniel J. Foley
University of Tennessee, Knoxville

A public affairs reporting class got some "real world" publishing experience and a weekly newspaper got a special report it normally wouldn't be able to produce when the two combined on a database study of a Tennessee school system.

The joint effort by the School of Journalism at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, and the 9,000-circulation *LaFollette Press* resulted in the May 29 publication of an eight-page special tabloid section on schools in Campbell County.

The headlines on stories written by the 10 students in my senior-level journalism class convey the flavor of their "report card" on the school district:

• "Campbell schools, students rank among lowest in state"

• "Absenteeism is highest in state"

• "Test scores: Student trail statewide averages"

• "Value added: Schools aren't making the grade"

• "Schools get extra $$$ from state . . . "

• ". . . But test scores, salaries low"

• "Low scores may be linked to poverty"

• "None of county's elementary schools accredited"

• "Success in college? Scores say no"

• "Success at work? It's same story"

The students spent five weeks of a 15-week semester learning to use a spreadsheet, analyzing a database compiled by the Tennessee Department of Education, interviewing school officials and then writing, critiquing and rewriting their stories.

The state's 21st Century Report Card database includes more than 300 columns of information on each of the state's 139 school districts — on such topics as achievement test scores, local funding resources, state aid, per-pupil spending, average teacher salaries, demographics, attendance and accreditation.

Similar data are available in many states, so the project methodology undoubtedly could be used elsewhere. The journalism students used Excel 5.0 on Macs to examine the database, but any good spreadsheet will work. The primary database skill used on this particular project was sorting and ranking school districts in various categories.

One of the challenges was to identify which category would give the best overall assessment of the district. It is well-known that student achievement on standardized tests in any school district usually reflects the socioeconomic makeup of that district. Students who come from wealthy families with well-educated parents generally score higher than students who come from poor families with lesser-educated parents, regardless of the quality of the schools.

Tennessee, like many other states, has implemented a program to measure school impact on student learning, apart from such socioeconomic factors. The "value-added" assessment system, which was designed by a statistics professor at the University of Tennessee, measures each student's progress from year to year.

Results of the value-added assessment have been interesting. In some school districts, students do well on achievement tests, but nevertheless don't make the expected progress from year to year. In other districts, test scores are comparatively low, but students nevertheless make better-than-average progress.

One of the things UTK students tried to determine was which school districts do the best on both student achievement and school performance. Here is how they used the data to do the rankings:

• **Student achievement:** Tennessee Comprehensive Assessment Program test scores are now available for seven grades (second through eighth) in five subjects – reading, language, mathematics, science and social science. Each districts' percentile scores for those 35 grade-subject areas were added and districts were then ranked from highest to lowest. Campbell County students ranked 107th of 134 districts. (Five districts were not included because they do not have all grades from second to eighth.)

• **School performance:** Value-added scores, based on student progress as a percentage of national norms, are now available in five subject areas. Each districts' five scores were added and districts were then ranked from highest to lowest. The Campbell County system ranked 119th.

• **Overall ranking:** Rankings for student achievement and school performance were then

Grading area schools

combined and districts were ranked based on the combined score. Campbell County ranked 124th.

The district's poor showing on both student achievement and school performance and its even worse overall ranking provided a theme for the special section. Each student was assigned to evaluate data from a specific portion of the database and to determine how Campbell County did in each category. One student, for example, examined data on dropouts, absenteeism, suspensions, expulsions and promotions. Her key finding may help explain the district's low overall ranking: students in the upper grades in Campbell County had the highest rate of absenteeism in the state.

The students used several benchmarks for purposes of comparison:

• The district's ranking among the 134 districts in the study.

• The district's score, percentage or number compared to the statewide average.

• The district's score, percentage or number compared to the national norm.

• The year-to-year trends within the district (three years of data were available for most categories).

In order to avoid stories that were a mass of mind-numbing statistics, each student was instructed to pick and write about only two or three or four of the most revealing numbers. The class interviewed the school superintendent, the county executive and the president of the teacher's union to get their perspectives.

Journalists with even modest skills in using spreadsheets could duplicate this project in any community where the state compiles similar information in database format. The project does, of course, involve a lengthy commitment of reporter time. Smaller papers with fewer resources may want to explore a cooperative effort with a college journalism class.

Teacher tips

Here are some thoughts for teachers considering a class database assignment.

• The project takes a substantial amount of classroom time — one-third of the periods for a semester. But the time commitment is justified by the educational value. In addition to learning about databases during three computer lab sessions, students had to use their interviewing skills, work with an instructor and editor who really demanded stories of publishable quality and required students to meet a real deadline. And, of course, publication of the results further justified the time investment. Each student got a good clip.

