May 1997

Uplink

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

And the winner is...

Uplink Update

Along with the fame and prestige that comes with winning the Pulitzer, comes one obligation – share your tips with Uplink readers.

Winners of the Pulitzers for investigative reporting, public service journalism, spot news and beat reporting share some of the computer-assisted reporting tips that helped them win the big one in this issue.

Ford Fessenden tells how *Newsday* used CAR under deadline pressure to give readers a deeper understanding of the TWA crash.

Deborah Nelson writes about how *The Seattle Times* undercovered HUD mismanagement. Of course, Nelson wasn't the only *Times* staffer to win the Pulitzer. Byron Acohido shares how he used CAR to win the Pulitzer for investigative reporting.

John McQuaid of *The Times-Picayune* tells how he cast for a story about fish markets and landed a Pulitzer.

And Nora Paul tells where to find the winning stories online.

Inside

Crash Test

Disaster on Deadline

By Ford Fessenden
Newsday

The jumbo jet that crashed in a fireball and lay burning on the rolling surface of the Atlantic off Moriches on a July night last year quickly transformed *Newsday*'s newsroom into a rolling thunder of organized pandemonium. Reporters who rushed to their desks as they heard the news were dispatched to beaches and docks and neighborhoods, to airports and police stations, to government and corporate offices and hometowns.

And to their computer screens.

Newsday's Pulitzer Prize winning coverage of TWA 800 owes a deep debt to the technology of computer-assisted reporting. Over the next few days and as the story stretched on into weeks and months, hourly consultation of the Internet, and daily querying of safety databases simply became routine, at the same level of reportorial second nature as dialing a source at the FBI.

We reported immediately that this plane had no indications of trouble, according to Federal Aviation Administration databases on service difficulties and accidents and incidents. We consulted our own database of international aviation accidents — initiated after Avianca crashed a jet on a Long Island hillside in 1990 — to report that TWA had an exemplary safety record, sixth best in the world in our calculation, based on the average number of flights without an accident over 10 years.

Meanwhile, Long Island editor Alex Martin was deploying reporters to chronicle the enormity of the human tragedy. With *Newsday's* library staff running inquiries on people-tracking services Autotrack and Infotek CDB, as well as Internet people finders (librarian Nancy Altman recommends Four11 at http://www.four11.com), reporters had enough leads to compile biographies of 100 victims for Saturday's paper, two

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Troubled Housing

Probing HUD woes

By Deborah Nelson
The Seattle Times

It didn't take a computer analysis to tell us something was wrong with a federal program that let an affluent tribal leader build a 5,300-square-foot home with money for needy Native Americans.

In fact, the nature of *The Seattle Times'* investigation into HUD's Indian housing program called for more shoe leather and paper shuffling than keyboard trolling.

Nonetheless, electronic journalism played an integral — if mundane — role in the work that went into the series that won the 1997

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The fleecing of HUD

Pulitzer Prize for Investigative Reporting.

The series, published in December, was reported by Eric Nalder, Alex Tizon and myself and was edited by metro editor David Boardman. It showed pervasive waste and mismanagement of low-income housing funds at a time when more than 100,000 Native Americans are on waiting lists for basic shelter.

HUD fostered the problems with deregulation policies that created huge loopholes, curtailed oversight and discouraged enforcement. As a result, federal aid was flowing into nice homes for well-connected tribal members instead of the poor.

Weak regulations and even weaker oversight allowed a Washington state tribe to construct the 5,300-square-foot home for the housing authority executive director right under the noses of HUD's Seattle staff. The house was the largest in a development that featured homes with three-car garages for tribal members who didn't qualify for assistance.

An Oklahoma housing authority gave HUD-financed homes away to staff, board directors and their families. A new loophole allowed housing authorities to sell HUD homes for any price they wanted and this one set the price at nothing. (They learned how to do it from a paid consultant just days after he left his job with HUD's Indian housing office.)

In Connecticut, HUD sat idly by while a casino-rich tribe used a low-income housing grant to subsidize $400,000 homes for families that federal auditors (in a follow-up investigation to our own) determined had incomes as high as $206,000.

We had to do much of our reporting on these and other examples by visiting Indian communities across the country and knocking on doors. Most tribal housing authorities aren't subject to FOIA, and deregulation has reduced by half the records HUD compiles on them.

CAR tools

While data analysis wasn't the centerpiece of our six-month investigation, we made almost daily use of a spreadsheet, the Internet and various electronic services to track down people and information. And e-mail, of all things, turned out to be a key source of information.

The head of HUD's tribal housing program was a prolific e-mail correspondent. We could get his answers to questions as they arose and his take on issues as they evolved, even though he was often on the road.

But he also conferred frequently with his regional offices through e-mail. So early on in the investigation, I began obtaining copies of these electronic memoranda through FOIA requests and they provided some very frank, eye-opening revelations.

For example, in one series of exchanges, HUD officials were clearly having trouble finding specific rules against big houses or Jacuzzis in the new, looser regulations. In another, they were trying to find ways to bend FHA rules to allow the tribal official who built the big house to get a large enough loan to buy it. (She eventually paid $215,000 for it with the help of an FHA loan—about $45,000 less than it cost the housing authority crew to build it.)

HUD also provided several years of funding data via an e-mail attachment. This included how much each tribal housing authority received on what dates for how many units of housing. I put the information in an Excel spreadsheet and then added additional fields of information by hand—such as performance indicators to see if HUD was pouring more development money into housing authorities with bad track records. (More than $200 million in the past five years had been given to 42 tribes with serious management problems.)

The spreadsheet also gave us quick access to important details for our case studies. We found HUD had just awarded $2.7 million to a Minnesota tribal housing authority, even though it was controlled by a corrupt tribal leader and misspent most of a previous $4.4 million grant.

"They must have been sitting on their brains," one tribal member said of HUD's actions.

Other miscellaneous electronic resources: We tracked phone numbers and addresses of potential sources and subjects before traveling to other states. We used the various electronic phone services available free on the Internet as well as fee-based services like CDB Infotek and Autotrak.

