March 1995

Uplink

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

Uplink update

This month's Uplink features a new monthly column that will help reporters use the Internet. Nora Paul, a former *Miami Herald* librarian now at the Poynter Institute, tells where to go online when your community is hit by a natural disaster.

NICAR's Gwen Carleton and David Royse tell how to mine crime statistics, and warn about the dangers in the data.

David Armstrong of the *Boston Globe* recounts how he explored state inspection records for elevators and escalators. He worked with a reporting team that found lax enforcement, loafing inspectors and shoddy machinery. The series brought the demotion of state officials, and won a George Polk award this year for metro reporting.

Michael Fabey tells how he examined state pesticide enforcement records and uncovered a regulatory system gone wrong. His work recently won a Scripps-Howard Meeman bronze medallion for environmental journalism.

Inside

Beware examining FBI data

When crime doesn't add up

By Gwen Carleton
NICAR staff

Crime statistics are full of potential disasters. Just ask Shawn Macintosh of the *Dallas Morning News*.

"Several years ago, I found a ring of 9-year-old kiddie crack dealers in Macon, Georgia," she recalled.

But Macon police said there was no problem. And it turned out they were right. The kids were fabrications, the result of data entry mistakes.

In the past, many reporters left statistical analysis up to the experts. Today, more journalists are analyzing the data themselves, and are producing sophisticated stories about crime rates and trends as a result. But they also are finding just how difficult it can be to get the story right.

The FBI's Uniform Crime Reports are among the nation's largest and most popular crime databases. The collection of six databases, compiled and released annually, provides data on the victims, offenders and circumstances of millions of crimes committed nationwide. The FBI publishes "Crime in America," a book-length analysis of the year's statistics, shortly before it releases the raw data each year.

The Uniform Crime Reports have a number of strengths, among them size, detail and a 66-year history. But there are weaknesses as well. The FBI gathers its data from local police, then checks the numbers for mathematical errors and unusual fluctuations. But it doesn't catch every mistake. In addition, participation in the program is voluntary — and not every town volunteers.

"It's a 'we take your word for it' situation," said Carol Napolitano, computer-assisted journalism coordinator for the *Munster* (Ind.) *Times*. "Often, there were significant discrepancies between what we got from the FBI and individual agencies."

Garbage in . . .

The discrepancies usually happen when federal and state agencies define crimes differently, or when police change reporting procedures. But cheating happens, said Jim Omohundro, writer/editor of the Uniform Crime Reports Program. "There was one major city — I won't say which one — that we sanctioned because we found they were deliberately

Continued on page four

The case of the unknown stranger

By David Royse
University of Missouri

Run for your lives!

Everyone in the United States has a realistic chance of being murdered!

After all, the FBI said so in December. In *Crime in the United States, 1993*, a summary of the Uniform Crime Reports, the agency said the statement "is somewhat supported by the fact that a majority of the nation's murder victims are now

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NICAR is a joint effort of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the University of Missouri School of Journalism with the mission of bringing the journalism industry into the 21st Century. 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.

Computer records reveal environmental havoc

Dusting pesticide records

By Michael Fabey

When local resident Jim Pickron contacted the *Fayetteville* (N.C.) *Observer-Times*, we figured the most that would come about was a human-interest piece about the dangers of careless crop dusting.

Instead, using computers, we found his story was about a system gone wrong — that government regulators don't do their job when it comes to watching those who spray pesticides.

Pickron was putting up a fence in his backyard when he was accidently sprayed with chemicals. The state fined the pilot, who admitted his error. We wanted to find out whether Pickron was the victim in an isolated incident. We first asked the state for similar cases. They gave us a printed list of about 200 names of those who misused pesticides in the last two years, plus the victims, the fine, the violation code, and a little more.

I was beginning to learn about computers, and wanted to compile the information into a spreadsheet. The newspaper installed Paradox into the IBM 386 on my desk. I typed for a day and a half. And I noticed some information was missing, such as the full name of complainants and violators.