• The project also requires a substantial commitment of time by the instructor. To make this work as a class project, the instructor has to divide the database into a sufficient number of related categories so that each student is able to develop a separate story of substance.

To assure stories of publishable quality, the instructor also has to spend more time than usual making specific suggestions on how stories might be rewritten. And then the instructor probably will spend considerable time preparing stories for publication.

I spent four or five days polishing stories, writing headlines, designing tables, preparing page layouts and working with the editor to put the section together.

• A cooperative editor is essential. Larry Smith, the editor-publisher of the weekly *LaFollette Press*, was an integral part of this project. Smith, who is an adjunct instructor at the UTK journalism school, envisioned something even grander than I dared to suggest initially, and he offered many suggestions along the way to improve the final product. Once students had examined the data and compiled their initial findings, he met with the class in a news meeting setting to share his knowledge of the community and school district and offer suggestions for developing stories.

• Instructors may want to grade students as they complete each major step in the project. On this one, students were graded on the following: a spreadsheet exercise that resulted in overall rankings for all school districts; a memo listing the most significant findings from each students' assigned data categories; a test on numbers and statistics; a first-draft news story; a critique of other students' first drafts; and, finally, a rewritten news story.

Instructors who would like copies of project assignments and handouts may obtain them by sending me an e-mail request. Please include your postal mailing address.

Dan Foley can be reached at (423) 974-5109, or send e-mail to dan-foley@utk.edu.

Keeping CAR local

By Jim Toler

The Free Lance-Star

Jim Toler attended a NICAR On-The-Road seminar in Washington, D.C., in December.

Tapping a world's worth of information via the Internet. Adding depth and perspective to stories by analyzing data. Probing how governments spend tax dollars and how laws are enforced.

Those were the objectives my editor Virginia Demaree and I set for starting CAR at *The Free Lance-Star* in Fredericksburg, Va. The idea was to get someone in the newsroom comfortable enough with spreadsheets, databases and Internet searches so that other reporters would be able to apply technology to their beats. Considering we used calculators to figure election results last fall, this was a worthy goal.

Here are some of the stories that have resulted:

Chasing Data

Police reporters seemed to be writing an increasing number of high-speed chase stories last year. The pursuits often ended in injury-causing crashes and several suspects died. Based on those observations, I set out looking for data on police pursuits. Working with cop reporters, we quickly found out that only some local police and sheriff's departments had electronic records and even then the information was insufficient for comparison.

So I built a database of 65 chases from stories in our clip files. Using Lotus Approach (an easy database for first-timers), I constructed 25 information fields, and from that I was able to determine trends. Our findings: Police initiate chases for minor infractions a majority of the time, most drivers who flee are under 25 and chases typically end in crashes.

By examining state police and local figures, we also found that National Transportation Safety Board fatal accident statistics undercounted the number of deaths in Virginia in one of the years we examined.

Police in the Fredericksburg area haven't rewritten pursuit policies, but the stories and a follow up have prompted debate.

Cop and dollars

Localities in our area between Washington, D.C., and Richmond face similar problems with crime. Yet there's wide disparity in the amounts of money spent on law enforcement among the city of Fredericksburg and neighboring Stafford and Spotsylvania counties. Using an Excel spreadsheet, we compared law enforcement budgets and the number of cops on the street in each locality. In a story published in April, we showed that Spotsylvania County spends the least on law enforcement, though it's one of the fastest growing counties in Virginia. Spotsylvania officials are now in the process of hiring additional deputies.

Concern about crime has been on the rise. Spotsylvania was the scene of an abduction and murder of a teen-age girl last year. In May, two young sisters were abducted and murdered. Like the earlier case, their bodies were found in an adjacent county. The cases have drawn national attention and concern there's a serial killer at work.

After the May slayings, we used spreadsheets to analyze violent crime statistics and homicide rates in the region. The stories provided context for the unusual cases.

Educational effort

Where does all money for area schools go? How much gets to the classroom?

Those were the basic issues examined in an analysis of instructional expenditures over a seven-year period.

Education reporter Kiran Krishnamurthy and I put the data into spreadsheets. We found one county, which had a reputation for its school system, had fallen behind a neighboring county in per pupil expenditures. The reason: the system known for its schools had to put more into building schools to cope with growth while the other had increased classroom spending.

The story challenged long-held perceptions about which systems were getting dollars into the classroom.

Overall, our focus is local.