And of course the Internet was handy for easy access to HUD policies, Congressional bills and other official documents. I could download HUD inspector general reports on troubled tribal hous-

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CAR in a disaster

days after the crash. "I don't know how we would have done that story without those resources," said Martin.

Reporter Lauren Terrazzano kept up with families of victims through websites quickly set up to facilitate information exchange (http://members.aol.com/hseaman275/families.html). Reporter Jessica Kowal wrote about how the crash had become a new focus for conspiracy theories by following Usenet groups and websites that cropped up to talk about the mystery (e.g., http://www.corazon.com or http://www.aci.net/kalliste/phoshead.htm.)

As the competing explanations for this crash arose, *Newsday's* database team would query the safety databases for leads. How many times had a fuel pump in a 747 resulted in a problem, serious or otherwise? What about cargo door incidents? Missiles? How many accidents had gone unsolved? Again, the data would inform a shoe-leather effort by Long Island desk reporters that typically involved dozens of sources and aviation experts.

We got the FAA databases on service difficulty reports and accidents and incidents from NICAR, and queried them using Foxpro. We also used landings.com (http://www1.drive.net/evird.acgi$pass*1092068!h-www.landings.com/landings/pages/ searchntsb.html) for its search engine that helped us look through old NTSB reports, which you could look up in synopsis form on NTSB's web page. The NTSB now seems to be about to incorporate its own search engine

The National Aviation and Space Administration's Aviation Safety and Reporting System has a website (http://olias.arc.nasa.gov/asrs/), but the critical information comes from its anonymous incident-reporting database. You can buy it on CD from NASA with a pretty good front end. NICAR also sells a Dbase format version.

Ultimately, TWA 800 was a showcase of old-fashioned journalistic values — hard, careful work by a staff of 55 reporters. As we have found in stories ranging from falling aircraft parts to shady Miami operators masquerading as foreign airlines, computer-assisted reporting has the ability to transform public understanding of aviation safety. With this story, it became routine, and helped us keep readers informed with a depth and immediacy that would have been difficult even a year or two ago.

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The House of Representatives has put copies of Inspector General reports online. You can access the reports by going to http://www.house.gov/IG/

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Investigating HUD

ing authorities from the IGNET website (www.sbaonline.sba.gov/ignet/).

Backing up isn't hard to do

One setback: This was such a dumb mistake, I hate to own up to it, except that maybe it will serve as yet another cautionary tale about lapses in tedious but essential housekeeping tasks.

I wasn't backing up my Word and Excel files. For reasons that escape me now, I had convinced myself that some good fairy in the network automatically backed them up nightly.

I was wrong, of course.

One afternoon, I tried to retrieve a file and it wasn't there. In fact, all the files in my housing sub-directory had disappeared. When I went searching for the backup files and realized what had happened, I swore and then I cried.

We sent the hard drive to a company specializing in such crises. But they could only retrieve long files of gibberish mixed with disjointed phrases from my original files. It was as if their spot on the hard drive had exploded like a grenade, flinging the words, like shrapnel, in all directions.

I had to reconstruct two months of work from boxes full of documents, notes and (thank God) printouts. Now I've become obsessive-compulsive about backing up files. I save on my hard drive, I save on floppies, I save to the network.

And I keep the old hard drive on my desk as a reminder. Maybe I'll hang it next to the Pulitzer.

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Hook, line & Pulitzer

CAR catches big fish

To subscribe to Fishfolk, a listserve devoted to issues affecting fisheries, send a message to listserv@mitvma.mit.edu In the body of the message, write subscribe Fishfolk (your name). The server will send back a confirmation with instructions and details.

By John McQuaid
The Times-Picayune

When *The Times-Picayune* assigned three reporters — me, Mark Schleifstein, and Bob Marshall — to look into local and global problems in fisheries, we weren't sure what to make the confusing tableau before us. News pages carried reports of scattered problems in the Gulf of Mexico region, New England, Canada, the Pacific Northwest and elsewhere. But the troubles seemed unrelated — they happened in diverse locales, with different cultures and distinct populations of fish.

We soon found out that the problems were connected — mainly through emerging links of the global marketplace. Neither ecosystems, nor tradition-bound local markets and communities, could keep up with growing demand and development. CAR played an important role in helping us demonstrate the economic web that connects diverse locales and fisheries together, and showing alarming trends that both policymakers and the media had not detected or had ignored. Those conclusions formed the cornerstone of our eight-part series "Oceans of Trouble: Are the World's Fisheries Doomed?" that won the Pulitzer Prize for Public Service.

Healthy fisheries depend on two things — markets and sustainable fish populations. So I set out to gather as much data on catch, economics and fish stocks as I could. Most of it came from the National Marine Fisheries Service, the federal agency that oversees fishing in federal waters, but some came from state agencies as well. I got extensive historical data on catches and their total for all important fish species in the Gulf of Mexico, and data on the aggregate regional catches from every part of the United States. Using Excel, I normalized catch values with the Consumer Price Index and studied trends across the last four decades.

The numbers showed that fishing in the Gulf and elsewhere was in the midst of a catastrophe.

After a dramatic expansion of fishing in the 1970s and 1980s, the data showed, fishing had taken a nosedive. The most important Gulf fish had plummeted in the amount of catch, in per-pound value, or both during the preceding decade. Further reporting showed that these trends were the result of overfishing, tough new regulations to control it and an influx of cheap imported fish. Nationally, the same pattern held. What's more, the numbers of boats plying the waters had steadily climbed and remained high — meaning there were many more fishermen, but a lot less fish and money in the business than there had been 20 years ago. Many fishermen were, in fact, leaving the business and the ones still in it were barely hanging on.

But we also ran into problems. Fisheries Service data was maddeningly sketchy. The government had virtually no information on the economic or social status of fishers in the United States — almost no census data, nothing on employment levels, nothing on incomes.

