

Uplink

December 1999

DEALING FOR DATA

In pursuit of data

By Brant Houston

IRE and NICAR Executive Director

You believe in Sunshine laws and the Electronic Freedom of Information Act. You might believe those laws work. And sometimes they do. But there are many times when all you get for your trouble is:

- A) A simple rejection largely unsupported by law or regulation.
- B) Endless delays.
- C) A \$25 million bill for 10 hours of data work.

There are good times to avoid freedom of information requests and there are other

times, as Sarah Cohen points out in her article (see page four), you may have no other choice than to go the long arduous route of FOIA. In either case, you will probably enter that familiar, gray area of negotiations.

Here are some basic steps that many have followed in the pursuit of federal, state and local databases.

- If it's not on your beat, get a good feel for the agency before you approach it. Check their Web site, if they have one. Check with fellow reporters on how the agency responds to requests. Try to get its annual report and an audit of it. You get more respect if you show up knowing the agency's real business, what databases it definitely has, and how it has fared in its last audit.

- Be pleasant. Be casual. Don't be rushed. Set aside some time for your first visit there. If the agency is out of state, work the phone the same way.

- Try the low-key approach. You know you add to their burden. You know they are understaffed and underfunded. You want to make the transaction as quick and painless as possible. You are understanding. You will narrow your request in exchange for rapid response. Make sure to get the preliminary information about the database. (See Dawn Fallik's article on page three).

- Figure out who actually knows the databases. If necessary, arrange a meeting with the public information officer and the data processors.

- Know what you really want and how it might differ from what they may have. This will allow you to give up getting certain data for expediency's sake. (Just don't allow it to be a precedent.)

- Try to work with them so that if you have to make a written request it is exactly the one they need to give you the database.

Continued on page two

Inside Uplink

DATA DEALS

Negotiating for data can be one of the toughest parts about tackling a computer-assisted reporting project, so we decided to focus this issue on ways you can make the whole process a little less painful.

Dawn Fallik, one of the NICAR data library administrators, offers suggestions for writing an effective FOI request letter, specifically for electronic data.

See page three.

Sarah Cohen of *The Washington Post* discusses the differences she's encountered between federal and state authorities when negotiating for data.

See page four.

FIRST VENTURE:

Alfonso Chardy, who covers transportation for *The Miami Herald*, tells how he recently discovered the wonders of using CAR for his beat.

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CAMPAIGN FINANCE:

Dana Wilkie, Washington correspondent for *The San Diego Union-Tribune*, explains how she uncovered the practice of "bundling" by contributors to Sen. John McCain's campaign.

See page nine.

HIDDEN DANGERS

Airlines and HazMat

By Elizabeth Marchak

The Plain Dealer

In 1996, the Federal Aviation Administration promised to change the way it oversaw aviation, including the problem that was believed to have caused the May 11, 1996 ValuJet crash — hazardous materials.

In March 1997, the FAA started issuing press releases when the agency proposed fines of \$50,000 or more for HazMat violations.

Meanwhile, there were tips from sources that the FAA's press releases didn't tell the whole story. One person offered as proof an internal document which laid out some FAA officials' interpretation about enforcing HazMat training laws. Fifteen months after the crash, the document said, the FAA's Southern Region was still at odds with the rest of the agency's enforcement officials about whether airlines that didn't

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EDITOR

Brant Houston

DIRECTOR OF

PUBLICATIONS

Len Bruzzese

MANAGING EDITOR

Mary Jo Sylwester

ASSOCIATE EDITOR

Jessica Larson

ART DIRECTOR

Kerrie Kirtland

SUBSCRIPTION ADMINISTRATOR

John Green

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NICAR services include hands-on newsroom training in computer-assisted reporting, special academic and advanced training in data analysis.

Continued from page one:

In pursuit of data

Plan Two

No success with the easy, nice way? No databases forthcoming?

It's time for Plan 2.

Most negotiations with recalcitrant agencies begin with their absurd requests for money such as \$45 million or \$50,000. Don't be shy about using that absurdity for a humor story or to relate humorously to other officials. Have freedom of information experts on hand to comment about the ridiculous behavior.

Take it seriously, but also think of it as sport with a little contest awaiting you each day. Your blood vessels will explode if you get mad every time they put you off.

Then get them to tell you what laws they are citing. Then call the attorney general, commissions, the governor's office, the supervisors and ask them if the rejection sounds reasonable?

You have to use your instincts, but a daily call—not two or three daily calls—is not unreasonable for dealing with unreasonable people.

Given that the agency is stonewalling, it is perfectly legitimate to start asking for hard copies of records, budgets, audits, reviews and

consultant reports to learn more about this obstacle to freedom of information. Don't do it to harass. Do it because they are withholding public information.

Call other agencies for information, audits and reports on that agency. Find out what the agency is really up to. It's a good way to get stories while you wait.

Call staffers who are not authorized to speak to you. Call former employees.

Ask for more meetings to work out the dispute. Write many more FOIAs, if necessary.

Many times reporters seeking databases have been asked after several months: "What will it take to make you go away?"

Often, the officials forgot it all started with a simple database request.

They may be shocked when you remind them of that.

"Is that all?" they say.

Yes.

Brant Houston can be reached
by e-mail at brant@ire.org

THE VENDOR QUESTION

Privatized data

By Brant Houston

IRE and NICAR Executive Director

What do you do when government contracts with a private vendor to handle public data?

You suffer even more when you try to get that data.

Privatization of data appears to be an increasing problem for journalists trying to purchase copies of public databases.

Now you not only have to battle with public officials, but you also have to deal with businessmen eager to make a buck.

Recently, a reporter from a New Jersey weekly wrote to the NICAR listserv, saying that a private vendor wanted \$425 (or 5 cents per property) for the property records in two small towns.

While other New Jersey reporters gave good advice—get the records (unfortunately a year old) from the state for free—it's a problem that is not easy to circumvent.

For example, when some states passed laws

earlier this decade on access to electronic information, they provided that the public should be able to get the information for a fair and reasonable price. Nonetheless, vendors are stubborn about releasing the data and agencies often offer little help.

Here are some possible open avenues:

- Make sure to ask the agency if they keep their own copy of the data. (Many journalists forget to do that.) It can be a long shot, but it has worked in the past. If so, then ask them to make a copy for you when they back it up.