I went to the state Pesticide Division in Raleigh, and the clerks let me check some of the records in their computer. Their database included more than 50 fields of pertinent information, from types of chemicals to the extent of injuries. In addition, the database included twice as many records as the printout they first gave me. It turned out the printed version they gave me did not include cases where they had taken little action.

I asked for a copy of the database on diskette. The agency balked, claiming they did not have authority to release it since some of the fields were not considered public record. I cited state open records law, and told them they were required to turn over a version of the database with all fields open for public inspection. They refused. I called the Pesticide Division administrator, and said I was working on a story about how the agency was violating state law by withholding information. I got the diskettes the next day.

The database was invaluable. We used Paradox and found repeat offender, the most common place for violations, and crop dusting that resulted in injuries. Then we used Paradox to print mailing labels — and we sent surveys to every person who filed a complaint in the last two years. The survey showed people believed the agency did not treat them well. We also got victims to tell their stories, vital for the project.

We also imported data to map where violations happened. I used ProfNet to find experts on pesticides. I found sources on several electronic bulletin boards. And I tracked down more information from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. EPA first wanted to charge me $3,000 for printed records on pesticide violations. When I asked for the information on diskette, the agency said that was no problem. And the price? Free.

The result was a five-day series that examined how local, state and federal regulators often failed to ensure the safety of the likes of Pickron. The articles also showed that those endangered people and the environment often went unpunished.

Michael Fabey recently left the Fayetteville Observer-Times for the Journal of Commerce's New York bureau. He can be reached at 1-800-223-0243, or send email to mjf625775@aol.com. His series on pesticides is available from the Investigative Reporters and Editors' morgue. Call 314-882-2042, and ask for morgue number 10179.

Join us on the Internet

Don't forget to keep up with NICAR on the Internet. Subscribe to our listserve, and join as reporters talk about how to do the job better.

Email to listserve@mizzou1.missouri.edu. In the message, on the first line, write: subscribe nicar-l your name.

Join the Investigative Reporters and Editors' listserve the same way, except type on the first line of the message: subscribe ire-l your name.

Elevator inspections show bad rides

Go up the database staircase

By David Armstrong
Boston Globe

Every day, millions of people use elevators and escalators to travel to work, shop or attend a sporting event or concert. Most people, however, give little thought to the safety of these machines. The *Boston Globe* recently completed a three-part series that examined the elevator and escalator industry's inattention to safety, and the frightening ramifications for the riding public.

One of the first things we requested was a copy of the state's database of elevator and escalator inspections. The database was created only two years earlier, replacing a card catalog system that had been in place since

Mr. Otis invented the first elevator 100 years ago. The card catalog system was a reporter's nightmare: a paper search that would have required perhaps hundreds of hours of work. The computerized records, however, allowed us to quickly, and conclusively, evaluate the state's ability to inspect the 30,000 elevators and escalators.

Perhaps unaware of the potential manipulation of its own data, the state graciously agreed to provide us with a copy in dBase format of its inspection file only several days after it was requested.

Using FoxPro, we determined that nearly 40 percent of the state's passenger elevators had not been inspected as required. Even more revealing was the fact that of the elevators inspected, one-third flunked the state's safety test. And of those flunking the safety test, only two percent were shut down until mandated repairs were made.

By using the "group by" command, we could also see there was a wide disparity in inspection rates from city to city. In Worcester, the state's second largest city, nearly 75 percent of the elevators and escalators had not been inspected as required. We created a chart of the inspection rate by community and imported it to MapInfo to produce a map. This ran on the second day of the series and allowed readers to pinpoint the inspection rate in their community.

The database also helped us identify inspectors who were not doing their job. The database provided the address and date of each inspection performed by inspectors. There was a wide disparity in the workloads. This information was helpful in identifying inspectors who would later be observed by *Globe* reporters. The *Globe* found numerous inspectors goofing off on the job, spending their work days at home or running errands. Others worked two jobs.