The only data that could directly point to economic conditions were records of fishing licenses and the numbers of boats — data that the agencies said were probably only a rough estimate of the real number of boats out there. The quality of data on specific fisheries wasn't much better.

The Fisheries Service has data on catches and how much money they generated. But in an era when fish populations are in danger, the agency hadn't done much of the necessary biological analysis to determine whether many fish were being overexploited.

These information gaps themselves became part of the story. They illustrated not just holes in the government's information-gathering, but underlying biases and systemic problems. Agencies have traditionally managed fisheries like a big biology experiment, paying no attention to the people doing the fishing. That was fine with fishermen. Fishing is an important, but highly irregular enterprise. Crews shift regularly, some fishermen only work part of the year, and most understandably shun contact with government officials. Now, with fisheries in trouble, the entire management system had on one level broken down, and agencies did not have the information they needed to work with fishing communities.

The system was failing in another, deeper way. Agencies usually did not focus on specific populations of fish before they started to disappear — because it can take years to gather enough data to give a good picture of what's going on underwater, and because they lacked the resources. As one

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Crime watch

Investigating crime statistics

By Derek Willis
The Palm Beach Post

Derek Willis attended the NICAR bootcamp in June 1996 and intermediate bootcamp in January.

Florida's analysis of crime in 1996 brought some good news: the state's overall crime rate declined again, allowing Arizona to take over the top spot among the most crime-ridden states. And for residents of Palm Beach County, the 6 percent drop in crime was much higher than the overall rate.

One big problem: both numbers were wrong.

In its report, the Florida Department of Law Enforcement included in its calculations police agencies that had failed to submit a report or gave inaccurate figures.

Twenty such departments were counted as having no crime at all by FDLE, which skewed the overall rate. The police department for Hialeah, a city of 200,000 people in Dade County, was the largest agency to report "no" crime.

Palm Beach Post reporters also discovered that two local agencies turned in incomplete or inaccurate reports to the state.

One city said its crime rate declined 60 percent from 1995 to 1996; the reason was that officers were not turning in crime reports to a records clerk.

How the story was done

In advance of the state's report, police reporter Monika Gonzalez asked every police department in the county for a copy of the report they sent to FDLE. Our original intention was to compile a chart and run a story the day the report was to be released.

But when we compiled the numbers in Excel and did a few calculations, we noticed that several departments had huge swings in crime from 1995 to 1996.

So we called those departments.

One city sent its six-month report to the state because the final version wasn't ready. Another sent a full report but knew it was incorrect. Two others didn't send a report. FDLE included all of them in its calculations.

To account for these agencies, we excluded them from both 1995 and 1996 totals and recalculated the crime rate. The county's rate actually increased during that time period.

Next we asked FDLE for 1996 crime data from every police department in the state, which we received on a 3.5-inch floppy disk and imported into Excel.

We found 17 other departments that were counted as having no crime. Using our paper copies of 1995 data, we found seven more who didn't report any crime in that year.

So we again excluded all of those agencies from both years' totals and recalculated the change in the crime rate. Instead of a 1.7 percent drop, Florida's crime rate edged up 0.41 percent.

Lessons learned

Obviously, the lesson here is to check the data.

Florida has hundreds of police departments and the state's report presents summary data but not detailed information. FDLE made no mention of the fact that these 20 agencies reported no crime — we simply looked at the numbers in Excel.

Eyeballing (and multiple sorting) led us to most of the major discoveries for our stories, and a few minor ones that would raise questions. One county said its crime rate dropped nearly 84 percent during the two-year period. We also found that agencies in other counties seemed to have a habitual problem with reporting, filing no reports in both years.

FDLE acknowledged that its report is only as good as the numbers it receives but said there were no plans to change the system.

But reporters, editors and, hopefully, readers now realize that the crime reporting system depends not just on the public, but also on police agencies who compile statistics.

And that sometimes, these agencies make mistakes.

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To find out how to double check your city's math, order "Computer-assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide" by Brant Houston. It can be ordered from NICAR or Investigative Reporters & Editors for $26 plus shipping. Call (573) 882-2042.

Stats from the road

Continuing with crosstabs

Have a problem you would like tackled in this space? Perhaps you know of a technique that you've found valuable in your work. Maybe there is something you've heard of, but would like to see dicussed in greater detail. Let us know about it. The monthly "Stats from the road" column is gaining speed. If there is something you would like addressed in the column, flag Sarah Cohen down by e-mailing her at sarah@nicar.org

By Sarah Cohen
NICAR

Last month's Uplink column had all kinds of reasons to use crosstabs: They're easy to do, easy to understand and easy to explain. But a few key issues were missing. Among them were ways to paraphrase their results to get a key number for your story.

In this month's column, we'll look at three ways to get meaning from your crosstab: relative risk, odds ratios and attributable risk.

Here's a crosstab of uncomplicated births derived from Florida hospital discharge data for one quarter last year. "Insured" means that the women had some kind of traditional fee-for-service insurance. "Medicaid" means the women were covered under the state's health insurance program for the poor. The question: Do women with expensive traditional insurance get C-sections more frequently than women with less generous government-supplied care?

Here are the raw numbers, rounded off to make it easier:

	Insured	Medicaid	Total
C-Section	3,000	2,000	5,000
No C-Section	8,000	10,000	18,000
Total	11,000	12,000	23,000

Here's how it would look as a simple crosstab, like the ones described last month. The first row is the C-section rate, or the percent of all women within the insurance plans who got C-sections:

	Insured	Medicaid	Total
C-Section	27%	17%	22%
No C-Section	73%	83%	78%
Total	100%	100%	100%

Of course, this difference could be explained in other ways. For instance, women covered by traditional insurance are typically older than Medicaid recipients, and their pregnancies may be riskier.

But the same kind of analysis might be done within a single age group, like women in their 20s.

Looking just at the row for C-sections, how can you describe the difference?