- Find out if the agency gives a copy of the data to another agency. This is what the New Jersey reporters suggested on the NICAR-I thread. Check both the state and federal levels.

- Know what the law says and if it says the vendors can't overcharge, then write a letter to them citing the law and "cc-ing" the agency and any other appropriate officials such as the attorney general.

Brant Houston can be reached
by e-mail at brant@ire.org

Successful E-FOIA

By Dawn Fallik
IRE and NICAR

At the NICAR database library, we get a lot of calls that sound like this:

"I finally got some data from our local police force, but I don't know what's on it. Can I just send it to you and you tell me what it is?"

Unfortunately, the answer is no. Without some basic information about data on the tape, disk or CD-ROM, it's nearly impossible to decipher what the agency delivered.

Whether you're analyzing the data yourself or sending it to NICAR, the best approach for avoiding this dilemma is to first do a little homework, then write a detailed Freedom of Information request to make sure you get the proper paperwork.

The right questions

Before you even order the data, call the tech support or data person for the agency—whomever is in charge of data collection. Try not to talk to the public relations person because they usually have no idea what a database is, never mind which ones the agency oversees.

Once you get to the right person, ask what the exact name of the dataset is, request a record layout in advance (which will tell you exactly what fields are in the dataset) and ask how they keep the records.

Many agencies are now using common computer programs such as Access or Foxpro, but others will want to send you the information on a 9-track tape, 3480 cartridge or Jaz cartridge.

Nine-track tapes will be the most likely media you might run into.

Here's a checklist of questions you should ask when ordering data on nine-track tape (thanks to Brant Houston's book, "Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide.")

- What is the tape's density? 6,250 bpi, 1,600 bpi or other?
- What is the record length? Is it fixed or variable? Are the records standard or defined?
- What is the blocking factor or block size?
- Is the tape labeled or unlabeled?
- Is the database in ASCII or EBCDIC?
- What kind of machine is producing the

tape? IBM, Hewlett-Packard, Digital Equipment Corporation or other?

- How many records are contained on the tape?
- Has the information been compressed or packed?

If you don't have the capability of converting data from these formats, NICAR can usually help. But please give us a call to make sure before you send anything to us.

In addition to the above information, NICAR also likes to have an agency contact, just in case we have questions.

The FOIA letter

Now you are ready to write your FOIA request. Here is a list of 10 things you should include in your eFOIA to better your chances:

1. Mention the exact name of the dataset.
2. Request all the fields collected in the database.
3. Request all the code sheets used with the database.
4. Request the record layout.
5. Ask for a record count so you can make sure you've gotten the entire database.
6. Ask for a printout of the first 100 records.
7. If the dataset includes more than one table, ask for a relational chart of how all the tables join.
8. If the record layout does not include a description of the fields, ask for a data dictionary, which gives more details.
9. Specify how you would like your data. You should know what is available from your discussion with the tech person. Say "We would like this data in dbf format on a CD-Rom" or "We would like this data in text format on a zip disk." Sometimes you will have to supply the medium.
10. If it is state data, cite the local Sunshine Law. If it is a federal database, the FOIA citation is U.S. Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. 522.

Be prepared to argue over field elimination and price. The more you know about the data to begin with, the stronger position you'll have when haggling.

Dawn Fallik may be reached
by e-mail at dawn@nicar.org

Freedom of Information
Center, Missouri School of
Journalism, (573) 882-4856
or e-mail at jourke@muccmail.missouri.edu

Freedom Forum
(www.freedomforum.org)
includes primarily news
about First Amendment
and other press-related
issues.

Society of Professional
Journalists' FOIA Resource
Center (www.spj.org/foia/index.htm) includes state-
by-state list of FOI
contacts and access laws,
federal agency contacts,
advocacy groups and
information on how to file
a FOIA request.

Federal data fights

By Sarah Cohen

The Washington Post

IRE Resource Center
(www.ire.org/resourcecenter)
recently created a FOIA
database, of more than 80
FOI requests to federal
agencies. Michael
Ravnitzky donated part of
his collection.

Other FOI Resources:

(<http://web.syr.edu/~bcfought/foiorg.html>)
Professor Barbara Croll
Fought at The Newhouse
School, Syracuse
University, compiled this
thorough list of FOI
resources.

FOI-L, Freedom of
Information list: A project
of the National FOI
Coalition, run by Prof.
Barbara Fought at
Syracuse University.
Subscribe by sending an e-
mail message to:
listserv@listserv.syr.edu

In body of message type:
sub foi-l firstname
lastname (substituting
your real names)

In the second week of my job as database editor for *The Washington Post*, a reporter asked for help in finding data on immigrants' hearings for asylum.

He knew the agency operated under strict secrecy, but had in his hands data produced for a similar response from a local lawyer.

The database seemed like a gold mine anyway, so I figured I'd try for both the summary data and the underlying case management system.

It started pleasantly enough. Within a week or so, I had an appointment to visit the Justice Department's Executive Offices of Immigration Review. Meeting with the head of the systems department seemed like a dream come true. I left with a deal: She'd have my case management system ready on the following Monday, stripped of sensitive information. And I got to leave with the user manual that showed all of the codes I needed. Everyone agreed this would be simpler for them than to run the statistics we'd asked for.

I was shocked. I'd heard stories of years of negotiations to get simple federal databases. This one even had some sensitive information in it, and they were willing to create something I could use without disclosing the exempt data.

Not so simple

My naivete worked in the agency's favor. Nine months later, we don't have the database. Four months after my visit, the reporter who needed the data for his story won a FOIA appeal and the agency eventually produced the statistics he sought.

The story of how we went from friendly cooperation to a strong denial has been repeated in other agencies here. And these FOIA officers are better than their state and local counterparts in understanding reporters' short attention spans and using every day they can to avoid releasing data.

Our friendly meeting with EOIR went downhill pretty quickly. The following Monday, I was told that the systems analyst was ready to run my extract, read it into an Access database and FTP it to us as soon as the agency's general counsel glanced at the list of

fields we'd get. Problem was, the lawyer was out sick and no one else could take her place.