Seven inspectors and supervisors were suspended without pay after the Globe series was published. The two top officials in the elevator inspection office were demoted. And the state public safety official ultimately responsible for elevator inspections resigned from office two days before the series first appeared. The database also allowed us to say many inspectors appeared to be doing their job, judging by the number of inspections they completed.

The database of inspections was used as a continuing resource during research for the series. We could quickly check the status of particular buildings or accident sites. We even checked the status of elevators and escalators at the Globe. We found out two of the elevators had not been inspected. This information was reported in a sidebar to one of the many follow-up stories.

While the database was an important resource for reporters, it was only one of many tools used. Court records, accident investigations, and elevator industry records were almost entirely on paper, and resulted in numerous cuts to computer-softened hands.

David Armstrong can be reached at 617-929-2539, or send email to armstr@news.globe.com. Copies of the series is available from Investigative Reporters and Editors. Call 314-882-2042, and ask for morgue number 11001.

Data available from the NICAR library

NICAR offers a number of government databases including:

— Federal Elections Commission contributions data
— Federal Aviation Administration data
— Home Mortgage Disclosure Act records
— Federal procurement data
— Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms gun dealer records
— National Bridge Inventory System data
— FBI Uniform Crime Reports
— Social Security death records
— Occupational Safety and Health Administration violation data
— Truck Accidents and census data

NICAR also offers inexpensive data transfer for journalists.

Call NICAR for up-to-date prices and more information at (314) 882-0684, or send email to nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu.

FBI data: Continued from page one

underreporting homicides," he said.

The FBI excludes any data it deems unreliable from its reports. Some omissions, such as rape statistics for Michigan, Illinois and Minnesota, are consistent: those states define sex crimes more broadly than the rest of the nation. Others come as surprises. Montana, for example, is missing from the 1993 Supplemental Homicide Report, and Kansas and Illinois are missing from several 1993 databases.

The new statistics have provided reporters with some more subtle surprises as well. "Crime in the United States, 1993" stated 70 police officers were killed in 1993, for example, while the electronic version of the data showed 51. The difference? The FBI left 19 state, federal and Puerto Rican officers out of the electronic aggregates.

Unknown strangers: Continued from page one

killed by strangers or unknown persons." In other words, random murders are soaring.

Scary stuff. Numerous newspapers and wire services ran with the FBI's assertion. But the claim is not backed by the numbers. That is because there is a big difference between a stranger and an unknown person.

The distinction brings up a crucial rule, regardless of whether a reporter is running with a press release on a tight deadline or sifting through massive amounts of data: Know your definitions.

The difference between a stranger and an unknown person is enormous. A stranger, according to police definitions, is someone the victim did not know. An unknown offender, on the other hand, means the case is unsolved. They don't know who did it. It could have been the victim's mother. Or it could have been a friend. Or a stranger.

The FBI view

"There are still criminologists asserting that (murder) is a crime of passion, that it is a crime between family and friends, and something law enforcement has no control over," said Gil Gee, the principle author of the FBI study. "We are seeing a trend away from that. It should be noted that there is a shift toward more ambiguous relationships between homicide victims and offenders."

Ambiguous is the key word. That's because, in recent years, the biggest increase is not where the criminal is classified by stranger. It is where the criminal is unknown — and the case is unsolved.

"The essence of this study is that we are seeing a significant change in the circumstances surrounding murders," Gee said. "When you look at murder, you find that going back to 1965, a third of murders occurred within the family or were committed by an acquaintance. In 1992 that's 12 percent."

Murders by strangers are more difficult to solve than those by acquaintances and family members, Gee said. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that many of the unsolved crimes are committed by strangers.

"These cases would not be unsolved if they were that clear cut," he said.

Look again

There are a number of police officials and other experts, however, who disagree with the FBI's interpretation of the numbers.