You could just use the percentage point difference. The C-section rate for women in Medicaid is 10 percentage points lower than those covered through traditional insurance. But that's a rough sentence for your readers or viewers to swallow. If the difference were much smaller, there'd also be a problem with proportion: Is 1 percentage point a lot?

The simplest correction is to calculate the relative risk of getting a C-section by computing the simple ratio between the numbers. That's how the *Wall Street Journal* reported mortgage denial rates by race for the nation's top lenders a few years ago. In our case, the relative risk is 1.63.

A typical sentence might read: Women in traditional insurance plans get C-sections 63 percent more often than those women covered by Medicaid.

The problem with this approach is that it doesn't work very well if there's no reason to choose one of the rows rather than the other in the crosstab.

Let's say the data reflected pass and fail rates on an employment exam, and you wanted to compare these rates for signs of discrimination. Are you more worried about the difference in pass rates or fail rates? It could make a big difference.

Using the same ratios as above, but just reversing the math, women might have failed 63 percent more often than men, but men would have passed only 15 percent more often than women.

One solution to this problem is the odds ratio. It's pretty easy to compute: Divide the odds for one group by the odds for the other group.

Don't confuse odds with percents. An odds calculation uses its counterpart as its base instead of the total of all groups. The easiest way to remember it is how you figure out betting odds: odds of 3-to-1 mean that you could get a $3 windfall or you could lose $1.

So the odds of getting a C-section with traditional insurance are 3,000-to-8,000 or 3-to-8. For every three women who get C-sections, there are eight who don't. The odds of getting one in under Medicaid are 2,000-to-10,000, or 1-to-5.

The odds ratio is (3/8)/(1/5) = 1.88. That means the odds of getting a C-section under traditional insurance are 88 percent greater than for women covered under Medicaid. (It always works like this: Odds ratios are always higher than relative risk for numbers over 1, and always lower for numbers under 1.)

The most compelling reason to use this ratio, instead of relative risk, is that it doesn't matter how you express your problem.

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Using the crosstab

In the employment exam example, the odds ratio for men passing is the same as the ratio for women failing.

Attributable risk is used most commonly in medical stories, but lawyers have used it for years in product liability and discrimination cases. When you see statements like, "20 percent of all lung cancer could be avoided if everyone stopped smoking," the authors are talking about attributable risk.

It's a little harder to calculate, especially if you have lots of age groups or other control factors.

Here's a shortcut, which works for comparable numbers expressed as percents or any other kind of rate, such as a rate per 100,000 people: 1-(Rate in the control group, or the group not affected / Overall rate)

So for the C-sections, you would calculate it using the top line of the crosstab: 1-(Medicaid rate/ Total rate), or 1-(17/22), or .23. This says that about one-quarter of C-sections could be avoided if doctors paid by traditional insurers acted like Medicaid providers, so long as that's the only important difference between the two groups. Put another way, you could multiply the result by the number of C-sections there were, and estimate the number that might have been avoided: 700.

This is useful when there's a specific outcome you care about, and it works even when the proportions are very small, like in cancer clusters.

So is did two-thirds more women get C-sections in traditional insurance, are the odds almost 90 percent higher, or could you have avoided one-quarter of the C-sections among insured mothers if they were in Medicaid?

They're all true, assuming you've controlled for factors like age and health of the mother.

Pick your weapon carefully.

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NICAR has a slew (a common statistics term) of statistics handouts. To get a list of handouts, call the IRE Resource Center at (573) 882-3364.

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Oceans of trouble

scientist put it, this was a "science of elegant post-mortems."

One other database trick helped demonstrate this point. Looking for a way to analyze whether the government's actions to protect fisheries were working, I got a list of all fishery management plans used by the Fisheries Service for the last 20 years, including hundreds of amendments and updates. Taking this as a raw indicator of regulatory activity, I used Excel to total the amendments by plan, by region, and by year. The results indicated that the government was consistently behind the curve, producing a mind-boggling complex pile of regulations to protect fisheries only after they were depleted.

Schleifstein and I also subscribed to fisheries-related mailing lists that generated dozens of messages ranging from the useful to the ridiculously arcane each day. For example, the Fishfolk listserv administered by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology brings together social scientists, managers, biologists and fishermen in a freewheeling discussion. Because they offered a mosaic of expertise and opinion, the lists were useful for developing and refining some of the framing ideas of the series. They were also useful for more mundane tasks _ tracking down sources, or answering technical questions. At one point, I was curious about the origin of the fishery science terms "recruitment" (what happens when fish reach a catchable age) and "year class" (all the fish born in a given year). So I posted the question to the lists. I got dozens of responses, including one from a curious scientist who went to a library and researched the question for me. The terms originated early in the century, apparently in the work of Russian scientists. I was a little disappointed that they didn't come from college football, as some had theorized.

The Fishfolk list also provided me with one additional benefit. Trish Clay, a Fisheries Service anthropologist, was one of its founders. I was impressed with her posts to the list, and arranged via e-mail to interview her. We're now engaged to be married in October.

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Reporter lands rudder story

NICAR has copies of the FAA Service Difficulty Reports and FAA Accidents and Incidents databases for sale. They are two of dozens of databases that NICAR sells at reduced rates. To get a list of databases or to order data, call (573) 882-0684.

By Kara Morrison
NICAR staff

On a windy February morning in 1991, a Boeing 737 dove out of the sky and crashed into a Colorado Springs park, killing all 25 people aboard.

That crash, and the investigation that followed, alerted *Seattle Times* reporter Byron Acohido to a larger story that needed to be told. Crash investigators were finding what seemed to be a recurring problem with the rudder-control system on Boeing 737s.

Three years later, when USAir Flight 427 crashed and exploded into flames near Pittsburgh, investigators again pointed to 737 rudder problems, and Acohido began a two-year reporting project that would earn him a Pulitzer Prize.

Acohido, who has covered the aerospace industry for the *Seattle Times* since 1988, won the Pulitzer for beat reporting for his five-part series called "Safety at Issue."