We want to examine issues that make a difference in the lives of people who live in the community. We try never to forget that behind the Census numbers, government expenditures or the crime rates, there are real people with stories to tell.

Jim Toler can be reached at (540) 374-5416, or by e-mail at jimtoler@flstarweb.com/

Want to enhance your local coverage by using data to add weight to your stories? Consult Brant Houson's "Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide." Cost for the book is $26 plus shipping. To order a copy, call (573) 882-2042.

Using regression analysis

By Sarah Cohen
NICAR

When Carol Napolitano and Paul Goodsell wanted to study the effectiveness of Omaha schools, they turned to a tool that reporters increasingly use: regression analysis.

The method is growing in popularity among education reporters, as NICAR found in our first-ever seminar on advanced computer-assisted reporting techniques in Philadelphia last month, which focused on reporting on education statistics.

But the *Omaha World-Herald's* experience shows why using multiple regression analysis – a technique that's become a buzzword in newsrooms – requires more than some sophisticated software and a desire to show it off.

Napolitano and Goodsell spent weeks inside the schools they identified long after their statistical procedures were completed. What they saw not only put faces on their results, it explained them. In underperforming schools, Napolitano saw chaos. In exceptional schools, she saw teachers who returned year after year, discipline that kept disruptions at bay and strong principals.

Defining Reality

First, a few definitions. What is regression analysis? It's just a tool that helps you level the playing field by predicting one number based on values of other numbers. In Omaha and other places, that meant predicting test scores based on demographics of the student population, such as poverty, English language skills and stability (called "mobility" in school reports).

Typically, reporters subtract the predicted scores from the actual scores. What's left over is what *U.S. News & World Report* has started calling "value added" in its annual evaluation of American colleges and universities. It's the improvement that's attributed to the school's effort rather than the advantage or disadvantage that students bring to the schools from home.

The results can be striking. In Omaha, almost half of the schools that performed worse than the analysis would have predicted on California Achievement Tests scored better than the median county-wide. Almost half that outperformed the prediction scored below the district median. Hanging out at the schools confirmed their statistical results. At the most

effective schools, teachers kept order, gained the respect of the kids and challenged them to work hard. At the least effective, kids slept at their desks, flashed gang signs and wandered around aimlessly with a helpless teacher standing by.

Lessons Learned

Omaha's statistical technique can become a lesson for many reporters hoping to make sense of the proliferating school reports. The first battle was getting good data. What Omaha learned was that more isn't necessarily better — just more flexible.

After years of fighting, Omaha won access to a database containing 70,000 individual student records on the California Achievement Test, the home ZIP code, the school and a couple of other identifiers including participation in school lunch programs. What it meant was that Omaha, unlike others who have tackled this project, had actual scores rather than the percentage of kids who scored in certain ranges. It also meant they could match the ZIP codes with demographic information about the home neighborhood, not the school neighborhood, in a district with busing.

What they ended up using in their analysis, though, was familiar: All but one was a traditional measure of poverty or advantage, ranging from the percentage of parents in the home ZIP code with college degrees to the percent of students on free or reduced lunch. The last was the percentage of minorities taking the tests. Together, these factors accounted for up to 84 percent of the difference in median test scores among Omaha schools. The other 16 percent was, well, news.

If Omaha wanted to predict school performance, why did it exclude information on, say, dollars spent or PTA hours logged? Its goals, unlike those of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* featured last month in this space, were to isolate the characteristics of a school that teachers, principals, or officials, couldn't control. That way, it could evaluate the extra value each school brought to education rather than predict more exactly the school's performance on a series of test measures.

The method wasn't without controversy. School officials told Omaha reporters and editors that they'd ruin the lives of each 2nd grader in the district. They condemned the method. A school official's daughter, who was a graduate student nearby, e-mailed daily to question another detail of the method after the series ran. But the analysis

Continued from page eight: Statistics in education

had one strength the school officials couldn't deny: It confirmed internal, unpublished studies conducted by the school system itself in its attempts to identify the best and worst of Omaha's schools.

And it did so with compelling anecdotes from inside those schools. Here are some tips for reporters who want to tackle something like Omaha's project:

• Fight for information on students rather than settling for the school reports offered up on the Web. This information was crucial to Omaha's ability to look at a range of student demographics using Census data.

• Identify your goals early on. In Omaha, reporters wanted to evaluate the performance of the education system in each school.

In Arkansas, reporters decided that it didn't matter why schools were good – they wanted to develop a model of quality that ignored socio-economic factors.

Both are legitimate goals. Just decide which is yours.

• Watch for bad data, but don't get paralyzed.

