January 1996

Uplink

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

Campaigns

Uplink update

Computers are emerging as a new-age voting machine, and elections may never be the same.

This issue of Uplink profiles computer-assisted efforts, and offers tips for reporters to better cover campaigns. That includes using the Internet as well as using campaign contribution data.

For instance, in Oregon, reporters cajoled U.S. Senate candidates to release computerized contribution data before the Federal Election Commission's deadline. That meant voters knew days before they went into the booth who was paying for each candidate's campaign.

At the *Syracuse (N.Y.) Post-Standard*, the newspaper used the Internet on election night to give up-to-the-minute tallies for every local race.

We also offer a smorgasbord of web sites for campaign reporting — everything from voting records to speeches.

Inside

Finding the best politicans money can buy

Money-go-round

By David Royse
Associated Press

Campaign finance data. To paraphrase Jimmy Buffett: We all want it, we've all got it. Now, what do we do with it?

"There are a thousand stories that will jump off anybody's desk," says Josh Goldstein, research director at the Center for Responsive Politics, which tracks campaign giving. "You don't have enough time in the day to do all the stories that are out there."

Larry Makinson, a former *Anchorage Daily News* reporter who also works at the Center for Responsive Politics, wrote the book "Follow the Money." He says looking at campaign giving can shed light on the real candidate.

"The issues that a candidate talks about in targeting these contributors are often totally different from the issues they talk about to the public," Makinson writes. "Exposing the details of this phantom campaign — and identifying the players — provides a much more fully-rounded picture of the candidate and the positions he or she will take once they attain office."

Debunking candidates

The most important money profiles can debunk candidates' attempts to portray themselves as something they are not. For example, consider this lede from a 1988 story about presidential candidate Richard Gephardt:

"Rep. Richard Gephardt, who is seeking to craft an image as an anti-establishment, anti-corporate crusader, has raised far more money from political action committees than any of his Democratic rivals — much of it from the very interests he rails against on the stump."

Divulging the corporate support for Gephardt revealed his populism as a born-again-type, the writer implied, thus preventing Gephardt from running two campaigns — one for the readers of the

Continued on page six

Pulitzer winner calculates justice

Virgin territory

By Andrew W. Lehren
NICAR staff

Sometimes, for a Pulitzer Prize-winning story, you need to bang your computer with a screwdriver.

That's what Melvin Claxton found out at the *Virgin Islands Daily News*.

But this gets ahead of the tale.

The newspaper won a 1995 Pulitzer for exposing how the criminal justice system failed to work in the Caribbean paradise. Police and prosecutors failed time and again to put criminals in jail. Most major crimes went unsolved. Claxton found rampant corruption and incompetence. Even when prosecutors did win convictions, criminals rarely did time in jail.

Continued on page two

Uplink
January 1996
Volume 8, Number 1
A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

Uplink is published every month by the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, P.O. Box 838 Columbia, MO 65205. (314) 882-0684. Subscription price is $35 (U.S.) annually, $50 outside the United States. Postmaster: Please send address changes to NICAR. Send e-mail to nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu.

NICAR is a joint effort of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the University of Missouri School of Journalism.
NICAR services include hands-on newsroom training on computer-assisted reporting, special academic and advanced training in data analysis.
NICAR is supported by a grant from The Freedom Forum intended to help the institute deliver its services nationwide to news organizations and associations.

From page one:

Calculating justice

Claxton also used something government officials had ignored: a computer.

His tabulations were startling. Fewer than five of every 100 violent crimes reported to police led to an arrest. Fewer than 10 of every 100 were even investigated. About two-fifths of all violent crime cases were dismissed before going to trial, often at the request of prosecutors. Fewer than a third of all convicted criminals went to prison.

Claxton wove these facts into compelling stories that dramatized how the system failed in the U.S. territory. His series was rich with anecdotes and detail. But the computer analysis, he said, was the most important part.

"It was the bottom line," the reporter said.

