

Uplink

October 1997

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

Globetrottin'

Uplink Update

CAR has not only begun to reach every area of the newsroom — from the sports desk to the lifestyles desk — it has also stretched to every corner of the globe — from Sweden to Latin America. So, sit back and let Uplink take you around the world in pursuit of CAR.

NICAR's Kara Morrison looks at a variety of computer-assisted projects in Latin America.

Stefan Lisinski explains how his Swedish newspaper investigated the business of bankruptcy.

Also included in this month's issue are updates from Finland and Denmark.

This issue also takes a look ahead to what's to come in 1998. We are currently compiling economic CAR stories for a future issue but include a taste of what's to come with Neill Borowski's explanation of the *Inquirer's* property tax investigation.

And don't miss your chance to register for the IRE and NICAR national conferences.

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CAR for all

CAR in Latin America

By Kara Morrison
NICAR

When Carlos Subero decided to attend last year's advanced computer-assisted reporting seminar in Chapel Hill, he was already an experienced political reporter in Caracas, Venezuela.

But the knowledge he came home with led to projects no one else in his country had tried. The projects included an analysis of all 257 members of Venezuela's Congress using SPSS software, and a global study of the increasing number of women in high political offices. Subero did both analyses for his newspaper, *El Universal*, using databases he built from his own research.

"My first important project in CAR was very profitable," said Subero, who says he is still the only professional journalist practicing CAR in Venezuela. But he says the idea is spreading.

Lise Olsen, managing director of Periodistas de Investigación, IRE's counterpart in Mexico City, said Subero is one of several Latin American journalists now embracing the computer as a powerful reporting tool.

PI trains 40-60 journalists each month in computer-assisted reporting workshops. Olsen says two main factors are fueling the trend, the first of which is an increase in online information.

"It has become fashionable for government offices to have Web sites," she explained. This has made retrieving government records easier than having to request databases from government public relations offices that often do not know such information exists.

The second main factor is that other

journalists have been encouraged by watching some of their colleagues complete successful computer-assisted reporting projects.

"I think more and more people are trying [CAR], showing people who are doubtful that it can be done," Olsen said.

Jose Roberto de Toledo is a Brazilian journalist who has done just that, completing numerous CAR projects for his

Continued on page two

Busted

Tracking bankruptcy

By Stefan Lisinski
Dagens Nyheter

How do you tell a story about bankruptcy as a tool for economic criminality?

A lot of people, at least in Sweden, know that bankruptcy is a business itself with a lot of criminality, but the trick is to prove it. A lot of people involved in bankrupt companies are suspected, some are prosecuted but only a few are convicted for economical criminality.

I tried to do the story by starting at the other end.

I made a top list and investigated the people who are involved in the biggest number of bankrupt companies.

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Volume 9, Number 10

A newsletter for the
National Institute for
Computer-Assisted
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Uplink is published every
month by the National
Institute for Computer-
Assisted Reporting,
138 Neff Hall Annex
Columbia, MO 65211.
(573) 882-0684.

Subscription price is \$40 for
IRE members, \$60 for
nonmembers.

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grants from The Freedom
Forum and other
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help the institute deliver
its services nationwide to
news organizations and
associations.

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South of the border

newspaper, *Folha*, in Sao Paulo.

After finding numbers compiled by a Brazilian congressman, Toledo used Excel to analyze public works projects in the country by state, department and type of expense. He then calculated the amounts spent on each and compared the amounts to expenditures from previous years.

Toledo also used data from Sao Paulos Pro-Aim institute to analyze the causes of death in the city.

He was able to link many homicides to alcohol abuse. Finally, Toledo used INS data to track Brazilian emigrants.

He found the five American states that were their most popular destinations Massachusetts, New Jersey, Florida, New York and California and profiled several Brazilians there. Toledo said each project took about a week.

"The most difficult part," Toledo said, "is always to find the source of good and reliable data."

Starting simple

Olsen said most computer-assisted projects in Latin America are still done using spreadsheets and Internet sources, rather than more complex databases and statistical analyses.

Francisco Vidal, a reporter with Milenio magazine in Mexico City and formerly with the newspaper *Reforma's* investigative team, has done several such projects.

Vidal analyzed the economics of Mexican soccer teams using data he compiled.

He was able to estimate how profitable each team was.

Another project Vidal did was a spreadsheet analysis of cancer rates among Mexican women.

He found the rates were higher in some Northern Mexican states, and that women in other states were dying less frequently largely because they had detected cancer earlier.

Olsen said another reporter, Claudia Fernandez of *El Universal* in Mexico City, recently downloaded data from the National Security Archives Web site.

With this, Fernandez was able to decode some information about Cold War KGB activities with a code sheet that she also downloaded from the Web site.

She was then able to identify a journalist, a

former politician and other former KGB agents living in Mexico, one of whom was still alive.

She then interviewed him and the family members of others for a riveting story.

Good with the bad

While Olsen admits Latin American journalists have more problems gaining access to as much computerized information as American reporters do, she says they do have one advantage. Olsen said journalists there do not have to deal as often with translating old 9-track government tapes, since most government offices in Latin America use PCs.