The FBI's announcement "is not true," said Bill Burns, a spokesman for the Gary, Ind. police department. Located right outside of Chicago, Gary had the highest per capita murder rate in the nation last year. "You're most likely to get killed by someone you know," Burns said.

Tim Carroll, a police homicide detective Chattanooga, Tenn., cautioned against speculating about the relationship between a killer and his victim when the crime is unsolved. "Until we get a suspect, we don't know what the relationship is," he said.

James Fox, dean of the Northeastern College of Criminal Justice, said this year's FBI analysis focused on murders by strangers at the expense of some more important trends.

"There are two trends going different directions, and they miss it entirely," he said. "The (murder) rate among teens is skyrocketing, and the rate among adults is plummeting."

One newspaper that did not lead with the FBI's contention was the New York Times. In his story on the 1993 data, reporter Keith Bradsher noted, "a declining percentage of murder victims were clearly killed by family members or people with whom they were romantically involved. But because the relationship between murderer and the victim could not be determined in two of five cases, the figures on romantic and family killings may not be representative of national trends in actual killings."

Bradsher is not a reporter who covers crime. In fact, it's the only crime piece he recalled writing.

"It was a case of reading carefully," he said. "I did my master's in public policy and economics. They taught us you don't just look at the statistics, you look at how they were defined. You don't just take numbers and run with it."

The state and federal officers were not employees of any reporting agency, and the Puerto Rican statistics were unreliable, Omohundro said. Finding the holes is up to journalists, although FBI statisticians answer questions when asked.

Which assaults matter?

Another important question facing journalists is how to interpret the data. The epicenter of a recent debate was in Detroit, where two television news broadcasts used the FBI data and came up with different numbers.

A key concern is assaults. While Detroit's WDIV-TV counted both aggravated and simple assaults in its local crime analysis, rival WJBK-TV used only aggravated assaults, resulting in much smaller totals. WDIV's approach, created with NICAR's help, mirrored the FBI's format in its electronic data. WJBK's, on the other hand, corresponded with the FBI "crime index" categories presented in the text version of the data and in Bureau press releases.

"In a big city environment, I wouldn't pay much attention to simple assaults," said Josh Barbanel, a reporter for the *New York Times*. "Peoples' idea of danger concerns moving in a public space."

But in some areas, such as the Detroit suburbs, simple assault statistics might be more relevant, Barbanel said.

The FBI has no official position on how the statistics are used, as long as they are used accurately, Omohundro said. "Generally, aggravated assault is reported exclusive of simple assault," he said. "(But) if someone wants to use the two categories, we just ask they make the distinction clear."

There are many aspects of FBI data that journalists should clarify for their readers. The database represents only reported crime; actual crime is higher. Statistics on violent crimes are more reliable and uniform than those for lesser crimes. Some crimes, such as spousal abuse and child abuse, are not included at all. Others are excluded because the FBI lists only the most serious crime to occur during a single incident.

FBI will revamp system

The FBI, aware of the database's weaknesses, is well on its way to implementing a new system. The National Incident Based Reporting System promises to provide data free of the above problems, possibly by the year 2000. Omohundro just hopes journalists will be ready.

"It will give a clearer picture of crime in this country," he said. But the FBI analyst is steeling himself for journalists who misread the numbers. "The disadvantage is, the media will go crazy. They'll say crime increased 300 percent."

Gwen Carleton can be reached at 314-882-0684, or send email to c618652@mizzou1.missouri.edu.

Combine crime databases for the big story

Doing Time In Miami

By Gwen Carleton
NICAR Staff

The *Miami Herald*'s "Crime and No Punishment" investigation of Dade County's criminal justice system shows how different databases, used together, become more than the sum of their parts.

To create the 8-part series, *Herald* reporters used 10 different criminal databases from local, state and federal agencies, including 14 years' worth of FBI Uniform Crime Reports. The statistics proved what many long suspected: in south Florida, crime pays.

