___UPLINK

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The Safe and the Sorry, Working in Ohio

By Mike Casey,
Dayton Daily News

In the fall of 1989, an Occupational Safety and Health Administration official in Cincinnati told me that the agency kept its investigations on computer tape.

That got me thinking about using OSHA's database in a project about workers' safety.

The Dayton Daily News' workers' safety series ran from June 2 through 6 this year, following a successful 10-month fight with OSHA to release its database.

The series findings were:

- An employer paid a $2 fine in the deaths of two workers in Georgia, even though the employer was cited with two life-threatening violations.

- OSHA's median fine in accidents that kill and maim workers was $500 from 1972-1990. When adjusted for inflation, fines in 1972 were more than twice as high as those in 1990.

- The 10 Dayton-area companies with the most OSHA violations.

- The nation's worksite with the most fatal and serious accident investigations was Bethlehem Steel Corp.'s mill and shipyard near Baltimore.

- OSHA has taken years to implement tougher standards despite workers' deaths.

In December 1989, I sent a Freedom of Information Act request to OSHA for its southwestern Ohio inspection records on tape.

Workplace safety: A broken promise

Cleveland King's workday was almost over when a strong Georgia wind toppled a 15-foot concrete block wall on him, killing King and another worker.

"I took some of the blocks off until the paramedics got there," Osby Monday said. He looked away when he saw that the blocks had crushed his friend's head.

The federal government said King's employer neglected to brace the unfinished Midas Muffler Shop wall on that July 1986 day near Atlanta. It imposed a fine for two "serious" violations of workplace safety standards.

The fine was $2.

Twenty years ago the federal government pledged to assure safe and healthful working conditions for all Americans.

But an eight-month *Dayton Daily News* examination found the system created to do this fails. It fails because the government doesn't compel em... make safety a priority. It fails because em... ployers have little fear of serious punish... workers are killed or maimed.

The *Daily News* reviewed thousands of ... interviewed more than 200 people and analy... lion computer records from the Occupati... and Health Administration, the federal a... oversees workplace safety and health ... findings:

■ Employers routinely pay small fines wh... fault for accidents, even when workers are ki... pled. The median OSHA fine for such acci... 1972 through 1990 was $500, though fines re... increased.

■ OSHA never hears about many workp... because it relies on the media or the empl... selves to report them. OSHA's director e... misses 40 percent to 60 percent.

SEE

...gers. Each year ...ricans die from ...nesses and accidents. ...hears about many of ...deaths. Page 1.

Big violators. In 18 years a Maryland industrial site has been cited for 26 accidents that killed or injured employees. Miami Valley workers, too, face danger. Page 6

Why OSHA doesn't protect more workers. A fireworks plant explosion killed 21 people. At the time, OSHA didn't even know it existed. Page 9.

Flaws in rule-making. Proposals to make workplaces safer become tangled in bureaucracy. But injuries and deaths continue. Page 12

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Connecticut Legislature Cuts the *Red* Tape

This story was written by Peter Viles for the Associated Press. The story was released June 5.

Connecticut is poised to become a national leader in ensuring public access to computerized government records, a crucial freedom-of-information issue as governments shift their records frrom paper to computer tapes and disks.

Legislation given final passage in the state Senate June 3 provided that any citizen or news organiza-

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(Still) Plugging In.... The Palm Beach Post

By Jimmy Montague, MICAR

If you ask Paul Martin to describe the problems associated with starting a computer-assisted, investigative journalism program these days, his reply would consist of two words - "The recession."

Since Martin has been assigned to cover city government at the *Palm Beach Post* bureau in Port St. Lucie, Fla., the paper's computer-

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Later, I asked for the 1.8 million record national database. OSHA's response to the newspaper's request was that it would not hand over the tapes because the newspaper might come to conclusions different than OSHA's.

However, the agency sent boxes containing a 5-foot high stack of paper records for southwestern Ohio. The agency said the 25,000 paper records of OSHA inspections met the newspaper's request for the computer tape. *The Dayton Daily News* disagreed and filed a FOIA appeal with the Labor Department's Office of the Solicitor.