And so far, she says, laws in Mexico at least have not made any distinctions between electronic and print records.

Olsen also said sharing information helps reporters get started with CAR projects, since some ideas, like exploring campaign finance, analyzing budgets and comparing crime rates, can be done in almost any country.

"Information sharing is just as important internationally as nationally," she said.

Subero for one doesn't plan to stop learning about and using computer-assisted reporting. He is currently working with the Venezuela electoral institution Consejo Supremo Electoral to ensure campaign finance data is compiled there.

"I have no experience with Access, Paradox or Mapinfo, but it is my plan to do it soon."

Subero said Phil Meyer has agreed to travel to Caracas next November to teach CAR courses. "This will give you an idea about the importance that *El Universal* sees in CAR."

Toledo also said his experience has taught him much and has given him an edge in a market still new to computer-assisted reporting.

"Besides the conclusions of the articles themselves, I learned a lot of things doing this job from operating the software to finding good sources of data," Toledo said.

"More than that, I learned that the computer is the best friend of the reporter. Unfortunately, I believe that CAR is still almost unknown in Brazil. I believe this is going to change in the next [few] years. Until then, I and a few others will continue to use CAR techniques to be ahead of the competitors."

Kara Morrison can be reached at (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to kara@nicar.org

Continued from page one:

Filing bankruptcy

I could show that a lot of them had never actually ran the companies. I could describe the methods they were using. Criminals or not, that was for the courts to decide, but the reader got a picture of companies where the basic idea was not to sell anything but to fool the authorities and other companies.

The story was published Oct. 1996 in *Dagens Nyheter*, Sweden's biggest morning newspaper.

Story behind the story

For Swedish reporters the story about how I did the story was just as interesting as the story itself. This was one of the first times a reporter could use data from a Swedish authority and run it in his own computer.

Reporters in my country are used to getting information from authorities, but only on paper.

Every citizen has a right to read most of the documents that you can find at the authorities, both local and national. But when you get to computers we have rules that look like a joke.

When I asked the Swedish company register for information on discs about all Swedish joint-stock companies that filed bankruptcy during one year, they told me I first needed permission.

After four months, the Swedish Computer Inspection Authority said Okay. They had trouble before when a reporter asked for permission to write a book on a computer and they found that this was against the law! At that time the Swedish government decided that this was a question of freedom of the press and gave permission.

This decision helped me and I was one of the first reporters to get this kind of information on discs.

This also explains why one of the first CAR stories in Sweden was about economic criminality. The Swedish company register knows how to use computers and they are used to selling information to other authorities and market companies.

Other authorities don't understand what you are talking about, and they don't know that they are allowed to provide electronic information.

I guess in a few years this will change.

More Swedish reporters will ask for more electronic information and the authorities have to be taught to give us the information. The war has just started.

Crunching the data

For one year there were more than 18,000 bankrupt companies with about 50,000 members of the boards. The information was 43 megabytes. The newspaper had to pay about \$2,000 for the information. The company registers argued that they had to create a program to sort out the bankrupt companies.

I used Access, simply because my newspaper already had it, and I didn't think much about other alternatives.

The computer work was quite easy, even if I had to learn the program from start. The problem was that I got a lot of different ideas from the data, and I had to realize that I couldn't make a story of all of the ideas.

I got a list of people involved in 10 or more bankruptcies. Total there were 13 people.

Then I started the old-fashioned research work, looking into documents from courts, trustees reports interviews, etc. This took a long time and had little to do with CAR work.

A big part of the story was to make a description of all these 13 people. Most of them were anonymous in the story.

Of the 13 people there were seven who were what we call goal keepers. These were drug addicts, thieves and people with no money at all. They had been put in the companies when it was time for bankruptcy. Eleven of 13 were involved in police investigations. Only two were entrepreneurs who had failed in business. I published an interview with one of them.

Most of the people were in their 40s, 12 were men and 12 also were of Swedish origin. This was important since there is a lot of discussions about immigrants and criminality.

I also found some new interesting examples of economic criminality. We found a lot of accountants who were involved in hundreds of bankruptcies. Some of them were about to lose their permission to work as accountants.

The conclusion was that there is a lot of economic criminality in bankruptcies and that this is a profitable criminality with a good chance for the criminal to go free. One disappointment was that I couldn't find the big guys behind the goal keepers.

Stefan Lisinski can be reached by e-mail at stefan.lisinski@dn.se

The IRE Resource Center has handouts with tips about how to cover international topics with CAR and examples of economic and international CAR stories.

To get a list of handouts and stories or to place an order, call (573) 882-3364.

Analyzing property tax

The Philadelphia Inquirer has a Web site devoted to computer-assisted reporting. 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>

By Neill A. Borowski
The Philadelphia Inquirer

New Jersey has the highest per-capita property-tax burden in the nation. With this in mind — and a governor's election in November — we embarked on a mission to determine what happened to property taxes in New Jersey.

The target period was 1993, the year before Gov. Christie Whitman entered office, and 1996, which was the latest year available.