The series began after a new editor, Lowe Davis, talked with Claxton about possible long-term projects. Claxton already knew of countless tales of police work gone wrong, how evidence got lost, how unqualified people got key police jobs.

To widen the scope of the story, Claxton began looking at the system itself. That included examining stacks of court records that tracked charges, disposition and sentences. The government system was in such disarray that officials could not recount how many rapes they prosecuted in 1994.

Claxton answered those questions by building his own spreadsheet.

Claxton, an Antigua native, received his college degree in economics. He knew something about numbers and, he said, "I've always been a Mac buff and always keep my personal bills in the computer."

Paper records

With help from two interns, the reporter got paper records from the U.S. territorial courts in St. Thomas and St. Croix. In one case, because court clerks photocopied the wrong pages, he needed to revisit court files to make sure he got the right information.

Claxton used Excel to record more than 5,000 cases. The information included 10 columns — all the information kept in the court disposition listings. The records included a case number, the charges, the offender's sex, whether the case was decided by a judge or a jury, and what happened. The most useful information flowed from the last column, labeled "Dispositions." It was a collection of notes. It included notes like "Gov't not prepared for trial," "Dismissed by motion of the Government," and "Dismissed by the Government."

In addition, the reporter gathered police records, including arrest logs. He had planned beforehand how to build the spreadsheets. "We decided what we are looking for, and what averages we would love to know." Those figures included the crime rate, the number of criminal court cases, and the percentage of convictions.

Claxton typed in the records. "I sure would have loved for the government to have done this," he said. But few public records are computerized in the U.S. Territory. He had no choice if he wanted the story.

Claxton worked on an old Macintosh SE30. It was the best computer at the newspaper. That's not saying much, considering what is in many big U.S. newsrooms. To make things worse, the computer kept crashing. The problem was a hard drive that got stuck when it should have been spinning around for data. "That was a dark side of the story," Claxton recalled. "It gave us some frightening moments."

A repairman, after several failed attempts to fix it, offered sage advice: Take off the back panel and whack the hard drive with a screwdriver.

He offered them a shiny screwdriver with a black, rubber handle.

The solution was brutal, but got the job done.

Just to make sure, Claxton printed out every day's work. The results were shocking — so unusual that Claxton recounted everything twice before discussing them with public officials.

Police officers said they had no way to verify or dispute the findings. Judges and prosecutors, at first disbelieving, sought printouts for review.

The calculations brought depth to the anecdotes. When he started the story, he said, "what we didn't have was the quantified numbers." But with those figures, the result "was a quantified rather than a subjective story."

The newspaper has since replaced the troubled hard drive. Claxton kept it as a souvenir. The repairman got his screwdriver back.

In December, Claxton left the newspaper to finish a true-crime book set in the Virgin Islands.

Andy Lehren can be reached at (314) 882-0684, or send e-mail to andy@nicar.org

Building your own database

Hard-copy hints

By Jennifer LaFleur
San Jose Mercury News

Build your own database.

The phrase strikes terror in the minds of journalists who suddenly picture themselves locked in a padded room typing numbers for weeks on end, never seeing daylight.

As much as we strive to get government offices to provide information electronically, it is not always possible. Sometimes journalists must build their own database from hard-copy documents.

Carolyn Tufts, when she was a reporter for the *Belleville (Ill.) Democrat*, spent her free time entering information from thousands of traffic tickets into a database.

Robert Imrie, an *Associated Press* reporter in Wausau, Wis., wanted to analyze deer hunting accidents, but only had hard-copy forms — so he build his own database. Ralph Frammolino, a reporter for the *Los Angeles Times* built a database from juror questionnaires in the Simpson trial.

Building your own database also can be useful to keep track of information we get into our newsrooms regularly: accidents, homicides or other crime incidents. If you input these items as they come in, eventually you'll have a database you can use to look at trends.

Input options

In cases where large amounts of data must be entered, the reporter doesn't always have the time to become a full-time data entry person. Here are some options:

• Use a professional data-entry company. They are usually quite efficient and not expensive. In many cases, you can have these companies "double-enter" the data. This means that two people enter the data, then cross-check the two files.