The reporters found that Dade County, with the highest crime rate in the nation in 1992, sent only 15 of every 100 convicted felons to state prison, three times below the national average. The odds of a Dade robber getting arrested and going to prison were 1 in 40, compared to 1 in 20 elsewhere in America. And when Dade felons did go to state prison, they got significantly less time.

The *Herald*'s key sources were the Uniform Crime Reports (both electronic and text versions); criminal justice databases from state and federal agencies; reports on various criminal justice topics from federal agencies; and original research, used to obtain conviction rates and prison data for 24 big cities in 13 states.

Mixing many different databases added to the project's complexity, according to Steve Doig, the *Herald*'s associate editor/research. Doig discovered that Hialeah, the second largest city in Dade County, has not reported its crimes and arrests for several years. As a result, Dade's real crime rate in 1993 was at least 10 percent higher than that recorded in both the Florida and FBI databases.

Doig also discovered the prosecutor's office had seriously overcounted convictions.

"Fifty percent fewer going to prison than they were saying," Doig said. "Their computer system was counting cases instead of people, throwing their math off." He used SAS statistical software to correct the problem.

How to report on sentencing raised more problems. How do you compare different judicial circuits? Should a comparison include all criminals, or just some of them? Doig decided to calculate crimes indexes in all Florida circuits, then compare the circuits with the most violent crimes with Dade. That helped screened out the rural circuits with lighter caseloads and notoriously tougher sentences.

The *Herald* published "Crime and No Punishment" in August, 1994. "We uncovered real abuses with the drug court program ... our story shut off the use of it for ineligible people," Doig said. "A number of special judges were appointed."

"The most gratifying thing," Doig said, "was, after the initial squeals of dismay from judges, came choruses of 'We didn't know it was that bad — we need to do something.'"

Tech Tip

Portables can do big jobs

By Drew Sullivan
NICAR Staff

Your next big number-crunching computer may not be so big. In fact, you may be able to carry it with you to your local government agency.

Notebook computers are steadily gaining in speed, capacity and adaptability. It might be time to take another look.

In the past, notebooks could only handle the smallest databases. Hard drives were small, memory limited and the only input devices were floppy disc drives. There was little standardization in the industry — so you could only buy extra memory or a larger hard drive from the manufacturer. This meant higher prices and configuration restrictions.

But a new group of notebooks is hitting the market that meet the reporter's need for large RAM and storage memory, as well as the flexibility to attach peripherals such as tape drives and take advantage of upgrades in bus speeds.

Most notebooks come with at least 250MB hard drives with some upgrades reaching 1GB. Notebooks with removable hard drives allow for an almost infinite storage capacity as long as your analysis programs are on each drive. 4MB is still the standard for RAM but many vendors now offer cheap upgrades to 16MB.

A number of notebooks are available with built in CD-ROM. IBM offers a notebook with a "hot swap" feature that allows you to pull out your floppy and stick in a CD-ROM drive without turning off your system. External CD-ROMS can be added on notebooks with PCMCIA slots.

For on-line users, PCMCIA also allow you to add 14,400 or 28,800 bps modems and guarantee you can upgrade to future speeds. SCSI cards, Ethernet adapters, hard drives and sound cards can all be added using the PCMCIA ports.

The real news for reporters are the new docking stations offered by many vendors. The station acts as a expansion device allowing anything from extra hard drives, extra batteries, CD-ROM drives or peripheral cards.

While many of these new tools are finally available, they are still expensive. Prices have been steadily falling though and expect that to continue. Overall, expect to pay a little less than twice the cost of a desktop. RAM runs $45-$60/MB for notebooks. Hard drive prices are still somewhat expensive. For example, the EPS Pentium-90 Notebook with 16MB RAM and a 810MB hard drive can be bought for HD, $4588 delivered. Not bad for portable computer assisted reporting.