The result was a project in the Aug. 24 *Inquirer* that I reported and wrote with James M. O'Neill from our Trenton bureau. We looked at every residential property in New Jersey and compared each property's tax bill between 1993 and 1996. The analysis of more than 2 million records in each year taxed MS Access, but SPSS picked up the slack.

However, the important computer-assisted reporting revelation wasn't how to do a tax story. The important step was coming up with a unique economic analysis using CAR tools.

Every reporter with CAR skills and some knowledge of statistics can put together a regional economic analysis that may rival similar analyses done by local planning boards, academics or others.

There may be reluctance to venture into economics because the subject seems so technical and full of ambiguities. Don't worry. You can make a contribution.

In our tax piece, we found the median increase in a residential property tax bill was about 12 percent between 1993 and 1996.

Yet, Gov. Whitman said state income tax cuts made up for the increases. That was hard to pin down, but we used 1989 (1990 census) median household income statistics to estimate incomes in municipalities in 1993 and 1996. We calculated income tax bills each year and found the change. In the higher-income communities, the income-tax cut often made up for the increase in property taxes.

How were those income estimates made?

We turned to the Bureau of Economic Analysis (U.S. Commerce Department), which makes wage, salary and personal income estimates for counties. We applied the county-level income increases from the BEA to the 1989 median household incomes by municipality. We tested the estimates using the CPI and found the BEA method didn't yield crazy

results. (One key assumption, though, was that the typical household in a community saw increased income. We noted in the story that if the household's income were flat between 1993 and 1996, the tax cuts would have been even greater.)

Data sources

Here are some of the sources of regional economic data we used for this story and others involving regional economic analysis:

- Income data (BEA). A wonderful source is at <http://www.stat-usa.gov>. Estimates of personal income, earnings, wages and salaries are available for states, metros and counties. Unfortunately, there is a subscription fee (no press privileges). The Bureau of Economic Analysis' site is <http://www.bea.doc.gov>. This is free and you can at least get the news releases and maybe some data. The BEA also makes income projections by metro area to the year 2045.

- Income data (BLS and Census). Hourly earnings and other data from the Current Population Survey and other sources available at <http://www.bls.gov>, the BLS (U.S. Department of Labor) site. The Census Bureau's income data tends to be more dated than the BEA's. The site is <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/income.html>. The BLS' Consumer Price Index also is available at the BLS site.

- Employment data (BLS). Many reporters say their state labor departments have a lot more data than BLS. However, in most cases the data released by state departments originate with the BLS. The two leading employment series: civilian labor force (residence-based) and payroll employment (employer-based). The civilian labor force number comes from the Current Population Survey and is used to calculate the unemployment rate. The civilian labor force number is national, with estimates for the states. For example, total civilian employment in Pennsylvania is the number of Pennsylvania residents who are employed. By contrast, payroll employment data (also called "establishment employment" or "series 790 data") are based on employer location and not job holder residence. For example, payroll employment in Pennsylvania is the number of jobs within the state borders - even if residents of New Jersey fill some of them. The 790 data typically are available only to the metro area level

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tax investigation

although the central cities of Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington and New York are released. The payroll employment data also breaks industries down to sub-industry groups. Local residence-level employment data are available through the BLS Local Area Unemployment Statistics (LAUS) program. Some economists call these numbers the laus-y statistics because they are gross estimates and probably subject to a great deal of error (which isn't measured). However, as questionable as these data are they are available each month on the county or municipal levels. Finally, the Series 202 data — now available from state labor departments and available in the future from the BLS — is based on a quarterly survey of every employer and includes wage and employment information. It is available down to at least the county level (and is viewed as relatively solid; the BLS uses the 202 numbers to benchmark the 790 numbers). Some data are available at <http://www.bls.gov>.

- **Businesses (County Business Patterns).** The Census Bureau each year publishes County Business Patterns, tracking employment, payroll and establishment totals down to four-digit SIC codes. For example, in 1994 there were 92 video-rental establishments employing 894 people and paying them a total of \$10,482,000 a year in Philadelphia. So? You may be studying the size of one industry versus another. The CBP series isn't based on surveys, so there is no sampling error. The Census Bureau uses administrative records for CBP. However, there is a lag. The latest available, 1994, was released last fall.

A problem is that the bureau withholds some data if information about one employer might be disclosed. This becomes common when you move to three- or four-digit SIC codes or you concentrate on smaller counties in your analysis. Find out more at <http://www.census.gov/epcd/cbp/view/cbpview.html>. Complete reports are available for download by state using Acrobat Reader (pdf files).

- **Economic Censuses.** While we know a bit about local businesses from County Business Patterns, the Census Bureau's economic censuses can fill in some of the "holes." The censuses of Retail Trade, Wholesale Trade, Services, Services/Tax-Exempt, FIRE (Finance,

Insurance and Real Estate), Manufacturing, Mining and Construction show the number of establishments, annual receipts and number of employees. These censuses come out for years ending in "2" and "7." For information: <http://www.census.gov/epcd/www/92results.html>.