In Omaha, for example, certain schools were designated "universal free lunch" schools. So many of the kids qualified that the schools just gave the program to everyone and stopped counting how many would have gotten the reduced price lunches elsewhere. They didn't show up as poor in the database.

• Look at more than one year's worth of information. Omaha looked at schools that under- or over-performed five years in a row.

• Use the scientific method, and understand all of your results.

If you need help, hire it. Omaha, in fact, used two consultants, John Bare and Brenda Sugrue, to lead them through the maze of numbers and tests.

• Don't let the school officials intimidate you. They'll always tell you that you've made big mistakes, and you're irresponsible.

If you have been responsible, don't let it dissuade you.

Sarah Cohen can be reached at (301) 942-2199 or e-mail her at sarah@nicar.org

The IRE Resource Center has reprints of the *Omaha World-Herald's* series, which ran April 20-24. To order a copy, call the center at (573)882-3364. The Resource Center also has examples of other newspapers' education series and copies of tip sheets from education reporters.

Continued from page two: Taxing analysis

always temporary and the new development will eventually return to the tax rolls.

Day 4

Another emerging issue in Ohio is urban sprawl. Urban folks complain about the government investing in building new highways, sewers and other infrastructure to allow people to move out of the city.

Instead, critics argue, the money should be spent to improve older urban communities.

The local industrial relocations identified in the first day's story clearly followed the trend of moving outward into greener pastures — literally and figuratively in terms of tax cuts.

A small spreadsheet of basic Census data also demonstrated the corresponding shift in population and wealth during the past 30 years.

Day 5

For the final day, I tackled the issue of the slippery numbers. In monitoring the tax abatements – which are given in exchange for promises of job creation — communities often rely

on annual estimates provided by the companies. The numbers were suspect.

The company receiving the county's largest tax cut of $10 million, for example, was getting credit for creating 143 jobs while openly downsizing.

And some companies obviously never could live up to their promises. When the raw payroll and job numbers — those that were the basis of granting the abatements — were calculated, they didn't add up.

Some deals, if fulfilled, would equate to creating jobs paying an average of more than $100,000 annually, while others promised full-time jobs paying $12,000 a year.

Questions raised around the state about tax abatements recently led to $500,000 being set aside in the state budget to hire an outside expert to conduct a statewide review. The review is under way.

Geoff Dutton is now working at the *Daytona Beach Journal* and can be reached at (904)252-1511

9

Backgrounding individuals

By Alan Schlein
Schlein News Bureau

Dozens of search engines exist to give you first clues on backgrounding individuals. This is not a comprehensive list. Just ones I've found useful in finding people online. The best test for most search engines is to put your own name in and see what turns up. Compuserve offers Phone File' America Online offers "White Pages" and CD-ROM's are available with the nation's phone numbers. Netscape also offers a "People" icon that provides various searches for addresses, phone numbers or e-mail addresses of people and companies.

• Switchboard: www.switchboard.com
Good tool for finding people and e-mail addresses.

• Whowhere: www.whowhere.com
Also good as phone book, business resource and e-mail address finder.

• Yahoo's People Page: www.yahoo.com/search.people

• Lyco's People Find: www.lycos.com/pplfndr.html

• Excite's People Finder: www.excite.com/reference/people.html
Broad search coverage by concept. See later reference to Excite for best journalism usage.

• Alta Vista: www.altavista.digital.com
My favorite (so far) of all the search engines — especially powerful if you know exactly what you are looking for. If you do put it in quotes and check it out, use the advanced search capability to designate word proximity in a phrase. Also a full-text index of Usenet newsgroup archives.

• Infospace: www.infospaceinc.com
This one is good for finding people, e-mail addresses and directions to the location. It's one of several good mapping programs and gives directions in simple terms (like go right, instead of go west).

• Four11: www.four11.com
411 is great for searching e-mail addresses, white and yellow pages phone books and also has a reverse directory capability, when you have a number and want to know who lives there.

• Internet Address Finder: www.iaf.net
This seems to be the most comprehensive for finding e-mail addresses, including obsolete and old ones.

• Saavysearch: www.cs.colostate.edu/~dreiling/smartform.html
It looks through multiple search programs and gives you a single list of hits back. I find it saves time.

Backgrounding Tools

• Dejanews: www.dejanews.com
You can search for a topic, returning all the archived newsgroup messages that mentioned that topic, or search for an e-mail address to get all the messages that someone has posted (great for finding out subject's interests). BUT BE AWARE: while you can read others postings on the usenet or news group, they can also read yours. A recent New York Times story noted that a well-known privacy advocate had posted 527 messages to usenet groups in the past 18 months, with postings to 32 different newsgroups, everything from a cyberpunk mailing list, a beer newsgroup and a Debbie Reynolds fan club.