After two weeks of illness, she returned to "higher priority" items. Daily calls to the agency produced nothing, so I offered to write a FOIA request, which would at least put the request in their list of higher priority requests. I still wonder if this was a mistake. The public information officer I was dealing with was delighted — "Sure, go ahead!" he said. The clear implication: It would be taken out of his office, and put into the bureaucratic hopper where I'd be lost forever.

Denials

Soon the FOIA calls started. Did they get it? Do they plan to respond to it? And on the 20th business day, I got my rejection. The reasons were ludicrous. First, the case number incorporated an alien's ID number, which the agency likened to a Social Security number. That, they said, could be used to identify people at risk. The problem is, only that agency "has" that ID number, and it would have to be the one to give out the information that it unlocked. Second, it refused to encode those numbers.

Finally, it rejected the entire package because, it said, the records were compiled for law enforcement purposes and would interfere with their ability to conduct investigations. No one could think of how, other than that "lenient" judges might be chosen by defendants if possible during appeals.

My second FOIA was eventually slightly more effective, but it took eight months of near-constant bickering to produce just a portion of the firearm trace database maintained by Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms.

This may sound familiar, but it raises the level of secrecy and the lack of accountability to a new level that I've not seen in even some of the strictest states.

But the fights are worth undertaking. For any reporter who works in a border area, or who needs to compare trends from state-to-state, getting the baseline federal data is still important. Just be prepared to wait even longer, fight even harder and be even more persistent than usual.

Sarah Cohen can be reached by e-mail at cohensh@washpost.com

FOI resources

By David Wethe
IRE and NICAR

Negotiating for data can seem like a daunting task if you have to face troubles all on your own. Fortunately for reporters, though, there are several places you can turn for help.

Here's just a few of the possibilities:

The Reporter's Committee For Freedom of the Press Web site (www.rcfp.org) offers a guide to open records and meeting laws in all 50 states. Each state has slightly different standards that record custodians are held to, and each Sunshine Law is explained in depth on this site.

They also have a section on electronic records (www.rcfp.org/electrecs/), which includes the statute from each state specifying access to electronic records.

Further questions about each state's Sunshine Law can be directed to Byron Brown at (703) 807-2100. Rebecca Daugherty can also answer more broad questions about the national Freedom of Information law.

The NICAR listserv archive includes many messages with questions about negotiating for data, with answers posted by fellow list members. There is a good chance you might find some suggestions from another

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DEALING FOR DATA

Overcoming Excuses

This is an excerpt from a handout created by Jennifer LaFleur, currently database editor at the St. Louis Post-Dispatch, for the 1997 National CAR Conference. The full version of the tipsheet is available at the IRE Resource Center. Ask for tipsheet #671.

Excuse #1: Our database is very complicated and you probably won't understand it.

Answer: "Oh really, are you using some kind of variable-length or redefined records in your relational database design that won't just export to an ASCII comma-delimited file?" If you're not dealing with someone who knows the data, this usually gets you there.

Excuse #2: Our computer system can't do that.

Answer: "Really? That's unusual for today's database systems. What system do you use?" This should eventually get you to someone who knows what's going on. You may also run into cases where they truly do not understand how to do anything with their computer except run the reports they know how to run. Find out who the vendor is and talk with them. I've also run into cases where they used software I was familiar with and could talk them through the process over the phone.

Excuse #3: The person who knows how to do that is on vacation for two weeks/doesn't

work here anymore.

Answer: "No one else knows how to do it? What if there was an emergency?" This sounds like an even better story.

Excuse #4: It will cost you \$20,000.

Answer: Ask for an itemized estimate of charges. Three out of four times, this gets the cost down at least some. Offer to pay reasonable programming fees. You should only have to pay the programmer their hourly rate, not overhead.

If they do programming, ask for a copy of the program or at least have them put in writing that they will save the program in case you need the data again next year.

See if there is a rate charged by state agencies to other agencies.

Provide your own tape.

Ask for a backup tape.

In some cases, this actually might be the price charged to that agency from a larger state data processing center.

Do a records request for the data they've provided and what they charged other organizations.

Excuse #5: That uses proprietary software.

Answer: You don't want software. You want the data. If they don't know how to copy to a file or print to a file, find out who their vendor is.

Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press (www.rcfp.org/electrecs/) has information on electronic Freedom of Information acts, including a state-by-state summary. The summary includes details such as the specific wording from the statute, any cases or opinions, and what fees might be charged. They can be reached by phone at (202) 466-6313.

Coming soon...

Next month's issue of

Uplink will include stories on:

- Dealing with new race classifications in the Census 2000 data
- Using CAR to cover religion
- CAR in the college classroom

AVIATION DATA

Foreign planes

By MaryJo Sylwester
IRE and NICAR

When the EgyptAir flight 990 crashed into the Atlantic Ocean on Oct. 31, reporters across the country were scrambling to find data about foreign airlines.

NICAR, which has a substantial collection of aviation data, only has records on planes registered in the United States. (NICAR does have some enforcement data on foreign planes)

So where else can you turn the next time something like this happens?

There are at least a couple of places for datasets. But be prepared to pay big bucks.

Aviation Data Service, in Wichita, Kan., claims to have one of the most extensive databases of both U.S. and international planes. They collect the data from a network of sources, including civil registries, plane and engine manufacturers, insurance companies, dealers and others.

They sell three databases: one consisting of business jets and turbo jets; another of helicopters and one of commercial airlines. You can get just U.S. registered or international planes, or both. The information is updated monthly.

A query on their prices just after the EgyptAir crash came back with these estimates:

- All three datasets, international planes only: \$50,000 to purchase one time, or \$3,000 per month on a subscription basis.

- Just the commercial dataset, international planes only: \$30,000 one time, or \$2,000 per month on a subscription basis.

Aviation Data Service can be reached at (316) 262-1491.

Another source for international airplane data is Airclaims in London, England. The organization's database, called "CASE," has full histories of more than 60,000 aircraft including commercial jets, turboprops and business jets worldwide. Cost is \$10,000 annually on a subscription basis.

More information is available on the company's Web site, www.airclaims.co.uk/index.htm or by calling their North American account manager Robert Grundy in Costa Mesa, Calif., (714) 437-3103.