- **Gross output.** We all know that Gross Domestic Output (GDP) measures the output of goods and services for the national economy. However, there is GDP available at a state level, called appropriately Gross State Product. The database is simple: the total output of goods and services down to two-digit SIC code for each state. "Output" in this case is the value added to the good or service by an industry within a state. Because it is a value-added measure, there is no double counting (for example, the value of raw materials brought into Pennsylvania to make a product would not be counted in Pennsylvania's output).

- **State/Local government finances/taxes.** The Census Bureau's government page at <http://www.census.gov/govs/www/index.html> is overflowing with useful statistics. Included are 1992 through 1996 state tax collection data, state and local government finances from 1991 through 1994, financial information for larger counties and 1992 through 1995 state government payrolls.

- **Federal tax data.** The IRS' Statistics of Income (SOI) program has a useful site packed with tax statistics at http://www.irs.gov/tax_stats/index.html. Besides the statistics, you can download the IRS tax-exempt organizations file by state. Links to state tax departments are available at http://www.irs.gov/prod/forms_pubs/ftaframes.html. Other tax-related sites are available at http://www.irs.gov/prod/forms_pubs/ftaframes.html.

- **Other local economic data.** Each state has a data center affiliated with the Census Bureau. The links to these centers is at <http://www.census.gov/sdc/www/>. If you rummage through your data center's site, you can come up with local economic statistics, building permits and other useful data.

Neill A. Borowski can be reached, by e-mail at neill.borowski@phillynews.com.

We are currently planning for an economics-themed Uplink. If you have used CAR for economic stories or know of someone who has, send an e-mail to Jody Sowell, Uplink's Managing Editor, at jody@nicar.org

Covering Housing

This is an excerpt of a handout from the IRE

Resource Center.

To order the complete handout

or to get a list of other available

handouts, call the

IRE Resource Center

at (573) 882-3364.

By George Rodrigue
The Dallas Morning News

In this handout, George Rodrigue gives a variety of tips for covering public housing. The IRE Resource Center has several handouts and stories dealing with public housing. To order any of these files, call (573) 882-3364.

1. Look under your own nose.

Public Housing segregation in East Texas Everybody knew that public housing in rural East Texas was segregated.

Anyone could drive into pretty much any small town and see two projects: One white and well-tended, and the other black and decrepit.

What Craig Flournoy and I did, twelve years ago now, is stop and ask why.

Public housing authority directors said things like, "If you let black kids and white kids grow up together, they might like each other. And then you know what you'd have? Race mixing!"

The same pattern, in different guises, was equally obvious in other rural areas. Not to mention the big cities. Urban renewal had razed hundreds of inner-city neighborhoods, usually occupied by minorities but almost all of them poor.

The occupants were herded into high-rises and, quite often, denied chances to move to neighborhoods with lower poverty rates and more jobs.

Why?

Some public officials confessed that racism played a role, as did the convenience of politically connected developers.

In other words, "ghettos" didn't just happen. They were subsidized by the federal government.

2. Examine the files.

HUD had known about problems in East Texas, and elsewhere, for decades.

Next question: Discrimination had been illegal for 20 years. Why did HUD fail to intervene? We FOIA'd pretty much every HUD inspection file of East Texas public housing authorities.

The agency had known about the authorities' bigoted directors for decades. It had them on the record opposing "race mixing." Yet it had done nothing.

Privately owned but HUD-subsidized projects showed the same pattern.

Odd, because federal law required HUD to ensure that projects in non-minority residents. Time after time, we found HUD had approved marketing rules that specified a goal of "zero" recent minorities.

When we called the former HUD regional administrator for comment he said, "It looks like we didn't give a damn about those regulations, and we didn't."

Last piece of the record chase: When Housing and Urban Development delayed providing us with certain reports, *The Dallas Morning News* asked the agency to send us copies of the docket cards listing the name and phone number of every attorney who had filed suit against the agency for civil-rights violations.

That led to warehouses full of HUD documents those lawyers had obtained, including depositions with city officials around the country who'd taken federal funds designed to "free" poor people, and used the money to ghettoize them.

3. Reverse-engineer the bureaucracy.

Computer-aided inspection of Dallas Housing Authority waiting list drew quick confession.

Like most big cities, Dallas' public housing has long been segregated.

The Dallas Housing Authority's leaders, however, denied deliberately "steering" of applicants to particular projects.

By law, the authority must maintain a waiting list that tracks each applicant, noting that applicant's race and the projects that each applicant is offered.

We cross-tabulated the race of the applicant with the racial composition of the projects the tenants were offered.

Whites almost always got offered "white" projects; blacks almost always were offered "black" projects.

I called back the staff person who was responsible for making these offers and told her there was less than a one-in-ten-thousand chance of this being mere coincidence.

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Housing handout

She confessed then and there that the agency was “trying to make people offers for places it knew they’d like.” This was illegal, she knew, but she said her bosses required her to follow this policy.

Other things to look for in waiting lists: People who jump ahead of others on the list, or never get called for apartments. That can be a sign of favoritism, or prejudice.