• Fraternity and Sorority Connection: www.greek.com
You can link to this site for some alumni links.

• Finding Faculty: www.petersons.com
They publish the textbook Register of Higher Education, a great resource for finding administration folks at universities. Not on-line yet. They do, however, have the best on-line service available to search for a university employee.

Finding Professionals

• Profnet: www.prnewswire.com
Originally run by Dan Forbush at the State University of New York — Stony Brook, it has now been merged with PR Newswire, a public relations wire service. They still take your request and broadcast it to thousands of university press flacks nationwide. Include your affiliation, a very specific description of the type of expert you are seeking and the type of questions you need answered and information on how to contact you (e-mail and phone). They usually get an answer.

• American Medical Association Physician Select: www.ama-Assn.org

The data, they are a changin'

By Richard Mullins
NICAR/Missouri School of Journalism

Sometimes you need to make changes in your data – cleanup, standardization, etc. A question often heard in NICAR bootcamps is something like "I know how to do this in FoxPro, but I don't know how to do it in Access." Since the reverse of this question also comes up, I'll cover the basics of both.

Updating data

Here is the query in Access:

```
UPDATE Contribs
SET NewOccupation = "Homemaker"
WHERE Occupation = "Housewife"
```

This is how to do the same thing in FoxPro: there are two commands typed in the command window.

```
USE Contribs
REPLACE ALL ;
NewOccupation WITH "Homemaker" ;
FOR Occupation = "Housewife"
```

In FoxPro, the table you are working on is defined first, in a separate command ("use," which is the same as going through the File/Open dialog box.) In Access, the table to work on is specified after the word UPDATE. The words are different, but they have in common a way to define the column to work on, the text to put in it and which rows to perform the change.

Deleting data

• Access:

Maybe you won't use this as often, and never on the only copy of original data. Uplink readers would never commit a blunder like that.

Anyway, in creating a subset of a larger data set, sometimes you make the first cut by creating a new table based on rows meeting a certain criteria.

You could do subsequent delete commands to further whittle down that table. This SQL command in Access will delete all rows where the occupation field contains "ATTORNEY"

```
DELETE FROM Contribs
WHERE Occupation = "ATTORNEY"
```

Access tells you how many records will be deleted before it actually deletes the records.

If you click cancel on the message box, nothing happens and the records remain. If you click OK, Access deletes the records and you can't retrieve them.

• FoxPro

```
USE Contribs
DELETE FOR Occupation = "ATTORNEY"
```

Again, FoxPro takes two commands to do what is specified in one command in SQL and Access. After this FoxPro command, the records fitting the specified condition are only marked for deletion; they still remain in the table. You can still RECALL the records. This next command does the deletion and is not reversible.

```
PACK
```

FoxPro will not give you a prompt before this command is carried out. If you say "oops," the next thing you say as the smart Uplink TechTip reader that you are: "I'm glad I have a backup."

Richard Mullins can be reached at (573) 882-2127, or send e-mail to richard@nicar.org

Have a suggestion for a Tech Tip or have a technical problem that is stumping you? E-mail Richard Mullins at richard@nicar.org with your ideas or questions.

Backgrounding

To find physician addresses and credentials, click from the home page to "AMA Health Insight" and then "Physician Select," AMA's reference source of professional information on individual physicians in the U.S.

• Martindale-Hubbel: www.martindale.com/maps/../locator/home.html
Excellent resource for finding lawyers and backgrounding them.

• Finding Officers: www.officer.com/officers.htm

This site is an unofficial collection of links to personal home pages of law enforcement officers. If a cop has a home page on the Web, it's here.

• Biography Dictionary: www.tiac.net/users/parallax
Includes over 18,000 prominent persons.

Alan Schlein can be reached at (202) 544-5893, or send e-mail to Schlein@access.digex.net

Quick Hits

By Andy Hall
Wisconsin State Journal

Any of these issues may be worth of an in-depth project. But if you've got only a day or a week, you can produce meaningful stories examining portions of these issues.

Education

The racial achievement gap: Is it widening in your community's schools? Even if you're handed a news release and told to write up the latest test scores, you can quickly dig up additional data from the schools or your state's education agency. (Some state agencies are listing this data on the Internet.)

Method: Compare current high school cumulative GPAs, listed by race, to figures five years ago and, if available, 10 years ago. Use the same procedure for standardized test scores administered at various grade levels. Don't let the school district simply release the "average" score for the entire student populations. Also, examine the scores, listed by race, for each school. You'll see some interesting differences.