There are a few Web sites that offer online databases of airplane registrations for foreign countries that might be worth checking – with caution, however.

Dutch registrations: www.scramble.nl/civil/ph/nedreg_main.htm

Irish registrations: www.web-ie.com/irishav/

Landings, at www.landings.com, also includes links to several official and unofficial Web sites for registries of other countries, including Bermuda, Canada, Italy, Singapore, South Africa and Sweden.

MaryJo Sylwester can be reached by e-mail at maryjo@nicar.org

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FOI resources

journalist who has faced the same brick wall. Even if you don't subscribe to the list, you can check the archives through the NICAR Web site (www.nicar.org). Click on the phrase at the bottom "Join NICAR-L, a mailing list on CAR techniques." The link to the archives is at the bottom of the page.

IRE's Resource Center (www.ire.org/resourcecenter) is also a helpful place to find tipsheets that take you step-by-step through the negotiating process.

These tipsheets, written by journalists who faced similar hurdles in their negotiations, are archived by subject index.

The Society of Professional Journalists maintains an extensive FOIA Resource Cen-

ter on its Web site, (www.spj.org/foialindex.htm) where you can find a state-by-state listing of FOI contacts, information on the latest Freedom of Information court cases and legislation, and instructions on writing a FOIA.

And if you're getting some strange excuses from public officials, check out the Poynter Institute's Web site.

There, Nora Paul has included her compilation of the top 38 excuses from government agencies, and suggestions for overcoming them. That page is located at www.poynter.org/car/cg_excuse.htm

David Wethe can be reached by e-mail at c742109@showme.missouri.edu

Down the road

By Alfonso Chardy
The Miami Herald

When I first heard about computer-assisted reporting, I thought a super smart computer had finally been invented to either write stories or—at the very least—make the phone calls and do all the reporting needed for a story.

Jokes aside, computer-assisted reporting may well be the best thing to happen to journalism since objectivity became the non-negotiable standard in the profession.

The reason: CAR helps all journalists write the type of stories that have never been written before—stories with the precision of scholarly studies.

The power of the computer to order and group figures and information on the screen in ways not possible on paper enable reporters to discover hidden information that was available before only to a limited number of government officials or business managers.

With CAR, journalists can go from merely covering to discovering information.

Allow me to tell you how I've been able to put my newly-acquired skills in CAR to use. Keep in mind that I'm no expert by any means. I only went to my first computer-assisted class—aptly called boot camp—in August at the University of Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia, Mo.

On the beat

It was actually during the IRE and NICAR boot camp that I realized, on the very first day, that I could use these CAR skills on my beat.

I cover transportation in Miami-Dade County—and one of the biggest parts of my job is to monitor and write about traffic congestion on the highways.

So, when Brant Houston, the IRE and NICAR executive director, described the properties of Microsoft's Excel spreadsheet program, I knew instantly that I could apply the software to traffic figures.

That's because one way of measuring whether a road is congested is to determine how many vehicles it's carrying and the only way to determine that is to count the number of vehicles that pass at any given time at a pre-determined spot on the road.

The state Department of Transportation publishes the results of their counts in thick documents listing the average daily traffic volume on all state roads.

But those reports are difficult to understand or analyze. However, once I understood how to use Excel, I knew I could apply the software to the traffic volume reports and develop stories with unusual angles.

So as I participated in the NICAR boot camp in August, I began to develop my first Excel database of average daily traffic figures for major expressways in Miami-Dade County.

**With CAR, journalists can
go from merely covering
to discovering
information.**

I had to enter by hand into a new Excel file the DOT traffic numbers because they were not available in electronic form.

To make it simple, I entered data only for the major expressways like Interstates 95 and 75, among others. So every day, after boot camp finished, I would come back to my bed and breakfast hotel room and enter traffic figures for each of the 10 or so expressways I picked at random to determine whether traffic had gone up or declined in the county. I had sets of figures for 1997 and 1998.

A better view

By the end of the week of boot camp a clearer picture emerged. Something I had never realized before. Traffic was up—way up—not only on all major expressways in the county but particularly on those that link Dade to neighboring Broward County.

On one roadway, I-75, traffic was up a whopping 99 percent from about 60,000 to almost 120,000 annual daily vehicles near the Broward-Dade line.

This statistic, though it was in the 1998 DOT traffic volume report, was not immediately apparent to me until I used Excel to compare the figure with the 1997 report.

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NICAR-L listserv

Through the **NICAR-L**

listserv you can ask

questions about

computer-assisted

reporting, offer advice to

others or simply see

what's being talked about

on the list.

To join, send a message to:

listproc@lists.missouri.edu

In the message area type:

SUBSCRIBE NICAR-L

[your name]

More information about

the listserv is available on

the **NICAR Web site**,

www.nicar.org

The DOT Fatal Accident (FARS) dataset is available from NICAR in two formats: the entire United States per year, or for all years (1975-1998).

For the entire set, the cost is \$70 for small news organizations, \$100 for those in 25-50 market or circulation of 50,000 to 100,000, and \$120 for large organizations. Per year prices are \$50, \$70 and \$90 respectively.

More information is available on the NICAR Web site, www.nicar.org/data/fars

To order, call the NICAR data library at (573) 884-7711.

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First Venture

That way I was able not only to see the difference between one year and the next but also actually calculate the difference.

The software gave me the ability to add, subtract, average and do percentages that before would have been difficult since I'm not a math wizard by any means. Often I still resort to my trusty fingers to do or confirm an operation.

At any rate, learning Excel and how to apply it to DOT numbers led to the production of three stories for *The Miami Herald* within the first couple months after boot camp.

The first was a simple one that told readers how traffic volume had gone up on major expressways in the county from 1997 to 1998, just to show off my new skills.

The second story was much more complex. By calculating traffic volumes, I was able to

discern that the heaviest traffic increases were on roads linking Miami-Dade County with neighboring Broward County.

The significant discovery here is the explanation why traffic had increased on these cross-county roads: that a large percentage of people who once lived in Miami-Dade County had moved to new homes across the county line in Broward but kept their jobs in Dade.

The "reverse commute" began after Hurricane Andrew devastated South Dade in 1992 and has accelerated in the last two or three years.