The series, published in October 1996, details the potentially fatal problems with rudder-control systems on the world's most popular aircraft.

Spotting the story

Acohido had kept his eye on the rudder problems since the Colorado Springs crash and was aware of more than a dozen foreign crashes similar to the 1991 incident. The Pittsburgh crash brought the problem closer to home.

Immediately after that Sept. 8, 1994, crash, Acohido searched the FAA's Service Difficulty Reports database and found nearly 100 reports of serious problems with 737 rudders.

After he wrote the story about those reports, a source suggested Acohido would find further information in a NASA aviation database. That database provided details of a Continental Airlines pilot's similar experience with rudder problems near Honduras in 1994.

From there, Acohido says most of his reporting came from interviews and thousands of pages of documents, including National Transportation Safety Board records obtained through the Freedom of Information Act, FAA documents, Boeing service bulletins and court records.

Other computer assistance came from the graphics department. Acohido said working with the graphics coordinator Karen Kerchelich and news artist James McFarlane to provide detailed graphics for the series helped him focus.

Three perspectives gave him three new sets of questions to answer each time they met. And having to describe in detail each mechanical aircraft part to his editors in turn helped clarify Acohido's writing.

'That helped push me forward," Acohido says, admitting the process was tedious at times. "The more I found out, the more I found out I didn't know."

Pulling it together

In spring 1996, after having done 20 to 30 breaking stories over the two years, he began writing the series. It would take six drafts and more than 500 inches of material before he had finished.

Two more incidents gave Acohido the momentum to finish the project: the crash of Commerce Secretary Ron Brown's 737 in April 1996 and the near-crash of an Eastwind Airlines 737 in June 1996.

It wasn't just the Pulitzer that made the series a success. The FAA has since mandated changes to the 737 rudder-control systems.

"I know for sure we did meet our goal of providing readers with clarity about an issue that meant something to them," Acohido said. "I know we helped raise the level of awareness to the pilot community. I know that for a fact."

He heightened his own awareness so much that Acohido avoids flying on 737s whenever possible.

"I don't like flying on them because I know too much about them. The same risk is out there. It's there now, and it will be there for two to three more years until they put the fix they are working on on the airplanes."

His best tip for a Pulitzer-winning project?

"Don't try to do it in one giant piece," Acohido advises. "Get whatever you can in print. It will help your understanding. It will break out new insights and new sources."

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Tech Tip

Cheating at FoxPro

By Richard Mullins
NICAR/Missouri School of Journalism

Many tasks in importing and processing computer data are repetitive. This is good because it means you keep asking for data and someone keeps giving it to you.

The downside is you are too smart and your time is too valuable to sit at your keyboard and mechanically type a sequence of FoxPro commands. The answer – as many old-timers ("six months or six databases, whichever comes first") know – is a simple batch of commands, saved in a FoxPro command or .prg file.

However, one of your data processing steps could involve adding a field, changing the name of a field, or deleting a field after a new one is created and filled with the right data.

It would be nice if you could cheat your way around the manual two-step intervention this seems to involve: 1) Stopping at the appropriate point in the process to modify the table structure, and, 2) waiting.

Before I tell you how to cheat FoxPro out of tethering you to the keyboard, I should finish on the reasons why batch files for processing data are important:

- They save your time, not the computer's.
- They are repeatable. This is important if your data custodian has to send you a correction after you've invested four hours in your importing and preparation steps.
- They explicitly document and define the processing steps taken with the data. The batch is developed by deliberating what steps need to be taken and then testing those steps.

After process is refined, the commands are recorded in the batch. This ensures that the correct procedures are not left to chance or memory.

The batch should include comments (non-executing lines) about what you did and why. You should put in who wrote the batch and when it was changed.

All of these things are useful when you are asked about the integrity of the data or about decisions and changes made to the data.

Now, here's how to cheat. The technique is based on two features of SQL and FoxPro: Using the into table keywords at the end of a SQL query, and putting a literal value in the SELECT clause of the query.

As an example, you have a table called contribs and you want to add a character-type column named NewOcc and 40 characters wide. Here is what your batch would look like:

```
* Add a char(40) column to the table

SELECT *, space(40) as NewOcc ;
  FROM contribs      ;
INTO TABLE contrib1

* next step in batch ...
        * . . .
```

The query selects all the current columns, and creates one that is 40 spaces, using the built-in FoxPro function. The AS keyword is standard SQL and defines the column name you want. If you leave it out, FoxPro will name it EXPR_1 or something.

Here is one more example from one of my batches. It does in one step what I used to have to do in two manual steps: creates a column called state, and then puts the third and fourth characters of the id column into that field. (See the second line.)

As the data comes from the FEC, the state column contains the state used in the candidate's mailing address, not the state where the office is sought. In importing that data, I call that column MailState.

The Candidate ID field contains the two-letter postal abbreviation of the state the candidate would represent. In this example, the columns are explicitly named in the query instead of using the asterisk wildcard; I wanted to dictate the order of the columns.

```
SELECT cand.id, cand.name, ;
       substr(id, 3, 2) as State, ;
       cand.party1, cand.party3, ;
 cand.ico, ;
       cand.status, cand.address1, ;
       cand.address2, cand.city,;
       cand.mailstate, cand.zip, ;
       cand.prin_comm,
cand.electyear,;
       cand.district ;
  FROM tmpcand CAND ;
  INTO table cand96
```

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

On the Internet

Surfing for winners

Haven't heard enough about Pulitzer winners? Now you can hear from some of them as they share several of their tips on tape. You can order audio tapes of presentations given at NashCAR by calling Gaylor MultiMedia, Inc. at (615) 361-3611.

By Nora Paul
The Poynter Institute

The season of journalism awards and prizes are upon us.

The Pulitzers were just announced, so were the IRE award winners. In this column we'll look at some sites that can lead you to where to read the prize-winning stories, where you can find out more about journalism prizes and where you can learn about the stories behind the stories.