Drew Sullivan, NICAR's systems director, can be reached at 314-882-0684, or send email to jourds@showme.missouri.edu.

Cool Internet Site

The National Press Club offers tips on hot stories and a variety of information for journalists. http://town.hall.org/places/npc

Get computer training

NICAR's U.S. tour continues training around the country in March and April. These are open to all journalists:

Indianapolis, IN

NICAR will participate in the annual computer-assisted reporting conference at the Indiana University/Purdue University campus, March 17-19. Call James Brown at 317-274-2773 for more information.

Stamford, CT

NICAR will participate in a regional SPJ conference, March 25, and conduct hands-on training on March 26. Enrollment for hands-on training is limited. Call NICAR for more information.

Chicago, IL

NICAR will participate in the IRE regional conference, March 31-April 2. Hands-on training may be added. Call NICAR if you want hands-on training.

Albany, NY

NICAR will conduct an overview session at the New York State Press Association conference, April 7. Hands-on training may be added. Call NICAR for more information.

NICAR Bootcamp

NICAR's weeklong intensive training seminar, May 14-19, Columbia, Mo. Call NICAR for more information.

Call NICAR at 314-882-0684, or send email to nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu.

On the Internet

Disaster sites to tap

By Nora Paul

This year began with dramatic proof of man's inability to control nature. When you cover the latest natural disaster, you need current information, historical references, comments from people who understand these disasters. Here are some Internet sites that can help you the next time mother nature gets angry. Remember, any address that begins with http is available on the World Wide Web, so use search programs like Mosaic and Netscape. Any address that begins with gopher is available both on the World Wide Web and through gopher programs.

General information

—The Federal Emergency Management Agency offers publications, press releases, fact sheets and guides on how to be prepared for disasters. It also features photos of disaster scenes from the Mississippi floods and the California earthquake. http://www.fema.gov/fema/index.html

—The American Red Cross includes its activities and net locations. A section for updating world crises is under construction. http://www.crossnet.org/

—Emergency Preparedness Information Exchange (EPIX) provides documents compiled by the Centre for Policy Research on Science and Technology at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, B.C. It includes material on emergency management, and connections to other sites. gopher://hoshi.cic.sfu.ca:5555/11/epix

Disaster relief groups

—International Service Agencies lists groups concerned with refugee and disaster support. http://www.charity.org/

—Volunteers in Technical Assistance provides information on more than 30 members of National Voluntary Agencies Active in Disaster. gopher://vita.org/11/disaster

Disaster updates

—EPIX's disaster reports include those from the United Nations and from InterAction. gopher://hoshi.cic.sfu.ca:5555/11/epix/curevents/intsitreps

Hurricanes and cyclones

—The National Hurricane Center includes links to other meterological sites. Maps show past tracks of tropical cyclones from 1961 to 1993. http://nhc-hp3.nhc.noaa.gov/index.html

—The National Hurricane Center's Tropical Cyclone page maps the paths of destruction from Andrew and Hugo, and a publication listing the deadliest, costliest and most intense U.S. hurricanes this century. http://nhc-hp3.nhc.noaa.gov/hurricane_info.html

Earthquakes

—U.S. National Earthquake Info Service Earthquake Lists includes key background information, like the deadliest and costliest quakes. gopher://wealaka.okgeosurvey1. gov:70/11/other_bulletins/neis/neislists

—The Kobe Earthquake Reference Page points to a variety of Japanese and American sources. http://www.msen.com/~emv/kobe.html

—A Kobe earthquake news group. alt.current.events.kobe-quake

—A news group on scientific aspects of earthquakes. sci.geo.earthquakes

—General discussion of earthquakes. alt.disasters.earthquake

Floods

—A Dutch site put together within days of the flooding. Maps, a chronology of events and links to other sites (most in Dutch). http://www.hvu.nl/flood/