Questions: Is the gap between whites and minorities expanding? Why or why not? Can the differences be explained by other "risk factors" such as poverty and high mobility? National education experts say they know of no major school district in the nation that has substantially reduced the racial achievement gap. If your schools have, you've got a huge national story. If they haven't, you've still got a huge story.

Tip: Look for students or schools whose experiences defy the stereotypes. They'll provide inspiring stories of success – and poignant stories of failure.

Population trends

How has the population of your community changed since the 1990 Census? Don't wait for the 2000 Census to find out.

Method: Contact your State Data Center (list of centers available through 301-457-1305). Also check the Census Bureau's homepage, www.census.gov, and particularly the annual county-level estimates for race/ Hispanic origin, sex and age at www. census.gov/population/www/estimates/

co9094.html (See handout from *USA Today's* Paul Overberg for details; call IRE at 573-882-0684.) Be sure you understand the limits of the data.

Tip: New data became available in July.

Crime

Where is violence concentrated in your community? Which police officers handle most of the violence?

Method: Obtain the police department's database for calls for service, or for reported crimes. Or persuade the department to provide you with such information as the address having the greatest number of violence-related calls, the block with the greatest number of calls, and the officer responding to the greatest number of violence calls. Long after you've published your major package of stories, many quick-hit-stories remain hidden in the data.

Tips: There's great value in stories demonstrating that crime can be traced to specific buildings and to a relatively small number of people. Your stories give the community a place to focus efforts such as rooting out bad landlords and bad tenants, or obtaining more police patrols.

Quick-hit angles include: which cops handle the greatest number of violence-related calls, and what are their perspectives on trends in the community? What types of calls do officers in your community handle? Which date, day of the week or time are most frequently associated with reported violence? How long does it take the police to arrive to incidents? What patterns do you find when you analyze the sex, age and race of violence victims?

Redlining

Are insurance companies excluding minorities from homeowners coverage?

Method: Examine state insurance department records. Start by focusing on a particular company. Determine how much of the market that company holds across the metropolitan area. Determine what share of the market the company holds within each ZIP code. Obtain Census data listing minority population within each ZIP code. Is there an interesting pattern? In 1995, Madison-based American Family Insurance settled a lawsuit over its Milwaukee policy-writing practices

Campaign finance assistance

By Brant Houston and Jo Craven
NICAR

One of the worst tasks in computer-assisted reporting is data entry. Yet doing data entry is usually the only way to do one of the best kind of stories: analysis of state and local campaign finance reports.

But, in the coming years, there is a chance that campaign finance stories may not have to rely on massive and time-consuming data entry projects.

Electronic filing of campaign finance reports has become a hot topic among state election officials and campaign finance reformers.

A recent report (soon to be updated) by the Center for Governmental Studies in Los Angeles reveals that all but four states are considering ways to encourage or require electronic filing.

And in July, 40 state election officials from more than a dozen states met to share questions and ideas about electronic filing and disclosure.

As outlined in the center's report, electronic filing and disclosure of campaign contributions and expenses can streamline administrative costs, permit faster reporting on the information and aid the public in making better decisions during elections.

For journalists, electronic filing and disclosure through diskette or through World Wide Web sites would allow dozens of timely and meaningful stories during an election, rather than afterward.

There already is progress in some states. While the systems are not perfect, here is a list of some of their efforts:

• Hawaii has implemented electronic filing of campaign finance reports and is in the process of upgrading its system. The Hawaii system visually mimics the state's paper forms. It provides diagnostics, including spell checking. And it supplies housekeeping functions, such as generating letters notifying filers of missed deadlines.

• Iowa has developed an electronic filing system and expects voluntary filing to begin in August. The first reports expected to be available are PAC filings in October and candidate committee filings in January.

• Michigan permits electronic filing, but has not developed filing software.

• Twenty-two states have pending statutory legislation for electronic filing. Among those already considering how to start their own systems are Michigan, Missouri, Oklahoma, New Jersey, Illinois and Ohio.

What's missing

Although steps have been made, we are concerned about moves not to disclose street addresses or to restrict information electronically that can be obtained on hard copy.

For example, California has voted to omit contributors' street addresses from data that it puts on the Web and is debating whether to omit cities as well – decisions that will make it impossible to clearly identify multiple contributions by the same individual.

IRE and NICAR are pushing for electronic filing and have the ear of election officials who are trying to come up with standardized reports and coding for electronic filing.