• Use a temporary service. This requires that you train the temp on how to properly enter the data or create a simple data-entry form. This also requires regular spot-checks of the data.

• Do it yourself in your spare time. Especially on your first projects, this will help you interview the data.

Once you get ready to build the database, here are some dos and don'ts to keep in mind:

Dos and Don'ts

• Break up names into separate fields for first, last, and middle or middle initial.

• Plan. Plan. Plan. If your set up your database for U.S. addresses, will there ever be a point when you'll be putting foreign addresses in the database? If yes, create a field for country. In many database programs you can give these fields a "default" value. That means the computer would automatically put USA in the country field unless you specified something different.

• Will you want to look at the data by day of the week or month? You may want to break up the date into three parts or add a separate field for day of the week.

• Be consistent. If you're typing in city names or streets, use the same format each time. Use all upper case to avoid problems with case-sensitivity.

• Enter some of the data, then have a colleague look at the data. This is a good way to test the database to make sure it's easy to understand and they may suggest other information to include.

• Balance. Don't include so much that it takes you the next 10 years to enter the data, but include that data you think you "might" use: It's easier to input it the first time around.

• If you're entering the data yourself, have someone else spot check from the original form.

• Get a summary report based on the forms you're using. This can help you check the totals in your database.

• Do some basic integrity checks on the data: Check for duplicates, count fields and look for inconsistencies. For example, if you were inputting accidents, does your database use I-70 and I 70 and Interstate 70?

• In Paradox: check mark these fields individually and CALC COUNT ALL, then sort alphabetically.

• In FoxPro and Access: group by these fields individually, COUNT them, then sort or order by alphabetically.

• Backup your database frequently.

Jennifer LaFleur can be reached at (408) 920-5728, or send e-mail to JENSTER@aol.com

Get computer training:

• NICAR Bootcamps, week-long intensive training seminars, March 10-15 and May 19-24, Columbia, Mo.

• NICAR/Medill Broadcast Seminar, March 23-24, Medill School of Journalism, Evanston, Ill.

• North Carolina Advanced Computer-Assisted Reporting Seminar, May 5-10, Chapel Hill, N.C.

• National IRE Conference, June 13-16, Convention Center, Providence, R.I.

These dates are open to all journalists. For more information, call NICAR, (314) 882-0684, or send e-mail to nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu.

Public-interest contributions and the candidates

Linking money before the vote

Visit NICAR at http://www.reporter.org. Administered by NICAR's web master, Wallace Winfrey, the web site offers detailed information about NICAR's activities. This includes upcoming events, training seminars, the newsletter Uplink, and NICAR's database library.

In addition, you can search the journalism resource center run by Investigative Reporters and Editors, at www.ire.org The web site also includes a menu for IRE and for the Hillman Project, which is developing a site for tips and resources for journalists around the world.

By Dan Mihalopoulos
St. Louis Post-Dispatch

It's good to know who gave how much and to which candidate, even when an election is over. It's much better still when you can have that information before voters decide.

That's a luxury Oregon journalists enjoyed during the campaign to replace Sen. Bob Packwood.

With help from the Center for Responsive Politics, reporters at *The Oregonian* and *Willamette Week*, an alternative weekly, linked candidates with contributions from interest groups and industries. All of this was done before voters needed to turn in their special, mail-in ballots.

"This was the first attempt to do real-time reporting and get a handle on the money before elections," said Larry Makinson, deputy director of the center in Bandon, Ore. "I'm not aware that anyone has done that before in a federal race."

Working independently, Steve Suo of *The Oregonian* and Bob Young of *Willamette Week* convinced the candidates to disclose their contribution records ahead of the Federal Election Commission's deadline.

Identifying contributors

This allowed Makinson to do what he does best — identify individual contributors with interest groups or industries and determine where the money really is coming from.

"The only way is to browbeat the candidates into releasing the information," Makinson said. "They don't like to share information if they can get away with it."