The newspaper also enlisted the aid of Sen. Howard M. Metzenbaum, D-Ohio, who chairs the Senate Labor Subcommittee.

Metzenbaum wrote the agency a letter saying the OSHA's reason for denying the request for the computer tape did not meet the exemptions under the FOIA.

In May 1990, OSHA agreed to turn over its tapes for southwestern Ohio. Four months later, it agreed to turn over the national database.

I used a Dell desk-top computer at the newspaper to analyze the southwestern Ohio records.

The Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting helped by providing software to read the tape.

The computer records sketch the findings of OSHA investigations with information such as company names, types of violations and amounts of fines. The records came on 1/2 inch, 6250 bpi tape. T record length was 23,399 and the block-size was 23,403.

To analyze the national database, the newspaper received help from a local University, Wright State University, which provided its mainframe computer and technical assistance.

The computer pointed toward problems. *Daily News* reporter Russell Carollo and I conducted scores of interviews and reviewed thousands of pages of records to flush out the picture of workplace dangers.

Some things I learned from working on this projects:

- It's useful to learn about the agency before receiving the computer tapes. That way you understand some of the agency's terminology that are used to describe computer fields.

- The computer allows medium-sized newspapers to tackle tough national stories.

- Universities can provide newpapers with the necessary technical assistance in computer projects.

- The data analysis people at OSHA w helpful in explaining the database. I suspect oth agencies have people who will be just as helpful.

- There is a lot of frustration with using a computer. For example, the first set of national tapes that OSHA sent the newspaper were faulty. We had to reapply to get new tapes, which took an extra six weeks.

New York Times Stops Playing "Catch-up"

John. C. Freed
Database Editor, The New York Times

Last year, as best as we can determine, the total amount received by members of the House in outside speaking fees appeared in only two papers: *The Los Angeles Times* and *The New York Times*.

There was a difference, however: The New Yorkers, calculators in hand, merely produced a grand total for publication. *The L.A. Times*, armed with computers, was able to print a list of receipts by the California delegation and give details on contributions by particular industries, such as defense and tobacco.

We decided to use the computer ourselves this year. As far as we know the two Timeses were still the only papers with the grand totals.

But this year in New York we were able to print a "Top 10" list for both the House and the Senate. Also, using the computer, we were able to spot patterns that enriched the story. And we easily produced a sidebar on Congressmen from the New York area. Instead of playing catch-up, we're out in front of the story.

Tape Cont....

tion requesting computer-stored public documents of information can get the data in the form desired - for example on floppy disk, computer tape or printout.

Further, it would block governing bodies from signing exclusive contracts with private firms that would sell government records to the public. It also requires that governments keep the state Freedom of Information law in mind when they construct computer programs for storing and retrieving data.

"I think this is real landmark legislation in the United States, if not the western world," said Mitchell W. Pearlman, executive director of the state Freedom of Informaiton Commission.

"It's absolutely critical legislation. The Connecticut example is one that should be followed by all the states, and by the federal government too."

- Timothy B. Gassert
Director and Counsel for the Division of Public Records in Massachusetts

"I don't think there's anything like it."

The state Senate unanimously passed the bill without debate Monday, sending it to Gov. Lowell P. Weicker Jr. The measure had cleared the House, 124-21.

"It's absolutely critical legislation," said Timothy B. Gassert, director and counsel for the Division of Public Records in Massachusetts.

"The Connecticut example is one that should be followed by all the states, and by the federal government too."

The bill addresses problems that have surfaced as governments have increased their reliance on computers. News organizaitons and other groups increasingly want government records in computerized form, which makes it easier to search through the records without leafing through mounds of paper.

"If someone wants to search government files to see, for example, whether the government is paying the same person twice for the same job, you can find that easily with fairly simple computer search techniques," Pearlman said.

But governments often don't oblige.

In some cases, they offer documents only in printed copies - expensive and insurmountable reams of paper. In other cases, they charge artificially high fees for shifiting information to a computer format the public can use.