With help of a two-year grant from the Joyce Foundation, located in Chicago, IRE and NICAR have begun the Campaign Finance Information Center.

The center, which is just getting started, plans to be a repository for federal, state and local campaign finance data and to help journalists analyze that data.

We already are reviewing the electronic filing issues with state officials and campaign finance groups, representing the interests and needs of journalists.

In September, we plan to attend a larger conference of election officials where we will push hard for meaningful changes.

Let us know by e-mailing jo@nicar.org and brant@ire.org what we need to do and any news of what your state or local government is doing.

To get a copy of the Center for Governmental Studies report, write to Craig Holman, Project manager, National Resource Center, 10951 W. Pico Blvd., First Floor, Los Angeles, Calif. 90064.

To get a copy of the COGEL study surveying 39 states regarding the conversion from paper filing to electronic filing, write to Charles G. Lamb, executive director, Missouri Ethics Commission, 221 Metro, Jefferson City, Mo. 65109

Brant Houston can be reached at (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to brant@ire.org

As part of the campaign finance project, IRE and NICAR will develop a Web page with tips from reporters, examples of stories and data for state and federal races. If you have additional suggestions of items that should be on the page, send e-mail to jo@nicar.org or jody@nicar.org

Get your training

On-the-road training

NICAR provides specialized training in your newsroom.

Learn to transfer data from government files into newsroom PCs. Build spreadsheets for insightful stories on the beat. Comprehend documents with database managers. Navigate the Internet and on-line databases.

Cost varies. For information, call Lisa Barnes at (573) 882-8969, or to register, call the numbers below.

August 13-17, 1997 — Boston, Mass.

Join NICAR for hands-on training at the Asian American Journalists Association in Boston. Limited to conference participants.

August 19-22, 1997 — Huntington, W.Va.

On-the-road training for Marshall University

September 11-13, 1997 — Washington, D.C.

Computer-Assisted Reporting Workshop

Sponsored by NICAR and the Medill School of Journalism

September 20, 1997 — Coeur D'Alene, Idaho

Join NICAR for hands-on training at the Idaho Press Club's annual conference in Coeur D'Alene. Limited to conference participants.

September 24-26, 1997 — Arlington, Va.

On-the-road training for *USA Today*

October 20-24, 1997 — Ft. Lauderdale, Fla.

On-the-road training for the *Ft. Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel*

Conferences

NICAR will offer training and seminars at the following professional conferences, including the IRE and NICAR national conferences. Costs vary. For information or to register, call Lisa Barnes at (573) 882-8969

March 5-8, 1998 — Indianapolis, Ind.

NICAR Conference

June 4-7, 1998 — New Orleans, La.

IRE National Conference

Bootcamps

Bootcamps are week-long, intensive training sessions offered at NICAR's headquarters at the Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia, Mo.

As with on-the-road training, you will learn to transfer data from government files into newsroom PCs, build spreadsheets for stories on the beat, comprehend documents with database managers, and navigate the 'Net and on-line databases — but you'll be drilled all day, every day for a full week. Tuition ranges from $500-$1,000 depending on circulation or market size.

For information, call Wendy Charron at (573) 882-0684.

August 10-15, 1997 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Regular Bootcamp

September 28 - October 3, 1997 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Bootcamp with eight fellowships available for minority journalists

Sponsored by NICAR and the Multicultural Management Program

January 4-9, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Regular Bootcamp

Quick Hits

for $14.5 million.

Tip: You can do this within one week.

Medical waste, voting, state aid, affordable housing, wardens...Got time for more?

• Do any hospitals in your area burn medical waste to generate electricity? The pollution may be making patients and employees sick.

• As politicians spend millions trying to win votes, check to see how many pols and other local leaders bother to vote.

• When your state doles out economic development aid, where does it got? If any ends up in funny places, such as a shaky deal to prop up a factory in the governor's hometown, you've got a hot issue.

• When a developer or politician brags that they're creating affordable housing, check it out: How many people can really afford these places?

• Who are the wardens of the prisons in your area? These people wield extraordinary power over the lives of inmates and employees, but they're seldom subjected to scrutiny.

Andy Hall can be reached
at (608) 252-6100.

From the NICAR library

NICAR offers a number of federal government databases. Here is a list of our growing collection:

NEW • U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Medical Devices Reports, detailing complaints about drugs, pacemakers and other medical products. 1974-1996.

NEW • U.S. Centers For Disease Control's AIDS database, providing case-by-case demographic information about those with the HIV virus. 1995.

NEW • U.S. Census Bureau's Consolidated Federal Funds Reports, showing which communities get how much under various federal programs. 1983-1995.