The Oregonian and *Willamette Week* then analyzed the databases and did stories that identified one candidate, Rep. Ron Wyden, as the favorite of former Packwood contributors.

"We took some hits for that story," Suo said. "Some felt it was an unfair comparison, but that's what the numbers showed. That's not to say that Wyden is a sexual harasser. Packwood had an incredible ability to raise money, and we showed that Wyden will inherit that legacy."

The Oregonian's Washington bureau had compiled Packwood's FEC reports from 1979. Suo used Access to join the table of Packwood contributors to the candidate tables. The query yielded nearly 200 hits.

At *Willamette Week*, Young used an Excel spreadsheet in a similar story on Wyden's Packwood connection. He superimposed the Packwood data onto the recent list of campaign contributors. Young then scrolled down the new list, noting the one-time Packwood contributors that had been active in the campaign.

Simple analysis of the data also showed which candidates received the most money from women's groups, pro-Israel PACs and the timber, insurance and health-care industries.

"Normally, we follow the FEC deadlines and there is a mad scramble to get a list of the biggest contributors," Suo said. "There's never been an attempt to make a comprehensive analysis of where the money was coming from. This allowed us to go a little deeper."

Scanning sees the light

The Oregonian had first crack at the data because Suo scanned in the paper records. Only one candidate handed over information in an electronic format.

"It wasn't difficult to scan individual donations into the database," Suo said. "Using simple macros, we got the information in tab-delimited format and got it into the database. It was much, much faster than data entry by keyboard."

Some candidates were unwilling to give the journalists data on disk although they had all the information on a computer, Suo said. The campaigns feared that the competition would acquire their lists and use them to raise money.

With scanning technology, however, "handing it to us on paper is as good as on disk," Suo said. "They were in the dark on the state of technology."

If data is unavailable on disk, he suggested, the next best thing is to convince the campaign to create a paper form that is scanner-friendly.

Regardless, duplicating the impressive effort in Oregon is not difficult with a little bit of computer savvy, Makinson said.

"A small paper with one inquisitive reporter can unravel patterns that were totally invisible a few years ago," he said. "You can have an incalculable impact, especially if you do it before the election."

Continued on page six

On the World Wide Web

Many happy returns

By Tom Foster
The (Syracuse, N.Y.) Post-Standard

The Syracuse Newspapers used a multilayered approach to report 1995 election results to their central New York readers in real time.

Using NewsLine, the newspapers' audiotext service, and Syracuse OnLine, the newspapers' World Wide Web site (www.syracuse.com), the newspapers delivered up-to-the minute returns on everything from the county executive campaign to dozens of town council races.

The newspapers used three terminals connected via modem to Onondaga County's Board of Elections mainframe to monitor results in real time. Those were transferred by typists to a master Paradox database of results that resided on the newsroom's Novell network.

Getting results

Once the results were on the newspapers' PC network, those single keystrokes did a lot of things at the same time. Results were posted at our web site. The newsroom as a whole was able to track the evening's events. And reporters got instant printouts for the races they were covering. Here are the details:

• Internet documents: Paradox's report writing functions allow HTML tags to be built into templates. Using templates makes it easy to accommodate changing data. The functions let us create HTML documents containing the latest results on the fly by telling Paradox to make the right web page.

We had to prepare. Prior to the election, fields in the Paradox table had been filled in with the names of the HTML files for the fact boxes, profiles and preview stories for each race. That let us publish more than just numbers. On election night, the files were sent to an update folder on the newsroom network, where they were transferred to the web server.

• Newsroom updates: Real-time electronic updates were available to all reporters and editors. One newsroom PC running Netscape was hooked up to a TV mounted above the city desk. That allowed point-and-click access to results that could be viewed by dozens of people at once. To speed things up, the PC connected to the television was used to monitor the results file from the newsroom network rather than our web server.