"We're entering into a new era of government, an electronic bureaucracy," said Gassert, the Massachusettes official. "And ironically, that kind of modernization is being used by many in government to restrict access to information that is supposed to be available to the public."

The bill enforces governments to honor any reasonable request for computer-stored public information. For example, a reporter who wants population statistics on floppy disk could get them, provided he or she was willing to pay a fee for the cost of transferring the data from whatever format the government uses. Governments could charge fees for shifing the data, but only within strict guidelines intended to prevent governments from artificailly limiting access.

The bill would not force governments to increase their reliance on computers, and would not make available any information that is now kept private.

The most forward-looking aspect of the Connecticut bill requires government agencies to consult with a central state information office before buying new computer systems.

Many existing government programs do not separate public and private information, and the unclassified data cannot be easily pulled out.

The bill would take effect on July 1, 1992.

"It's a recognition that computerized records have particular benefits and problems associated with them," Pearlman said.

"This bill takes the first steps toward dealing with those problems."

Brant Houston, a reporter for the *Hartford Courant* and frequent contributer to UPLINK, testified in front of the Connecticut legislative committee reponsible for Freedom of Information laws earlier this year. Houston did this at the request of a coalition of news organizations.

Houston told the legislators the difficulties he had encountered when trying to access electronic records, and he described some of the "silly excuses" government record keepers used to withold information.

Judging by the bill described in this article, it seems Houston's testimony paid off.

Plugging In Cont....

-assisted journalism program would seem to be dead in the water.

"I wouldn't even call it a program at this point," Martin said.

Martin got his bachelor's degree from the University of Missouri's School of Journalism in May, 1990.

After graduation, he did an internship at *The Post* from June until October. The paper hired him full-time in November.

"Two years ago we had expansion plans. But now it's just not an environment in which you can let someone go for a couple of months to digest a database."

- Tom O'Hara
Manging Editor, Palm Beach Post

Martin was trained in computer-assisted journalism at M.U. and has already used the techniques he learned there in helping with one award-winning piece for his new employer.

Last year, while still an intern working with former Projects Editor Rich Gordon, Martin says he did the computer search that yielded an outstanding series on property tax appraisals in Palm Beach County, Fla. (See "Taxing Investigation in Palm Beach," UPLINK December 1990)

Recently, that series was awarded third prize by The Florida Society of Newspaper Editors in that organization's public service category for newspapers over 100,000 circulation.

Now comes the tough stuff.

Even before the award was announced, Rich Gordon (also computer-trained at M.U.) left *The Post*. He was hired away by the rival Miami Herald.

Gordon's position is now held by Projects Editor John Bartosek. Bartosek, also an assistant managing editor, now wears two hats.

Since its initial success, the paper has used computer analyses on census stories and drought coverage, but those were not projects that required a relational database, said Martin.

Martin attributes the lack of computer-assisted reporting at *The Post* to a budgetary crunch induced by plummeting ad sales. He feels lucky because *Post* hasn't had as many personnel cuts as some newspapers have.

Said Martin, "When you're having to cut staff from the features department it's difficult to convince people to create new positions in the metro department. People started saying 'Oh, gee! $5,000 for a tape drive. $1,000 for a training seminar....'"

But Martin is an optimist.

"I think that when we come out of this recession, computer-assisted journalism is going to be one of the first areas management is willing to put money into," he said.

Managing editor Tom O'Hara concurs with Martin's diagnosis. "I'd like to do more [computer-assisted journalism]," O'Hara said.

"Two years ago we had expansion plans. But now it's just not an environment in which you can let someone go for a couple of months to digest a database," he said.

He, too, is cautiously optimistic.

Said O'Hara: "I don't know what the fut holds. If things pick up I'd like to get back into it but, for now, everything's on hold here."

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MICAR is interested in attaining any information, ideas or stories related to computer-assisted reporting for future issues of UPLINK

If you wish to contribute, please mail your story or idea to the above address. Or, call us for a fax number.

- Adam Berliant, Editor