• Federal Aviation Administration's accidents and incidents, including major plane crashes since 1974.

• NASA's air safety reporting system, including anonymous complaints by pilots and air traffic controllers. Useful for finding near misses and problems at local airports, 1988-1996.

• Federal Election Commission campaign contributions by individuals and political action committees, 1990-1997.

• The Health Care Financing Administion's 1995 database of all Medicare-funded inpatient work in U.S. hospitals.

• Federal Railroad Administration data for accidents, casualties, and highway crossings, 1991-1996.

• Coast Guard boating accidents, 1969-1994.

• Federal Aviation Administration data, including airplane maintenance work documented in the service difficulty report, pilot licenses and grades, and aircraft registration, 1974-1997.

• Home Mortgage Disclosure Act records, for tracking who gets loans and who gets turned down, and finding redlining patterns, 1992-1995.

• Federal procurement data, 1992-1996, includes breakdowns by agency.

• Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms gun dealer records. 1993-1996.

• National Bridge Inventory System data, includes inspection grades, 1994-1995.

NEW • FBI Uniform Crime Reports, a detailed compilation of crime data that includes statistical breakdowns of individual murders. This includes the 1995 final report.

• Social Security death records, by name and social security number, going back to 1937.

• Occupational Safety and Health Administration violation data includes worker accidents and exposures to hazardous chemicals by companies, 1974-1996.

• U.S. Department of Transportation truck accident and census data. It includes accidents by company and road.

• U.S. Small Business Administration loan guarantees, 1980-1997. This includes the name of the business, address, amount covered by the SBA, and status, including whether the loan went bad.

• U.S. Small Business Administration disaster loan guarantees, 1989-1995. This includes individuals and businesses, the amount covered by the SBA, and the status, including whether the loan went bad.

• U.S. Small Business Administration's list of minority companies certified for SBA assistance in seeking federal contracts. It includes the name of the company, its address, the owner, type of business and phone number.

• The National Inventory of Dams, 1991-1995.

• U.S. Department of Transportation hazardous materials accidents database, a collection of roadway, rail, air and waterway accidents from 1971 to 1996.

• U.S. Department of Transportation fatal accident reporting system. It includes all roadway accidents from 1975 to 1995.

• U.S. Coast Guard directory of U.S. merchant vessels. It includes the name of the ship, the managing owner, home port and various descriptive information.

For up-to-date prices and more information, call (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to info@nicar.org

Need technical advice?
Can't find what you need on the Internet?
The bound edition of 1996 Uplinks is now available for $20 plus shipping. To order, call Wendy Charron at (573) 882-0684.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

Reader Response

It's time we heard from you. We are looking to improve Uplink and want to know your ideas.

Are there certain columns that you would like to add? Are there certain topics you would like covered? Have you done a story that you think should be featured in an upcoming issue? This is your chance to play armchair editor.

Send comments, critiques and suggestions to Uplink's editor, Jody Sowell, at jody@nicar.org We look forward to hearing from you.

NICAR Net

Recent topics on the IRE and NICAR listserv have included campaign finance data, troubles with traffic accident data, ethics, medical investigation, medical investigations and Access tips.

To subscribe to IRE-L or NICAR-l, send e-mail to listproc@lists.missouri.edu

In the body of the message, type:

subscribe NICAR-L<your name>

subscribe IRE-L<your name>

Also, check out the IRE-L and NICAR-L mailing list archives on our website at http://www.ire.org and http://www.nicar.org. You can see posts to both lists organized by thread, author and date. The list archives are available in html or in plain text format.

IRE and NICAR Want You

IRE and NICAR have several positions open:

• Director/Trainer for Campaign Finance Information Center and Database Library Administrator for Campaign Finance Information Center

We are looking for excellent journalism skills and/or excellent computer skills. The center will archive state and local campaign finance data, offer on-site and on-line training and will publish a newsletter. Salaries for the jobs range from $35,000 ot $40,000.

• IRE Deputy Director

IRE is also looking for a deputy director who will report to the executive director and help oversee IRE's six divisions: training, publications, the Mexico program, NICAR database library, operations and the new campaign finance information center. Salary range is $40,000 to $46,000. The job may include teaching at the school of journalism as an adjunct professor.

• Database Library Administrator for NICAR

This position involves supplying data and data analysis to more than 120 print and broadcast organizations and overseeing a team of graduate research assistants. Salary range is $35,000 to $45,000.

Inquiries and resumes should be sent to Brant Houston, Executive Director, IRE, 138 Neff Annex, Columbia, Mo. 65211 or brant@ire.org