• Customized reports: To keep reporters who were working on the more than 140 races efficiently updated, the Paradox table also included a field listing the name of the reporter covering the race. A Paradox script triggered paper printouts so each reporter received a report listing results on just the races that reporter covered.

A Paradox script running in the background generated automatically all of the HTML and paper reports. That script monitored the system clock and triggered updates every 10 minutes. It allowed the typists, reporters and editors to work without interruption throughout the night.

What we learned

Generally, the process worked smoothly. We usually were able to pass results from the board of elections mainframe to our staff and online users within five minutes. The ability to update all races simultaneously tended to put us ahead of broadcast media. A local public radio station used our web page as a source of its report to listeners. The Board of Elections also monitored our page and referred callers to our site. There is always room for improvement. We confined our updates for Onondaga County to one file that was fairly large, about 49K. That's with no images. Because we only had to replace one file, that sped up our ability to update our site. Its size meant reloading via modem took an annoyingly long time in some cases. This was particularly true when using America OnLine's browser.

On the newsroom side, we learned the hard way that low-tech approaches can be more effective. On election night in 1994, reporters got an icon on their PCs that allowed them to monitor the master Paradox results table as it was updated. Two problems arose: Some reporters weren't comfortable multitasking, so they would view the results, take notes by hand and then exit that application to write. And when about 35 reporters tried to run Paradox over the network at the same time, the load brought traffic to a crawl and finally a crash.

We used paper reports this year to guard against network overload, but it turned out that most reporters were more comfortable with that system anyway.

Tom Foster can be reached at (315) 470-3071, or send e-mail to tsfoster@mailbox.syr.edu.

"Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide" by Brant Houston is a quick, user-friendly guide to using computers in journalism. It covers the basics of computer-assisted reporting, providing an overview of the use of database managers, spreadsheets and online resources to analyze electronic information.

The book includes a data disk. It is available for $24 from IRE and St. Martin's Press Inc., New York. Houston is managing director of the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting at the University of Missouri.

To order tape recordings of CAR Rock '95 sessions, call Sound Images at (303) 649-1811. For handouts, call Investigative Reporters and Editors at (314) 882-2042.

From page one:

Best votes money can buy

stump speeches, and one for the PAC representatives and Washington lobbyists. A closely related type of story is one that exposes what Makinson calls the "cash constituents." Are these large contributors the people the elected officials really serve? There's one way to find out, Goldstein suggests.

"Look at who carried water for what industries on specific amendments?" For example, Goldstein suggests, "take a small element of the farm bill and look at who (among contributors) got something back."

Bangs for the bucks

Some of the most interesting political stories are those that open up the "back rooms" and point to connections between campaign financing and precise pieces of legislation.

One such story, and one of the best examples of cash constituent coverage is an October 1995 *Boston Globe* story by Michael Kranish. The piece begins:

"Three weeks ago, Sen. Bob Dole launched his latest drive to save tax preferences worth billions of dollars for the ethanol industry. He sent letters, held private meetings with lobbyists, pressured fellow Republicans and ultimately helped turn back a House revolt against the tax break." Kranish then outlines the cozy relationship between Dole and Dwayne Andreas, chairman of agri-business giant Archer Daniels Midland. ADM and a couple of other companies would see more than $600 million in savings from the ethanol tax breaks. "Over the past 14 years," writes Kranish, "Andreas' family and company have given more than $250,000 to Dole's campaign committees and foundations."

Such in-depth reporting is not always needed. Simply reporting lists of campaign contributors and their affiliations, although not necessarily as captivating as deeper investigative pieces, can give the reader an idea of where a candidate gets support.

Go local

The *Courier Journal* of Louisville, Ky., recently began routinely reporting the sources of all campaign contributions to statewide candidates. Sometimes the stories may seem a little dull. Consider this headline from the coverage of the 1995 governor's race: "Optometrists are leading Patton donors; also gave heavily to Forgy." But they show the reader who are the cash constituents.