The Pulitzer Prize site: http://www.pulitzer.org/

Get the listing of current winners and, for the journalism prizes in 1995-96, the winners, their bios, their award-winning stories and information on the judging panels and the runner-ups.

The listings for winners prior to 1995 are under construction. The stories from this year's winners will be available in June.

Pulitzer Winners

• *The Times-Picayune*
http://www. neworleans.net
PUBLIC SERVICE
Series analyzing the conditions that threaten the world's supply of fish.
Read all about the win:
http://www.neworleans.net/prizepages/prizeindex.html

This article, covering the wins (Public Service and Editorial Cartooning) contain links to the prize-winning stories and samples of the winning editorial cartoons.

• *Newsday*
http://www.newsday.com
SPOT NEWS REPORTING
Staff of *Newsday*, Long Island, N.Y., coverage of the crash of TWA Flight 800 and its aftermath.
Read all about the win:
http://www.newsday.com/about/pulitzer.htm

This page in the "About Newsday" area provides links to the 1996 Pulitzer winning coverage and lists of previous *Newsday* prize winners.

• *Seattle Times*
http://www.seattletimes.com
INVESTIGATIVE REPORTING and BEAT REPORTING
Investigative: Eric Nalder, Deborah Nelson and Alex Tizon of *The Seattle Times* investigation of widespread corruption and inequities in the federally-sponsored housing program for Native Americans, which inspired much-needed reforms.
Beat: Byron Acohido of *The Seattle Times* coverage of the aerospace industry, notably an exhaustive investigation of rudder control problems on the Boeing 737, which contributed to new FAA requirements for major improvements.
Read the stories:
http://www.seattletimes.com/todaysnews/special.html

The texts of "Safety at Issue: the 737," and "Tribal Housing: From Deregulation to Disgrace" are presented here.

•*Philadelphia Inquirer*
http://www.phillynews.com
EXPLANATORY JOURNALISM
Michael Vitez, Ron Cortes and April Saul of *The Philadelphia Inquirer* series on the choices that confronted critically-ill patients who sought to die with dignity.
Read the stories:
http://www.phillynews.com/packages/end_of_life/

Seeking a Good Death series text is available here. The package of stories from the series, related stories from the archive and list of links to Internet resources is a great example of compiling a full array of coverage on a topic on the web.

• *Wall Street Journal*
http://www.wsj.com
NATIONAL REPORTING
Staff of *The Wall Street Journal* coverage of the struggle against AIDS in all of its aspects, the human, the scientific and the business, in light of promising treatments for the disease.

• *New York Times*
http://www.nyt.com
INTERNATIONAL REPORTING
John F. Burns of *The New York Times* coverage of the harrowing regime imposed on Afghanistan by the Taliban.

Continued on page eleven

Continued from page ten:

On the Internet

I guess they are too used to winning prizes to make a big deal, so I couldn't find anything about this Pulitzer win. But do a search <http://www.nytimes.com/search/daily/> on "Taliban" and you'll get Burns' news stories (don't be thrown off by the dates on the list that is retrieved from the search – even though it says April 1997, the stories are from last October).

• *Baltimore Sun*

http://www.sunspot.net

FEATURE WRITING

The site includes Lisa Pollak's compelling portrait of a baseball umpire who endured the death of a son while knowing that another son suffers from the same deadly genetic disease.

Other journalism awards:

Sure, the Pulitzer is journalism's Oscars, but there are a lot of other awards given by journalism associations. Here are links to the associations' pages with information about awards and winners:

• ASNE – American Society of Newspaper Editors Writing Awards

http://www.asne.org/kiosk/news/wabrel.htm

Includes 1997 winners with links to a page with their photo on it.

• APME – Associated Press Managing Editors Awards

http://www.apme.com/

Awards for public service, FOI, Meritorious Service and the Associated Press awards are listed here with details about the award and listing of winners and finalists. (There is no link to the awards page from the home page, so click to any other page, go to the bottom and link to the APME Awards page.)

• Committee to Protect Journalists

http://www.cpj.org/attacks96/frontmatter/ipfa.html

1996 Press Freedom Awards winners page with links to lengthy bios of the winners.

• Education Writers Association

http://www. ewa.org/

Click on the "Contest" link in the left column to get to a news release about the 1996 winners, some with links to the stories that won the prize.

• International Women's Media Foundation

http://www. iwmf.org/courage.htm

"Courage in Journalism" Awards

• IRE – Investigative Reporters and Editors Awards

http://www.ire.org/resources/contest/

Links to the 1996 award winners. Some of the winners' entries are linked to the text of their stories.

• NABJ – National Association of Black Journalists Awards

http://www.nabj.org/CONVENTION/conv0.html

Click on the Awards item in the left column to get a page about the categories of awards given by NABJ.

NAHJ – National Association of Hispanic Journalists Contest

http://www.nahj.org/noticias/contj97.htm

Information about the award, to be presented at the national convention. For a listing of last year's winners: http://www.nahj.org/noticias/detalle.htm#jaward

• NGLJA – National Gay and Lesbian Journalists Association Awards

http://www.journalism.sfsu.edu/www/nlgja/awards.html

Description of the award and links to listing of last year's winners.

• RTNDA – Radio and Television News Directors Association

http://www.rtnda.org/rtnda/

Scroll down the options to Awards and click to releases about past and current winners.

• SPJ – Society of Professional Journalists Awards

http://www.spj.org/awdfell/awards.htm

Although the page is still under construction, it does have a listing of the awards they give and a link to last year's winners.

And now a plug for the too often unsung support group behind the great journalism.

• News Research

http://sunsite.unc.edu/journalism/awnwslib.html

This site links you to essays by some of the top researchers in the country and how they conducted the, often, award-winning research.

Congratulations to all the winners and runner-ups. And good luck next year, everyone!

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

Get more tips from Nora Paul by going to the Poynter website at poynter.org. The site includes a list of upcoming seminars including "Reporting with the Internet" and also includes some CAR-related handouts.