While I think I've become pretty adept at manipulating information in Excel, dealing with serious database programs like Access is still a challenge.

It may be a different story down the road, so to speak.

Alfonso Chardy can be reached by e-mail at Achardy@herald.com

NICAR DATA LIBRARY

Fatal accidents

**By MaryJo Sylwester
IRE and NICAR**

The Fatal Accident Reporting System (FARS) dataset, which includes fatal accidents on U.S. public roads where at least one person died within 30 days of the accident, can be used for a variety of enterprise stories and as a resource for breaking news. NICAR has data available from 1975 through the end of 1998.

The data, collected by the U.S. Department of Transportation since 1975, includes an impressive array of details on each accident, including:

- Weather, light and road conditions.
- Whether a school bus, police or emergency vehicle was involved.
- Previous speeding, drunk driving and other convictions of drivers.
- Alcohol and drug test types and results.
- Seat belt use and air bag deployment.
- Person killed was on the job at the time.
- Accident following a police pursuit.
- Accidents in designated school zones.
- Drivers cited for inattentiveness, drunk driving or other violations.
- Vehicle make, model and body.

New in the 1998 data are fields identifying the motor carrier identification number (which is

required for trucks and buses crossing state lines) and driver height and weight.

The Roanoke (Va.) Times used the FARS data, along with state data on vehicle miles driven, to show that an interstate in Virginia was not as deadly as many people had come to believe.

The Star-Ledger in Newark, N.J. used FARS to report that fatal accidents had increased on a highway after the speed limit was increased to 65 mph. But they also discovered the increase was not unusual, after comparing the change to historical data.

Having the dataset readily available in your newsroom could also pay off for breaking news. For example, the next time someone is killed on the local interstate, you could be the first to say exactly how many people have been killed on that highway in the past 15 years. (The DOT didn't start including the exact name of the highway until the 1982 data).

The database consists of four relational tables representing the four levels of information police collect: accident, vehicle, person and driver.

More information is available on the NICAR Web site at www.nicar.org/data/fars

MaryJo Sylwester can be reached by e-mail at maryjo@nicar.org

Bundling bucks

By Dana Wilkie

The San Diego Union-Tribune

I first got the idea for this story during a computer seminar for the Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowship. We were using Microsoft Access, learning how to more efficiently import large databases from the Web and how to manipulate that data.

Our instructor mentioned that the Microsoft program was excellent for unearthing large numbers of checks written to candidates on the same day – a practice known as “bundling.” The practice allows companies and industries to get around federal limits on their own gift-giving by having many of their employees give money instead.

“Many of McCain’s contributions came at the urging of CEOs who were close to McCain, who had done business before the senator’s Commerce Committee.”

Shortly afterwards, my editor assigned me to look at campaign contributions to presidential candidates and to see if any good stories came of it. It struck me that since Sen. John McCain was setting himself up as a champion for campaign finance reform, it might be interesting to see if he took advantage of any fundraising loopholes himself, such as bundling.

Importing data

We imported presidential fundraising data from the FEC Web site directly into Microsoft Access. We separated out McCain’s contributions, then asked the program to show each donation by date. Since “bundling” typically involves coordinated con-

tributions from people working for the same boss or company, we also asked the computer to show the “occupation” and “employer” of each contributor beside the date of the donation. This allowed us to easily see if there were large numbers of donations that appeared on the same day, or within a few days of one another, and from people working for the same company or industry.

As the story points out, we found several contributions written on the same day by employees of the same company. We wanted to see if these employees’ relatives had given money on the same day, too, so we searched for addresses that matched the addresses of those we knew had given to McCain. We found several matches.

Filling in by phone

We were able to fill in the details about the contributions through phone interviews – where the checks were collected, who hosted the event, how the host invited his employees, whether there was pressure of any kind to attend, etc. While speaking with campaign-finance-reform-minded groups, we learned that the Center for Responsive Politics had recently done an analysis of “bundled” contributions and published a report naming McCain as one of the campaign’s top bundlers. We conducted interviews with CRP staff and referred to CRP’s report.

Clearly, many of McCain’s contributions came at the urging of CEOs who were close to McCain, who had done business before the senator’s Commerce Committee, and who had given the senator all the money they were allowed to give under federal election law.

The large number of checks showered on McCain – at the same time and by people at the same company – sent McCain the unmistakable message that if the senator won the presidency, it behooved him to remember the generous donations of those who helped put him in the White House.

Dana Wilkie can be reached by e-mail at dana.wilkie@copleydc.com

Campaign finance data:

Federal Election

Commission reports are available on a monthly basis from the NICAR data library. A one-year subscription for the monthly updates is available for \$600, for all sizes of news organizations.

The FEC data can also be purchased on a one-time basis, for each two-year cycle, at a cost of \$75. NICAR has data for the 1991-1998 cycles.

Contact the data library, at (573) 884-7711, to order.

Drivers' records access

By MaryJo Sylwester
IRE and NICAR

The availability of drivers' license records is once again in the spotlight as the U.S. Supreme Court is considering the constitutional validity of a 1994 law that limited the public's access to the records.

The court's decision, which is expected sometime after the New Year, will also determine the fate of a provision in an appropriations bill passed by Congress – and signed by President Clinton – in October that changes the 1994 Driver's Privacy Protection Act (DPPA) to limit access further.

Effect on journalists

For journalists, this could mean either a return to full access to drivers' records or a complete roadblock, depending on the Supreme Court's ruling.

"If they want to use the big 'p' word – privacy – to invoke all this unnecessary legislation, we need to speak up as journalists," said Kyle Elyse Niederpruem, president of the Society of Professional Journalists and a writer for the Indianapolis Star. "The big deal now is waiting on the Supreme Court to figure out the mess – whether that be colored by privacy interests, state rights issues or compelling public safety concerns – here's one person who hopes the Supreme Court sees through this mess."

Niederpruem said the DPPA, which went into effect in 1997, merely made "everybody's life a nightmare," including both journalists and DMV officials. The exemptions and variances in state laws made for a patchwork across the country, and many journalists were unaware of the changes until they tried to access the data after the laws passed, Niederpruem said.

Wording of law

The DPPA restricted state departments of motor vehicles from releasing personal information contained in drivers' license records, unless they established an "opt-out" provision for citizens to withhold their information from public release.