This year, another good local story, says Goldstein, is to look at the money going from the circulation area to the presidential campaigns. "It's time for folks to start making that a local story ... showing who the national cash constituents are locally. That's not going to win you a Pulitzer, but it's a good local story."

Goldstein also suggests looking at the campaign expenditures of members of Congress. "You're looking for stuff that looks unusual," Goldstein says. He cited the case of one member whose campaign had spent $8,500 on clocks, according to her FEC expenditure reports. "What is a campaign doing spending $8,500 on clocks," Goldstein asks. "An enterprising reporter asked the store that, and they said, 'No, nobody's spent that much here.' That's a story."

Check out political discussion areas on the commercial bulletin board services such as America Online, Prodigy, Compuserve. For example, Compuserve's Political Debate Forum has message areas on Health Care, Defense / Peace, Education, and "Empower America." In it's library are items such as a shareware program which has phone numbers and addresses of all US Congressmen, indexed by party, home state and committee assignments. There is the text of Policy Review, a magazine available on high priced commercial databases, but available on-line for a lot less.

— Nora Paul

From page four:

Linking contributions

But the key is to get the candidates to disclose before the law forces them to. Young and Suo recommend approaching the most amenable campaign first.

"Peter DeFazio agreed on a Monday morning. Once I got him, it was like dominos," Young recalled. "It was not hard to do it. I had it sewn up in one day."

Makinson promised to apply much of what he learned in the special Senate race to the 1996 elections. Contributions to presidential hopefuls and candidates for a few Senate seats will be likely subjects of pre-election scrutiny next year.

On the Internet

Campaign coverage

By Nora Paul
Poynter Institute

Campaign coverage requires different kinds of information at different stages of coverage and for particular types of stories. Here are some excellent web sites for campaign reporting.

Make an issue of it

Get background on an issue from Project Vote Smart site at http://www.vote-smart.org/. It links to organizations interested in issues ranging from abortion to environment to international trade and welfare, poverty and homelessness.

CapWeb's Political Page at http://policy.net/capweb/political.html has links to PACs and political interest groups, as well as all of the political parties.

Democracy Place USA, a new service of the Soundprint Media Center, promises weekly updates on key issues around the country. It offers polls, and a discussion list only for journalists. It's at http://soundprint.org/~democracy/

The On-line Political Information Network, provided by the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University, http://ksgwww.harvard.edu/~ksgpress/opinhome.htm, links to campaign and election information. The home page also offers experts.

Check what they said

Politics USA, from the National Journal and the American Political Network — http://politicsusa.com/PoliticsUSA/ — allows for selective comparisons of candidates' positions on several key issues.

The texts of speeches and public announcements made by candidates can be a great way to check for conflicting, or convenient, statements. Search archives of Presidential documents, speeches and information located on the Internet at http://www.whitehouse.gov and the text of legislation and the Congressional Record on Thomas at http://thomas.loc.gov/

Most of the candidates are also putting together websites with background information and speeches. Find a list of the candidates' websites at Primary Destination: New Hampshire's Candidate InfoBank at http://www.fosters.com/FOSTERS/cgi-bin/walk.cgi/FOSTERS/info/d2/

A comprehensive listing of candidates' pages, by party then candidate name can be found at http://www.webpub.com/prez/

Use PR Newswire at http://www.quote.com/info/prnews.html to read news releases from U.S. government agencies, members of Congress, and congressional committees.

See how they voted

Track Voting Records. Contact the legislator's office; it should keep a list of voting attendance and the vote cast. For a compilation of contact information for the 104th Congress members go to http://ast1.spa.umn.edu/juan/congress.html

Also, find out how your congresspeople voted at the "How did your senators and representative vote?" site, http://www.timeinc.com/cgi-bin/congress-votes. Fill in your zip code and the voting records of your senators and representatives will be listed.