Spreadsheet story ideas

This is an excerpt from a handout provided by Stephanie Reitz of *The Hartford Courant* at NashCAR, the NICAR national conference held March 6-9 in Nashville. To order the full handout, call the IRE Resource Center at (573)882-0684.

By Stephanie Reitz
The Hartford Courant

An engineer once told me that if he was stranded on a desert island, the one software he couldn't live without is the spreadsheet. It can be used to calculate, sort and graph with relative ease, he explained (although he neglected to mention why that would come in handy on a desert island).

Engineers, accountants, budget analysts and the pencil-pushers that we cover in our reporting have known for years that spreadsheets are a great time-saving tool. For reporters, they also provide a new way to collect and analyze information – and to have fun while doing it.

Here are some story ideas using spreadsheets, many of which you can start as soon as you return to your newsrooms:

• City employees' earnings and overtime

Request these payroll records from your finance or personnel office, specifying that you want the detailed information turned over to the IRS at the end of the year — not just the gross salary for the positions.

Then take a look at who makes what, and why. We analyzed this in one Connecticut city and found firefighters who had doubled their pay with overtime during a staffing shortage — but were exhausted on their life-or-death calls.

• Work-related injuries and illnesses

The U.S. Department of Labor requires these filings each year, broken down by department and detailing the number of work days lost. Build a spreadsheet that compares them over several years: why, for instance, did work-related illnesses jump over just a few years in the old library? Are police, firefighters and public works employees still those most likely to be hurt? These figures can prompt interesting stories about work conditions in certain buildings or departments, and the tax-funded worker compensation measures.

• Compare seemingly unrelated accounts

As the school department cuts textbook purchases because of budget problems, has the athletics account been touched? Analyze budgets over several years and see which are most vulnerable to reductions, and which are sacred cows. Also, end-of-year spending reports can help highlight which accounts keep showing surpluses and perhaps have been overbudgeted (and where does that surplus go?).

• Keep a running tab of a topic of interest

For example, does your town include a state unemployment report in its agenda packets every month? Or the number of marriage and birth licenses recorded each month in the town clerk's office? Update your spreadsheet every month or so, then go back to it in six months to a year – look for interesting spikes and dips, and you can whip up a quick daily or a deeper enterprise story.

• Build a spreadsheet on voting turnout

With the basics from your town's election registrars, you can build a spreadsheet of registered voters and ballots cast in each election or referendum. Is one neighborhood particularly well-represented during budget referendums? How does your community stack up against others in voter turnout? This information is also good fodder for election advance stories.

• What's the cost of that union contract?

With the appropriate union contract and formula in front of you, figure out the true cost – payroll multiplied by the raises offered each year. Don't forget those hidden "step increases!" This allows a thorough and fair review of a contract's financial value. You can also use this on individual contracts, such as when a new administrator is hired with pay incentives built into his/her contract.

• A final hint

The more interested you are in the data, the more you'll enjoy learning to use the spreadsheet. Don't jump into any old project just to get one under your belt – pick a topic that makes you curious.

And don't hesitate to call me if I can help with spreadsheet glitches, formulas or anything else – happy calculating!

Stephanie Reitz can be reached at
(800) 524-4242 Ext. 5349,
or send e-mail to sreitz@courant

So many CAR options

By Brant Houston
IRE Executive Director

The optional computer-assisted reporting day of the National IRE Conference is coming up fast. The so-called optional day will be on Thursday, June 12, at The Biltmore Hotel in Phoenix, Arizona and will offer about 20 panels and workshops.

Some panels will be popular repeats from our NashCAR conference in March such as reporting on air, rail and car crashes. We will also have two-hour panels on special topics in which panelists will show attendees how to produce stories from education, health, and business databases.

Other panels will be two to three hours long and broken into one-hour sessions. For example, Nora Paul of the Poynter Institute will lead a "training the trainers" program that will go from 9 a.m. to noon and be divided into three sections. Another two-part panel on using CAR at small to medium newspapers will be coordinated by reporters from smaller news organizations.

As usual at the national conference, NICAR will keep a demonstration room open from Thursday through Saturday for journalists to share techniques and talk about specific problems or stories.

For the main program on Friday and Saturday, we have scheduled a series of exciting and ground breaking panels composed of award-winning journalists. Many of those panels will have CAR sprinkled throughout

And on Sunday the Poynter Institute will guide the program with a group of thoughtful sessions on writing and other topics.

You can find information on the conference at www.ire.org both before and after it happens.

Indianapolis, March 19-22

Meanwhile, we are already planning for our next national CAR conference, which will be Indianapolis, March 19-22, 1998. This conference is a return to a city where IRE did two joint conferences with CAR pioneer and University of Indiana professor James Brown in the early 1990s.

We're happy that Jim has invited IRE and NICAR back to the university's campus in Indianapolis where there are great computer labs and lecture halls.

Please send us ideas and stories (as they emerge during the year) that you think should be subjects for panels and hands-on training in Indianapolis. You can e-mail them to brant@ire.org

Global = Local

As IRE and NICAR do more international work it's becoming clear to us that global is becoming local and the local is becoming global.

In Nashville, reporters from Iowa talked to Lise Olsen (the director of our reporting institute in Mexico City) about the effects of NAFTA on agriculture in the Midwest. Our panels on immigration looked at immigration's effects on the United States, Latin America and China.

Several IRE members have asked us to put together panels and handouts on global economics issues.

Colleagues in Mexico, Sweden and Denmark are sharing ideas and techniques as the Internet and Web browsers make international reporting easier.

One of our challenges in the coming year is to show how our programs for small to medium news outlets (print and broadcast) and for international journalists actually bolster each other.

One way we hope to meet that challenge is by holding a border seminar Nov. 14-16 this year along the Mexico and U.S. border for journalists from both countries. We expect that many of the journalists will be from smaller news organizations.

Coordinating coordinators

And speaking of our efforts for those organizations, IRE and NICAR are rejuvenating our regional coordinator system. We are looking for members to volunteer to be regional and state coordinators.