Every agency has to keep certain records, whether by law, regulation, or common-sense necessity. Find those records and use them to reverse-engineer the agency’s real operating patterns.

Also with HUD, we created a national database of public housing occupancy by race. We applied HUD’s own criteria for segregation within a public housing authority, and found that the overwhelming majority of housing authorities were segregated.

4. Huge, immensely promising projects bear especially close scrutiny.

Empowerment and Enterprise Zones

Years ago Dallas’ Crow Companies got \$4 million in Housing and Urban Development grants to create 2,000 jobs for Hispanics in the impoverished West Dallas area. Time passed, the project was built, the federal funds were disbursed.

Net result: 16 jobs for West Dallas Hispanics. Each with a federal subsidy of \$250,000.

The history of even grander schemes, such as “empowerment zones” and “enterprise communities,” contains many tales of more grandiose flops. HUD and the Congressional Republicans share an ideological bias toward these kinds of programs, however, so they never really die. Keep an eye on them, and compare participants’ contractual promises to what they actually deliver.

Bear in mind, also, that previous studies have found these zones mostly shift development around a bit within a city, without fundamentally altering development dynamics in the region.

5. But then, so do routine business transactions.

Landlords with HUD Section 8 subsidized projects often take the money and run.

Here’s a scandal so blatant HUD recently called a press conference to denounce it.

Too many landlords whose projects carry HUD Section 8 subsidies have been pocketing the federal checks but then declining to pay their mortgage holders, or to spend money on maintenance.

Because of the weak way Congress wrote the laws, HUD must continue sending those checks even after the landlord declares bankruptcy — leaving HUD to pay mortgage insurance. As a result of such “skimming,” taxpayers are stuck with bad debts on decrepit projects, and tenants live in hell-holes.

HUD local or regional offices may be willing to provide information under FOIA, about projects where maintenance is particularly bad and where landlords may be in default on their loans.

Another routine problem: Housing and Urban Development guarantees loans up to \$25,000 to lower-income people needing home renovations.

But it also lets contractors handle the loan paperwork. This is an invitation to fraud, and HUD has found plenty.

Builders get folks in debt they can’t manage and then flee, often leaving shoddy or half-finished work behind.

6. Connections matter.

Welfare reform will affect the lives of everyone in public housing, driving up rents and, perhaps, leaving more kids unattended.

Public housing doesn’t work in isolation. Changes in food stamp and welfare laws will cause huge changes.

Some families will become better off (and face higher rents, and may leave.)

Others will become even poorer.

Some face benefit cuts.

Others must cope with sporadic employment or face new costs for transportation, health and child care — especially after they lose the single year of “transitional” benefits guaranteed them by most states.

And as millions of mothers are pushed into the workforce, who’ll be watching the children?

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Brant Houston's
"Computer-Assisted
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Guide" offers
practical advice for
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a computer-assisted
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The National Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference



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To attend this conference, you must be a current IRE member through 4/1/98. Please indicate your membership status:

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To register, mail this form and a check to IRE, 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, Missouri, 65211.

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International Wrap-up

For an update of what is happening at IRE's Mexico division — Periodistas de Investigación — check out its Web site, point your browser to <http://investigacion.org.mx>. A version of this handout with all 250 links is available at this site.

By Brant Houston
IRE Executive Director

Spurred by the wealth of information on the Internet and the sharing of techniques by their U.S. colleagues, journalists in other countries are quickly catching up on CAR.

This month we will conduct a border workshop for U.S. and Mexican journalists in Juarez. The workshop, set up by IRE's Mexico division, will be a bilingual excursion into CAR and traditional investigative techniques.

In the next six months, IRE and NICAR trainers will travel to Sweden, Finland, Denmark, Germany, Peru and England.

In Sweden and Finland, IRE and NICAR this month will train journalists not only in the basics, but also in the wise use of statistical methods. In Denmark, IRE and NICAR will hold another weeklong boot camp in March before joining Swedish journalists at their annual investigative conferences. In Germany this January, we will provide training for the staff of *Stars and Stripes* while also reaching out to German journalists.

In Peru, NICAR and its fellow division, IRE Mexico (Periodistas de Investigación) will do an "exploratory" visit next month to Lima to make plans for seminars for Peruvian journalists that will take place next year both in Missouri and Lima.

And in England, IRE and NICAR will help conduct an all-day training session at a new media conference in London in July. Last year trainers from the U.S. spoke and taught at the conference that combined panels and training. For the 1998 conference, organizers plan to have one day of panels and a separate day of training. We are customizing lessons and data especially for foreign journalists in order to make it as relevant as possible.

Meanwhile, we continue to receive numerous inquiries and visits from other foreign journalists. A Fulbright scholar from Spain is currently doing a study on CAR here at Missouri. Earlier this year another Fulbright scholar from Venezuela attended both our basic and advanced boot camps while working with CAR pioneer James Brown at the University of Indiana in Indianapolis.