About twenty-nine states have since established an "opt-out" and a few have adopted a media exemption. News media

exemptions fall under a provision of the federal law that keeps records open for matters relating to vehicle and driver safety.

Latest proposal

However, a provision in the Department of Transportation appropriations bill, passed in October, would require states to have an "opt-in" provision instead, and allows the government to withhold federal highway funding for states that don't comply.

This would mean individuals would have to agree, in writing, to allow their personal information to be released to the public.

"If they want to use the big 'p' word - privacy - to invoke all this unnecessary legislation, we need to speak up as journalists," said Kyle Elyse Niederpruem.

The state of South Carolina challenged the DPPA on the grounds that it interferes with the states' sovereignty under the Tenth Amendment by requiring states to enforce a federal program. The Federal Appeals Court ruled the law unconstitutional there.

Three other states also challenged the law – Alabama, Wisconsin and Oklahoma – and appeals courts upheld the law in the Wisconsin and Oklahoma cases, and invalidated the law in the Alabama case.

When the Supreme Court heard oral arguments in the case in November, justices questioned whether the federal government was encroaching on state functions, but said striking down the DPPA might also result in a need to revisit a 1985 law regarding fair labor standards.

MaryJo Sylwester can be reached by e-mail at maryjo@nicar.org

For more information on the Driver's Privacy Protection Act:

SPJ Web site: www.spj.org/foia/drivers/index.htm

Freedom Forum Online: www.freedomforum.org/first/welcome.asp

Continued from page one:

ValuJet

carry hazardous materials even needed to train their workers to recognize the stuff.

With the disparity between the FAA's press releases and my newly-acquired internal document, I turned to the data. I was spurred on by Congressional testimony that said passenger airlines accounted for 60 percent of the cargo flown on airplanes.

Ten months later, on Jan. 17-18, 1999, we published a two-part series called "Safety on Hold: The hidden dangers in airline cargo".

The data

We made extensive use of two government databases. I examined 20 years' worth of FAA enforcement data, studying trends by violator, frequency, charge, year, region, FAA office and resolution. My findings filled one of those fat, three-ring binders.

The data showed the FAA's enforcement peaked in the six months following the much-publicized crash, assessing \$3.2 million in fines for the whole year. In 1997 and for the first half of 1998, the number of violations and the fines decreased.

Confronting the agency with its own data – analyzed the way they analyze it – put them in a box.

Then I spent several more weeks studying HazMat reports to DOT's Research and Special Programs Administration.

RSPA's data, provided by NICAR on a CD-ROM, is in tables which cannot all be linked because the comments field produces a Cartesian product.

But some data can be linked on a far smaller scale if the record numbers from the main table are linked to the table with the comment field.

I did this to track down airlines' reports, which gave me anecdotes and information about all the efforts the airlines make to con-

tain leaks and spills.

Meanwhile, the number of HazMat reports of spills and leaks had increased 623 percent for the decade through June 1998, far outstripping the growth in cargo and way ahead of other transportation modes for the same 10-year period.

But the data my editors found most interesting was how enforcement varied among the nine FAA regions. In other words, it was cheaper to break the law in the Southern Region – Atlanta, Miami and Memphis – than in the Northwest Mountain Region's cities like Seattle.

The data showed airlines with the highest number of HazMat violations – like Federal Express – didn't pay the most fines.

Showing readers

Like all project reporters, I was dreaming of that full-page color graphic. In August, after spending almost four months in front of a computer screen, I met with Jim Owens, our graphic whiz, who immediately grasped the idea of using a cutaway diagram of an airplane to explain HazMat to our readers.

We chose a Boeing 737 to depict the world's most widely used commercial jet, because we were focusing on problems with passenger airlines.

The RSPA database gave us all kinds of examples of HazMat incidents and accidents on passenger airlines – like chain saws in the overhead compartments and a leaky container of rubber cement that glued passenger luggage to the walls of the cargo bay. Owens was intrigued by the possibilities.

When I began to interview people for the story, no one in the industry had any idea what I was talking about. No one at any of the airlines wanted to talk to me about the FAA's enforcement policies.

I kept calling Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Commerce, Science and Transportation Committee, hoping for an interview.

After three months, his staff told me he was turning my findings over to the DOT's Inspector General.

The DOT/OIG and the General Accounting Office had done audits that at least in part dealt with the FAA's oversight

Continued on page twelve

Elizabeth Marchak's series, "Safety on hold: Hidden dangers in airline cargo," is available from the IRE Resource Center (story #15476). Contact the Resource Center at (573) 882-3364 to order.

The following tipsheets, available from the IRE Resource Center, may be helpful in reporting on stories about hazardous materials or plane crashes:

Tipsheet #987

"Environmental Perils:

Toxic Chemicals at Home and at Work"

1999 National CAR Conference

Tipsheet #986

"Story Ideas for

Environmental, Science, and Health Journalists"

1999 National CAR

Conference

Tipsheet #403

A nine-page
transportation safety
handout

Tipsheet #953

"Plane facts: Responsible
aviation reporting"
1999 National CAR

Conference

Tipsheet #729

"Using aviation safety
documents"

1997 National CAR

Conference

To order tipsheets call the
Resource Center at (573)
882-3364. More
information is also
available on their Web site
at www.ire.org/resource_center

Continued from page eleven:

ValuJet

of HazMat. I kept an eye on them and discovered that the FAA was redacting information about HazMat from some reports.

After the ValuJet crash, the FAA quietly got Congress to change FAA regulations, giving the Director of Civil Aviation Security, who also oversees HazMat, broader powers to withhold information from the public.

Why was this happening? I really wanted to know.

To my surprise, both the DOT/OIG and the GAO had plenty to say, and they said it on the record.

New angle

This was a whole new angle to the story—secrecy. It worked nicely with what became the main story for day two: The FAA has done little to educate the flying public about the dangers of HazMat.

**We made extensive use of
two government
databases. I examined 20
years' worth of FAA
enforcement data,
studying trends by
violation, frequency,
charge, year, region, FAA
office and resolution.**

My interview with the FAA, which took a month to set up, was pretty contentious. A senior FAA official chided me for focusing on the airlines instead of the shippers.