—California Data Exchange Center - Division of Flood Management, with links to flood watch sites, weather information and updates of flood conditions. http://resources.agency.ca.gov/flood2.html

Volcanoes

—Michigan Technological University Volcanoes Page provides information on most of the world's active volcanoes. http://www.geo.mtu.edu/volcanoes/

—NASA's great fact sheet of information about volcanoes includes photos. http://spso2.gsfc.nasa.gov/nasa_facts/volcanoes/volcano.html

—Volcano listserv provides monthly reports from the Smithsonian Institution's Global Volcanism Network before they appear in print. To subscribe, send e-mail with the one line message "SUBSCRIBE VOLCANO your full name". listserv@asuacad.bitnet

If you have suggestions for this column, e-mail Nora Paul at npaul@poynter.org. Visit the Poynter Institute's website at http://www.nando.net/profl poynter/home.html. She also a feature called Hot News/Hot Research in the Poynter Institute's library section. It takes news stories and links you to some good sources for information to cover that story. To go directly to the page: http://www.nando.net/profl poynter/hrintro.html

Nora Paul is a former Miami Herald librarian now at the Poynter Institute. She is the author of Computer Assisted Research, available from the Poynter Institute and NICAR.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

The survey says...

More news organizations are doing computer-assisted reporting. University of Miami Professor Bruce Garrison is tracking that growth, and wants journalists to respond to his annual survey. The eight-page questionnaire was sent to the managing editors of all U.S. newspapers with a daily circulation exceeding 20,000. If you have not seen the survey form, ask your managing editor, or contact Garrison at 305-284-2265, or bgarriso@umiamivm.ir.miami.edu.

The 1994 results showed 29 percent said they had computer-assisted reporting desks, and 30 percent said they plan to add them. Few local broadcast outlets are trying computer-assisted reporting, and, at those that do, the effort comes from the reporter.

AP hires Port; St. Pete job opens

Bob Port is leaving the *St. Petersburg Times* in Florida to join the *Associated Press* in New York. He will be a special assignment editor to work on investigative reporting projects.

The move means the *St. Petersburg Times* is seeking a computer-assisted reporting editor familiar with a wide variety of equipment. If interested, call Susan Taylor-Martin, Deputy Managing Editor, at 813-893-8869 or e-mail her at susanskate@aol.com Send a resume and clips to her at *St. Petersburg Times*, 490 First Avenue South, St. Petersburg, FL 33701.

Miami Herald promotes Gordon

The *Miami Herald* recently named Rich Gordon as the newspaper's newsroom technology coordinator. The two-year assignment includes establishing computer-assisted reporting training programs, and helping design technological improvements that will benefit reporters.

Computers shadow groundhog

Even an old story can be given new life with a little computer analysis. That's just what some of the IRE and NICAR staff did Groundhog Day. In trying to come up with new training curriculum, Jennifer LaFleur, NICAR training director and Rosemary Armao, IRE executive director, thought getting the database of Punxsutawney Phil's predictions would be a unique idea.

Unfortunately no one in the marmot's Pennsylvania hometown had that information, so with the assistance of their mothers, LaFleur and Armao dug up the history of this meteorological mole by researching 109 years of Feb. 3 issues of the *Punxsutawney Spirit* and the *Punxsutawney Plaindealer*. They input the information into a spreadsheet and ran some quick statistics: The groundhog sees his shadow 91 percent of the time, based on 97 years for which data were available. For nine years, no data were available and in 1943, the results from the Quarryville, Pa., groundhog were used. The average time of day Phil looks for his shadow is 8:19 a.m. By graphing the prognostication times, we also were able to see this event appears to have more planning. While times throughout the past 110 years have varied from 6 a.m. to 4:30 p.m., during the last 15 years, those time have leveled to between 7:20 and 7:30 a.m.

The next step is to test Phil's accuracy with a more sophisticated analysis using National Weather Service data.

By Jennifer LaFleur
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