At another boot camp, we had a working journalist from Argentina who wants to set up CAR workshops there. A New Zealand journalist is currently using E-mail to arrange a tour later this year of campuses and news organizations doing CAR.

At the same time, IRE and NICAR hope to help the Center for Public Integrity in Washington D.C. in its new project to put together an international consortium of international journalists.

So, as you can see, International CAR is really moving ahead.

Finland update
By Jennifer LaFleur
San Jose Mercury News

In spite of weak (or a complete lack) of open record laws, some European journalists are pioneering computer-assisted reporting in their own countries.

Much like the pioneers in the United States (particularly those at small to medium size news organizations) these journalists are breaking ground by being the first to ever request raw data from government agencies — and in some cases, they're getting them.

YLE, public broadcasting of Finland, has also begun training television, radio and teletext reporters in using computers at its Radio and Television Institute in Helsinki. In January and October of this year, NICAR did hands-on sessions at the Institute. Heikki Hiilamo, a YLE investigative reporter and NICAR boot camp attendee has been leading the charge there. Hiilamo, currently on leave from the company, helped develop the October training session.

The difference in the January and October sessions was notable. Fewer participants expressed concern with not being able to get information from the government and more of the participants had used the Internet regularly as a reporting tool. Two of the reporters even came to the October class with economic data they had acquired and wanted to analyze.

In some cases, databases — such as tax information on individuals — is more readily available in Finland than in the United States. And the same techniques we use for building databases

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Going global

from paper records (especially in smaller communities) can be used in countries where an electronic database might not be available.

Finland has one CAR advantage: It is a country that embraces technology with a higher rate of Internet connections than most U.S. cities. (With the exception of the text being in Finnish, many Helsinki billboards bear a resemblance to Silicon Valley.)

Most government agencies in Finland put information on the Internet. As is happening in the U.S., the government is providing information in Adobe Acrobat files that are not easily transferred to a database or spreadsheet and as in the U.S., reporters are faced with retyping the information into their computers. Among the government agencies providing databases in a useful format are:

- The bank of Finland (www.bof.fi) provides downloadable economic databases. (And also provides information in English for all of us non-Finnish speakers.
- Statistics Finland (www.statfin.fi) is their Census Bureau — plus more.
- European Forest Institute (www.efi.joensuu.fi/) provides logging and forestry information.

In addition many European universities provide useful research data on their Web sites.

Reporters in Finland are also realizing what other journalists outside the United States have found that data from U.S. agencies also can be valuable. Stat-USA (www.stat-usa.com) for example, provides information about imports and exports by country.

We'll have another report soon since NICAR is visiting Finland in November.

Denmark Update

By Gwen Carleton

The Capital Times

In Denmark, a land of powerful government that keeps its databases closed, journalists are using CAR to shed light on their leaders' effectiveness and learn more about its people.

In recent months, the country's largest national daily newspaper, *Jyllands Posten*, has focused on the effectiveness of the country's supreme court.

The 18 appointed justices have many side

jobs, the paper found, so journalists used CAR to analyze each justice's workload, number of cases and decisions, as well as the amount of time spent on cases.

The paper also has written about moonlighting legislators in the national parliament, and has published a list of legislators' side jobs on its Web site.

"CAR has been deeply involved in a number of lead stories," said Nils Mulvad, a *Jyllands Posten* business reporter and graduate of NICAR's boot camp. "There have been a number of consequences politically, and on the court system's efforts to improve effectiveness — a number of votes concerning these issues are now being discussed."

A consortium of Danish journalists and journalism educators also continue their efforts to unlock the nation's detailed and sophisticated governmental databases.

The country's tradition of zero access and the public's own reluctance to open such information has hindered the effort thus far. But journalists say encouraging signs are beginning to appear.

In response to pressure from the consortium, for example, the government has agreed to standardize rules for access to information in its various branches, something members say constitutes a small but important step forward.

"It's the character of the information that should decide access, not where the information is hidden," Mulvad, who also is a consortium member, said. "The government has now accepted that."

In the seven months since NICAR held its first boot camp in Denmark, *Jyllands Posten* also has used CAR to analyze city demographics in advance of various city elections, and has expanded its Internet version of the paper. As other journalists nationwide jump on the bandwagon, Mulvad said, *Jyllands Posten's* CAR reporters are receiving increasingly frequent requests for lectures and training.

"Where there was uncertainty over the new methods when NICAR was here, now that attitude is gone," he said. "The CAR machine is working."

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The Uplink staff is currently planning for 1998. If there are certain stories or themes you would like to see addressed, we would love to hear about it. Call (573) 882-0684 or send e-mail to jody@nicar.org

Making data entry easy

By Richard Mullins
NICAR

We are looking for
Tech Tips. If you
have one you would
like to share with
other Uplink readers,
please send it to
jody@nicar.org

Sometimes the data you want is only on paper, but you really want to analyze it in a database.

So, even though data entry is the proverbial pain, you decide to do it.

If you're lucky, you can get some help on the data entry.

But even if you do, make sure you do some of the entry yourself - a couple dozen records is probably enough to give you an idea of the judgments that have to be made when reading forms and typing some value in a particular field.