The 1994 National Environmental Scoreboard lists the voting records on environmental issues at http://www.econet.apc.org/lcv/lcv94/scorecard.html

Follow the money

Mother Jones put together a wonderful site on following campaign spending: "The Best Congress Money Can Buy" which lets you plug in the name of a candidate and search 1991-1994 PAC contributions and '91-'92 individual contributions. The results come in a bar graph with the special interest group's contribution charted with other PACs. This great application is at http://www.mojones.com/coinop_congress/data_viewer/data_viewer.html

Check out C-Span's campaign contribution site at gopher://c-span.org:70/11/Resource/fec. It includes tables that show PAC contributions to legislators.

Also, the Federal Election Commission's new ftp site offers extensive summary data in zipped files at ftp://ftp.fec.gov. Use the program PKUnzip to pull out the tables that show, for instance, how much each PAC spent. Save the text files that explain how the data was put together.

Locate discussion areas on the Internet on particular campaign topics or candidates. There are also discussion areas on issues such as abortion, disarmament, and military.

The following list of web site and Internet resources is extracted from the Poynter's Guide to Resources for Campaign and Election Coverage. For the complete story, go to http://www.poynter.org/poynter/elect2.html For links to sources on hot news stories, go to http://www.nando.net/prof/poynter/hrintro.html

Nora Paul is the author of "Computer Assisted Research," available from the Poynter Institute and NICAR. She can be reached at (813) 821-9494, or send e-mail to npaul@poynter.org.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

Putting the heat on pensions

At *New York Newsday*, reporter Joe Calderone wrote about certain firefighters who seemed to have won excessive disability pensions.

When the newspaper closed, he moved over to the *New York Daily News*, and continued his investigation with another ex-*Newsday* reporter, Russ Buettner. Together, they decided to probe the entire disability pension system for firefighters.

"We wanted to look at the context of what was going on," Buettner said.

The reporters negotiated more than three months with the New York State Comptroller, using the state freedom of information law, for firefighter pension data. The database included more than 14,000 retirees, and about seven columns of information.

The reporters, already familiar with much about how the pension system worked and how the information was coded, needed about two days to analyze the data using FoxPro. "The analysis was simple," according to Buettner.

The result was a story that ran Dec. 18 showing how one of every two ex-firefighters collected disability pensions. That included the fire department's own retired doctors.

Also, nearly four of every 10 pocketed lucrative line-of-duty pensions. That included one firefighter who injured his ankle after tripping on a crack in the sidewalk outside a firehouse.

The reporters also showed how the Fire Department brass won line-of-duty benefits more than front-line firefighters. And New York firefighters won line-of-duty pensions more often than their counterparts in the state's other big cities. That point was highlighted with a chart that showed New York's wide gap with Yonkers, Buffalo, Rochester and Syracuse.

Russ Buettner can be reached at (212) 210-1964, or send e-mail to rbnews@pipeline.com.

Reisner new training director

The National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting has appointed Neil Reisner as its training director.

Reisner will be in charge of NICAR's on-the-road training seminars that last year provided training for more than 3,000 journalists throughout the country. He will report to Brant Houston, NICAR's managing director.

An award-winning journalist with two decades of experience and a journalism educator, Reisner most recently served as database editor with *The Bergen Record* of Hackensack, N.J. During six years there he served in *The Record's* statehouse bureau and as a regional reporter. Reisner previously worked at *The Home News* in New Brunswick, N.J.

He has taught journalism at Columbia University's Graduate School of Journalism and at Rutgers University.

Keep up with NICAR on-line

Subscribe to our listserve and join in as reporters talk about how to do the job better. E-mail to LISTSERV@MIZZOU1.MISSOURI.EDU. In the message, on the first line, write: subscribe NICAR-L your name. To join IRE on the Internet, the instructions are the same except, on first line, write: subscribe ire-l your name.

IRE/NICAR is also accessible through CompuServe's Journalism Forum. Go to the JForum, Section 19. Also look into the IRE/NICAR files in Library 19.

Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.
100 Neff Hall
University of Missouri
School of Journalism
Columbia, MO 65211

NON-PROFIT ORG.
U.S. POSTAGE
PAID
PERMIT NO. 309
COLUMBIA, MO. 65211