I argued my questions and my focus were fair because the individual airlines, which weren't all properly training their employees, had the largest numbers of vio-

lations.

The official looked confused. Then an FAA data guru, on hand for the interview, very quietly agreed I was right.

By tracking computerized enforcement action, I had also found many companies settled fines for less than had been touted in the press releases.

In one case, a \$60,000 proposed fine was settled for \$25,000. An FAA official said the practice of bargaining down the fines was routine.

Months of data analysis made this story possible. I was able to show where the FAA's enforcement was the toughest as well as where it was the most lax.

Confronting the agency with its own data, analyzed the way they analyze it, put them in a box. They admitted the problem.

In the April 21, 1999 Federal Register, the FAA published new guidelines to help employees more uniformly enforce the law.

After the series ran, Sen. Ron Wyden, D-Oregon, sponsored an amendment to the FAA reauthorization act that required the FAA to report to Congress until the problem is solved.

The results

In October, armed with new documents and updated data, we updated our readers on the FAA's efforts to oversee hazardous materials. The agency issued fewer and smaller fines than any time since 1991, my analysis showed. I used eight examples in a chart.

The Inspector General's office said the small number of fines was a problem. Meanwhile, the FAA's own documents showed it was quietly trying to gut Wyden's amendment that would make it accountable to Congress.

Wyden's version of the amendment is now in conference committee.

For me the most satisfying part of the story was looking at an issue everyone else had forgotten about or had assumed was under control because of all those FAA press releases. But the best part of all: I used the FAA's own data to do it.

Elizabeth Marchak can be reached
by e-mail at emarchak@digizen.net

Mapping conversions

By **Andy Lehren**
Dateline NBC

Earlier this year I was on the phone with a government official, asking about some of the undocumented features that came with one of his agency's databases.

What came next was right out of the 'Blues Brothers' movie. It's the scene where Elwood asks a waitress, "What kind of music do you usually have here?" She replies, "Oh, we've got both kinds — we've got country and western."

I asked him how the agency recorded latitude and longitude. He replied, "We keep it in latitude and longitude."

OK, so maybe that's funny only if you're nerdy. But you are reading *Uplink*. And a Tech Tip at that.

I took another stab at my question: do you keep latitude and longitude in degrees or decimal degrees?

The wrong answer could put a town like Halifax Estates, Fla., about 25 miles into the Atlantic Ocean. And we wouldn't want to do that to Halifax Estates.

There are lots of government databases that come with latitude and longitude fields. That means there's an opportunity to map your data, and find trends you could not catch without a GIS program like MapInfo or ArcView.

Questions to ask

When you get a database like this, there are a few questions you should ask. With national databases, it should be pretty obvious whether the data is in degrees or decimal degrees. But it may be harder to tell with certain local data just by looking at it. So ask.

Here's the difference:

We're all used to seeing globes, where zero degrees longitude goes through Greenwich, England, making it Y2K party central.

And zero degrees latitude is also known as the equator, a belt running around the middle of our planet.

Every time you move a degree along the equator, you're moving about 111,320 meters. Move about 74 degrees from Greenwich, England, and you're in line with New York.

The tricky part is what happens when

you're dealing with fractions of a degree. Degrees are divided into minutes and seconds. Sixty seconds makes a minute. Then sixty minutes makes a degree. Just like an hour on your watch.

But mapping programs want latitude and longitude stored in decimal degrees. That's just like it sounds.

Halifax Estates, Fla., is 80.98 decimal degrees from Greenwich, England. Go a couple hundredths more, and you're 81 decimal degrees away.

Conversions

Some mapping programs come with functions that allow you to do conversions before you attempt to map a database. But running data conversions in mapping programs can be painfully slow. Here's a quick way to let your database manager do the hard work fast.

Let's assume you have three columns of data: degrees, minutes and seconds.

You want to keep degrees the same.

Divide minutes by 60. That's dividing the minutes by the number needed to make a degree. Divide seconds by 3,600. That's dividing the seconds by the number needed to make a degree.

In FoxPro, assuming all the fields are numeric, and longitude field is called `x_long`, the result would almost be a line like this:

Replace all `x_long` with `degrees + (minutes/60) + (seconds/3600)`.

In Access, the update query would almost look like:

Update MyTable set `MyTable.x_long = degrees + (minutes/60) + (seconds/3600)`

We're almost done, but not quite.

There's one more thing to do.

In decimal degrees, a longitude west of Greenwich, England, in our hemisphere, is a negative number. A latitude above the equator is positive. Sometimes these are marked with a W or an N in databases.

So make sure you multiply your North American longitudes by -1.

Andy Lehren works at -74.3833 longitude and 41.55 latitude and can be reached by e-mail at alehren@nbc.com.

These tipsheets on mapping are available from the IRE Resource Center. Call (573) 882-3364 to order.

Mapping as an Investigative Tool (#970):
By Jennifer LaFleur, formerly of the San Jose Mercury News, for the 1999 National IRE Convention.

Mapping as an Investigative Tool: Do's and Don'ts (#971): By Andy Lehren of Dateline NBC for the 1999 National IRE Convention.

Mapping Crime (#858):
By Toni Whitt of the Virginian-Pilot for the 1999 National CAR Conference.

ArcView themes

The 1999 IRE Awards:

Contest deadline is Jan 14, 2000

Entries must have been published or aired between Jan 1 and Dec. 31, 1999

The awards include:

- IRE Medal for Outstanding Investigative Reporting or an IRE Certificate of Recognition for Newspaper, TV and Other Media.

- IRE FOI Award honoring an individual or organization whose actions further open records or open government.

- Tom Renner Award for outstanding crime reporting.

- Student awards for outstanding investigative reporting.

Entry forms are available to download on the IRE Web site (www.ire.org) or call (573) 882-2042 for more information.

The following discussion was posted recently on the NICAR-L listserv. See the NICAR Web site, www.nicar.org, for instructions in joining the listserv.

- I have three themes in the table of contents of my view: Streets, Precincts, and Census Tracts. When I turn on the Streets and Census Tracts themes, they are drawn in the view window, streets appearing on top of tracts.