Furthermore, whether you do it all or have some help, you should create some scheme to make it possible to quickly and unmistakably match an individual record on the paper to the corresponding row that was entered in the table.

Access assistance

Microsoft Access has some features to make this easy.

When you design the table and specify the field names and types, add two more fields to track data entry: one to show the sequence of the data entry, the other to show the time the row was entered.

After you create these fields, they require no extra effort on your part, and they can come in very handy.

I'll talk about how to do it first, then the ways you might use the fields.

For the sequence indicator, make a field called seq or sequence.

For the data type, choose AutoNumber (in Access version 2, it's called Counter.) The first row will have the number 1 in this field, 2 for the second row and so on.

The field increments the next value automatically.

Once the number is there for a row, it doesn't change.

Deletions from the table do not renumber the field and you can't modify it.

If your data doesn't have a unique identifier for each case or row, this field makes a good

choice. And if your data does have a unique identifier, the sequence field requires no effort on your part and it explicitly shows the order of data entry.

For the data entry time, make a field called EntryTime or RowTimeStamp. For data type, choose Date/Time.

The bottom part of the Table Design view is where you specify properties for a field.

In the property called default value, type the word Now.

You might notice that when you click somewhere else on the screen, Access adds parentheses to the end of the word that you typed.

This is a sort of automatic syntax-checking.

Access guesses (correctly) that you want to call the built-in function Now(), which returns the time and date according to your computer.

After you save the table and start entering data, you have two fields that Access is filling in for you: the sequence and the date/time.

Extra entry tips

When planning and assigning the data entry, break it up into small manageable batches, especially if there are more than a few hundred records to work with.

When a batch is done (say 50 records), log who did it and when, and file the paper originals by batch.

With this filing and entry system, coupled with the entry-tracking fields Access is handling for you, you'll have an unambiguous way to match and audit your work.

Here is an example use for the sequence field. Say you're typing in questionnaire responses.

Instruct all the people doing the data entry to write the sequence number generated by Access on the piece of paper containing the data.

If there is a question about the integrity or accuracy of a particular row in the table, you can find the paper original.

The timestamp field will help if you need to look at all the records that were entered, say, on Tuesday afternoon, or all the records entered from Friday onward.

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Around the world on the Web

By Nora Paul

The Poynter Institute

"One goal of computer-assisted reporting is to help make the local global and the global local," according to Brant Houston, our fearless IRE/NICAR leader. How can Internet resources help do this on a timely, comprehensive, credible basis, ie: on deadline?!

Here is a listing of some resources with great compilations of international resources that can help bring a broader perspective to your reporting. Because, as we all know, we are no longer just citizens of our respective countries, we are members of a global village.

Often the best source is to find a good "scout" page, a page of links that is well organized and contains the key resources. Here are some good listings of International Links:

- European Journalism Page

<http://www.demon.co.uk/eurojournalism/>

They have a set of links relevant to breaking stories as well as links organized by government and politics, the media, and organizations.

- The World-Wide Web Virtual Library: International Affairs Resources

<http://www.pitt.edu/~ian/ianres.html>

Well organized by types of resources, by source of the information, and by topics.

International statistics

- CIA World Factbook

<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/nsolo/wfb-all.htm>

A great compilation of statistics and country profiles.

- International Data Base

<http://www.census.gov/ipc/www/idbnew.html>

"Statistical tables of demographic, and socio-economic data for all countries of the world." Check out the "population pyramid" feature for countries.

- International Federation of Data Organizations:

http://ssda.anu.edu.au/other/other_archives.html

A page of links, by country, to national data archive collections.

International news

What are the big stories? Check out local media coverage of breaking news after finding them in one of these online news directories:

- OneWorld

www.oneworld.org

"A community of over 150 leading global justice organizations" compiles news items from around the world, nicely searchable and focused on human rights issues.

- ReliefWeb

<http://www.notes.reliefweb.int:81>

Keep up with coverage of international natural disasters and the current status of "complex emergencies" with this Web site from the United Nations Department of Humanitarian Affairs.

International directories

- Chiefs of State and Cabinet Members of Foreign Governments

<http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/chiefs/chiefs-toc-view.html>

If you need the name of the Minister of Education in Niger, head for this page, brought to you by those friendly folks at the CIA. They provide links to listings of all the government officials, with the date it was updated clearly marked. Unfortunately, doesn't give any contact or e-mail information.

- The Embassy Page

<http://www.embpage.org/index.html>

Fighting breaks out in Cyprus and you want the American Embassy's take?

Go to their Web site (and find all countries' embassy sites with this listing).

International organizations

- NATO: The North Atlantic Treaty Organization

<http://www.nato.int>

It only has 16 members, but for those members, there is a handy chart linking you to the country's senate, head of state, military chief and other government Web sites that are available (<http://www.nato.int/family/countries.htm>). Check out, too, the Web archive with press releases, speeches, treaties and other documents, some dating back to 1949.

Nora Paul can be reached at (813) 821-9494 or send e-mail to npaul@poynter.org

So you've got all this information and now

all you have to

do is pack.