We are asking the volunteers to sign up more members, hold informal gatherings of local reporters, and eventually help us arrange workshops in every state over the next year or two. We believe this will keep IRE in touch with reporters no matter what size their organizations.

Cory de Vera, IRE's membership coordinator, is collecting the names of volunteers. You can e-mail her at cory@ire.org or call (573) 882-2042.

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

To find out more about the Investigative Reporters & Editors' national conference in Phoenix, visit the IRE website at http://www.ire.org

Seminars, bootcamps, conferences

Get your training

Check out the NICAR website at nicar.org to find out times and dates for upcoming on-the-road training and bootcamps.

On-the-road training

NICAR and, where indicated, The Associated Press provide specialized training in your newsroom.

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

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

Note: In the following list, "Closed" means the session is open only to members of the host organization.

- Denmark, Sweden. May 26-June 6. Closed.
- New York, N.Y. Reuters. May 29-30. Closed.
- San Francisco, Cal. June 21-22 (seminar for minority journalists) San Francisco State University.
- Chicago, Ill. Reuters. June 26-27. Closed.
- Washington, D.C., Freedom Forum. July 14-15. Closed.
- Huntington, W.Va. Aug. 19-22. Marshall University. Closed.
- Washington, D.C. Sept. 11-13. Medill School of Journalism. Open.
- New York, N.Y. Sept. 26-27. (Broadcast workshop) Columbia University. Open.

Conferences

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

- IRE National Conference, Phoenix, Ariz., — June 12-15.

Bootcamps

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

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

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

- May 18-23. Regular Bootcamp on general computer-assisted reporting. For details, call (573) 882-0684
- July 11-13. Mini Bootcamp on general computer-assisted reporting. New York University. New York, N.Y. For details, call (573) 882-0684.
- Aug. 10-15. Regular Bootcamp on general computer-assisted reporting. For details, call (573) 882-0684

South of the Border

Periodistas de Investigacion (IRE-Mexico) offers computer-assisted reporting training in Spanish to journalists in Mexico and Latin America.

PI, based in Mexico City, has developed a two-day workshop that covers the basics of investigative reporting and computer-assisted reporting, and a four-to-five day bootcamp that covers CAR intensively.

The workshops can be held in almost any city with prior notice.

The courses cover using internet, spreadsheets, database managers, and general electronic records, and uses examples from the Mexican and Latin American press.

There is one bootcamp scheduled in May:

- Mexico City — May 14-18.

Annual membership to IRE-Mexico is $25 (or $200 pesos mexicanos) and is open to journalists or students of journalism living in Mexico and Latin America.

Instructors are Lise Olsen, managing director of IRE-Mexico, and Pedro Enrique Armendares, assistant director.

Both have more than seven years of experience in investigative reporting, Olsen at *The Virginian-Pilot* (Norfolk, Virginia) and Armendares *at La Jornada* (in Mexico City).

Call Olsen at (52)-5-554-7613 for more information, send email to: lise@ire.org

Growing collection of federal databases

From the NICAR library

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

NEW • Federal Aviation Administration's accidents and incidents, including major plane crashes since 1971.

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

• A monthly CD subscription for all 1995-96 Federal Election Commission campaign contributions by individuals and political action committees, plus all presidential matching fund requests.

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

• Federal Railroad Administration data for accidents, casualties, and highway crossings. 1991-1995.

• Coast Guard boating accidents, 1969-1994.

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

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

• Federal procurement data, 1992-1995, includes breakdowns by agency.

• Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms gun dealer records. 1993-1995.

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

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

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

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

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

• U.S. Small Business Administration loan guarantees, 1989-1995. This includes the name of the business, address, amount covered by the SBA, and status, including whether the loan went bad.

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

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

• The National Inventory of Dams. 1991-1995.

• U.S. Department of Transportation hazardous materials accidents database, a collection of roadway, rail, air and waterway accidents from 1971 to 1995.

• U.S. Department of Transportation fatal accident reporting system. It includes all roadway accidents from 1988 to 1995.

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

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

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

Bits, Bytes and Barks

NICAR Net

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

In the body of the message, type:
subscribe NICAR-L <your name>
subscribe IRE-L <your name>

Help Wanted

• *The Atlantic City Press* is looking for an investigative and computer-assisted reporter with five years experience. Applicants should be proficient in Excel, be able to use Access to analyze complex databases and know SQL.

Send resume and clips to Michael Diamond, 1000 W. Washington Ave., Pleasantville, N.J. 08232.

• *The Orange County Resister* is looking for a leader for its investigative team. This is currently a reporter-editor job.

Submit a packet with resume, clips and a one-page introductory letter to: Larry Burrough, deputy editor for news, 625 N. Grand Ave., Santa Ana, Calif. 92701. Fax: (714) 565-3681.

Membership has its privileges

You can join IRE via our web server, or you can download a copy of our membership form in Adobe Acrobat format from the web site and submit it by fax to (573) 884-5544.

For more information, check out http://www.ire.org/membership.html

More Phoenix Information

The National IRE Conference fun begins June 12 with CAR optional day. Here is a tentative list of the panels that will be offered that day:

- 50 Of The Newest Ideas In CAR
- Using the Internet For Daily And Beat Reporting
- Broadcasters' Workshop: Good Answers To Special Problems
- Crime Reporting: More Than The Usual Numbers
- Training The Trainers
- Ethics Of Data And Legalities On The Net
- Covering Education With CAR
- Local Reporting For Larger Markets — Newspapers & Broadcast
- Covering the Environment With CAR
- Small To Medium Newspapers
- Covering Social Issues With CAR
- Business Reporting With CAR
- Using CAR to Analyze Campaign Finances
- How To Find Data For Both Deadline And Long Term Stories
- Transportation: Crash Data
- How To Keep Your Data Organized
- Covering Health Care With CAR
- The Latest On Intranets
- Mapping, Graphics On The Web

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