When I turn on the Precincts theme, nothing is drawn in the view window. The only way to see the precincts is to make the theme active, then zoom to the active theme. Streets and tracts disappear. Neither streets nor tracts (even though they are turned on), are drawn in the view whenever the precincts are drawn. Any ideas? – Jeff Thomas, *The Gazette*, Colorado Springs, Colo.

- Are the themes all in the same projection? I've run into the same problem with one theme being in projected meters and the others in decimal degrees. I believe you can use the Projector extension to convert between projections to make things line up. – Matthew Ericson, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Philadelphia, Penn.

- You're describing exactly what happens when the data is in different projections. There is a "projector" extension in ArcView 3+. It can only re-project data that is in unprojected decimal degrees.

I'm guessing you have tracts and streets in decimal degrees (which is the way ESRI distributes data and the way TIGER shows up), but the precincts you got from the government were projected somehow. So you need to find out what projection the precincts came in. Most local agencies use the appropriate "state plane" in meters or feet. Make sure you know whether it's state plane based on the NAD83 or NAD27.

Then you can reproject your tracts and streets to the same projection. Then put all three of them into a View and you should be OK. If your streets/tracts and precincts are all already projected, then projector won't help you, because you need something in decimal degrees to start with.

If you have the just-released ArcView 3.2, it has a re-projector that *can* re-project data that isn't in decimal degrees. So in that case you could re-project each of the themes into whatever you want them to be. It can be run in batch mode if you have several themes to

change. For those of us who get a lot of GIS data from local agencies that shows up already projected in a cacophony of projections, this improvement in ArcView 3.2 is a huge help. – Dan Keating, *The Washington Post*, Washington, D.C.

- The story so far: Three themes in my view's table of contents: streets (line), tracts (polygon), precincts (polygon). The problem: Two of the three, streets and tracts, may be viewed simultaneously. But Precincts can be viewed by itself only. And if I move between views of streets/tracts and precincts, I must first "zoom to theme" before the theme may be viewed.

Matthew, Tim and Dan quickly diagnosed this as a projection problem. It appears they are correct. I am told (but am uncertain of how to verify for myself; instruction here is welcome) that both the streets theme, which I got through ESRI's TIGER data service, and tracts, which I got from CEISIN, are in decimal degrees. The precincts theme is in state plane feet, Colorado Central Zone (is this the same as UTM zone 13?), NAD83.

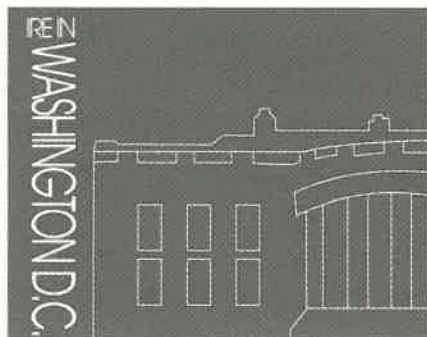
So, based on their most excellent and timely advice, I need to use the projection extension to make the three themes compatible.

Unfortunately, I'm working with a demo version of ArcView. It's a nearly complete version, except, of course, in that it does not have the projection extension and will not accept the addition of any extensions. – Jeff Thomas.

- I think you can find the projection utility (called Project!) on ESRI's web site. It's definitely included in ArcView 3.2 – David Herzog, *Providence Journal*, Providence, R.I.

- My friends, the NICAR list is the best deal in journalism. Your quick diagnosis of projection incompatibility sent me back to El Paso County's GIS dept., which provided confirmation that the projection of the voting-precinct shapefile was not in decimal degrees (as were the census tract and street shapefiles from TIGER and CEISIN), but in "state plane feet, Colorado Central Zone, NAD83."

Dan Keating generously offered to run a projection conversion with his full-blown version of ArcView, but for reasons unknown, the files choked up his attempt. In the meantime, the county's GIS team leader took it upon himself to run a conversion, shipped me the converted files, and all is well. – Jeff Thomas.



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Please send this form and your workshop fee to:

IRE, 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211. Fax credit card registrations to 573-882-5431. IRE accepts personal and company checks, or you may pay by Visa or MasterCard. American Express is not accepted.

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Refunds requested on or before Jan. 1, 2000 will be granted, minus membership fees.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

IRE Regional Conference

Investigative Reporters and Editors Regional Conference 2000 will be held Jan. 14-15 in Washington, D.C.

The conference, which will be held at the National Press Club, will include panels featuring experts from print and broadcast sharing tips and techniques for winner stories, a computer demo room with daily sessions on computer-assisted reporting topics, vendors and exhibits and reprints of the top investigative work in the country.

See page 15 of this issue for a registration form.

Registration and hotel information for all conferences is available on the IRE Web site at www.ire.org. More information is also available by calling (573) 882-2042.

IRE National Conference

The IRE National Conference 2000 will be held June 1-4, 2000 in New York.

The conference will include an optional CAR day, a computer demo room, TV Show and Tell Room, reprints, vendors and exhibits and a variety of panels featuring some of the top investigative reporters in the country.

Registration and hotel information for all conferences is available on the IRE Web site at www.ire.org. More information is also available by calling (573) 882-2042.

NICAR data library

The NICAR data library is evaluating its collection of databases, and is considering eliminating some of the less popular. They are also looking for new national databases

to add to the collection.

If you know of any national databases that you've found useful or think would be a good addition to NICAR, they'd like to hear from you.

The least popular databases being considered for elimination are the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), NHTSA Vehicle Recalls and Complaints, CDC HIV Surveillance data and NASA Air Safety Reporting Program.

If you would like to put in a plea to save any of these datasets, please contact the data library administrators, Dawn Fallik at dawn@nicar.org or Jason Grotto at jason@nicar.org. They are also available by phone at (573) 884-7711.

CAR boot camps

IRE and NICAR has several computer-assisted reporting boot camps scheduled for 2000. These week-long camps provide hands-on training in the use of spreadsheets, database managers and Internet searching from NICAR staff.

The dates for the camps, which are held at the Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia, Mo., are: January 5-9, March 26-31, May 7-12, July 21-26, and August 6-11.

A boot camp for editors is also scheduled Feb. 24-26.

Contact John Green at IRE, (573) 882-2772 to check availability. More information about the camps, including registration forms and hotel information, is available on the NICAR Web site, www.nicar.org, under the training section.

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