But you have no idea

what the weather is

going to be.

Point your browser

to [http://www.](http://www.worldclimate.com/)

[worldclimate.com/](http://www.worldclimate.com/)

and find out if you

should pack the

raincoat.

Get your training

Check out
the NICAR Web site
at www.nicar.org
to find out
times and dates
for upcoming
on-the-road training
and
boot camps.

Newsroom Seminars

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 online databases.

Cost varies. For information, call Lisa Barnes at (573) 882-8969.

December 3, 5 and 8, 1997 — Columbia, Mo.

On-the-road training for the Bureau of National Affairs

December 15-17, 1997 — Chicago, Ill.

On-the-road training for *The Chicago Tribune*

Workshops

IRE and NICAR can also bring their road-tested workshops to sites around the country. We match regional public records experts and experienced reporters with our own trainers for unique seminars ranging from one-day demonstrations and panels on regional public records laws to three-day hands-on sessions on computer-assisted reporting or advanced techniques for data-intensive beats.

Don't wait for someone else to organize a computer-assisted reporting workshop in your area. IRE and NICAR depend on members, news organizations, journalism schools and other journalism organizations to help us bring our seminars to you. Contact Sarah Cohen at (301) 942-2199 or e-mail her at sarah@nicar.org

November 21-23, 1997 — Columbia, Mo.

Intermediate Computer-Assisted Reporting Workshop

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

Computer-Assisted Reporting Workshop

Sponsored by NICAR and the Medill School of Journalism

January 23-25, 1998 — St. Louis, Mo.

NICAR Health Care Workshop

Boot Camps

Boot Camps 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 online 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 Katy Fanning at (573) 882-0684.

January 4-9, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Regular Boot Camp

January 9-11, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Advanced Boot Camp

May 10-15, 1998 — Chapel Hill, N.C.

NICAR Advanced Boot Camp

May 17-22, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Regular Boot Camp

July 12-17, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Regular Boot Camp

August 9-14, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.

NICAR Regular Boot Camp

Conferences

NICAR will offer training at the following professional conferences, including the IRE and NICAR national conferences. These conferences feature practical tips and story ideas shared by prize-winning journalists in quick-hit sessions. Keep up with our conference schedule through our Web site, at www.ire.org. Costs vary. For more information or to register, call Lisa Barnes at (573) 882-8969.

November 15-16, 1997 — Ciudad Juárez, Mexico
Border Conference

March 5-8, 1998 — Indianapolis, Ind.
NICAR National Conference

June 4-7, 1998 — New Orleans, La.
IRE National Conference

June 3-6, 1999 — Kansas City, Mo.
IRE National Conference

From the NICAR library

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

- NEW** • National Endowment for the Arts, 1987-1996, includes information on individual or organization receiving money.
- NEW** • Immigration and Naturalization Service legal residency, 1980-1995, includes information on the characteristics of aliens who were admitted as immigrants.
- NEW** • National Highway Traffic Safety Administration vehicle recalls and complaints, 1966-1997, includes information about vehicles that have been recalled by certain manufacturers.
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Medical Devices Reports, detailing complaints about drugs, pacemakers and other medical products, 1974-1996.
- U.S. Centers For Disease Control's AIDS database, providing case-by-case demographic information about those with the HIV virus, 1995.
- 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 Administration's 1995 database of all Medicare-funded in-patient 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.
- 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 1971-1996.
- U.S. Department of Transportation fatal accident reporting system. It includes all roadway accidents from 1975-1995.
- 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

The IRE Resource Center has copies of hundreds of stories that have used the databases listed here. If you are interested in seeing how reporters have used these databases, call the center at (573) 882-3364.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

Campaign Finance

The Campaign Finance Information Center is in full swing. Data, tips, links and stories are up at the center's Web site, www.campaignfinance.org

Also, coming soon to a mailbox near you will be the Campaign Finance Information Center's newsletter. Stories from the Fall '97 newsletter include reports about states with electronic filing systems, a look at how states are going to inform the public of the connection between money and politics and an explanation of in-kind contributions.

Conferences and Seminars

NICAR is forging ahead with new seminars and new approaches to conferences and workshops. Our annual conference, March 5-8 in Indianapolis, will not only include the usual panels and hands-on classes for beginners to the advanced, but also a set of special half-day sessions that will take in depth looks at how to use electronic information for particular beats.

We also are expanding our seminars for the intermediate range. Earlier this year we did a seminar on education and statistics. In the coming months, we plan to hold seminars on database design and data cleaning, use of SQL servers for the newsroom, mapping software, and business reporting. Watch our website at www.nicar.org for dates and times. For more information on seminars and boot camps, call (573) 882-0684.

NICAR Net

Recent topics on the IRE and NICAR listserv have included campaign finance data, troubles with traffic accident data, ethics, 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 www.ire.org and 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.

Reader Response

We are still looking for readers' ideas of how to improve Uplink.

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? Do you have something you would like to contribute? A Tech Tip? A column about a CAR story you reported?

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

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