

# Uplink

April 1994

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

## Uplink update

We asked for your help and ideas in our last issue, and we're starting to get the phone calls, clips, faxes, and electronic messages we had hoped for. Please keep them coming. (Several of our readers noticed that we failed to include our electronic addresses in our masthead. We included them in this issue).

We attended the recent annual conference at the National Institute for Advanced Reporting in Indianapolis, heard some terrific speakers, met with Jim Brown, NIAR's honcho, and picked up many ideas on where our endeavors at NICAR should head.

We hope to apply those ideas at the upcoming national IRE conference in St. Louis, June 16-19. If you want to attend, call IRE at (314)882-2042. The program for the traditional optional day on Thursday, June 16, will focus on online databases and computer-assisted reporting for daily and beat stories. The NICAR staff will be there in force, running a demonstration room, helping with panels, and providing advice.

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EEOC data, bulletin board surfing and CAR reporters moving

How to unscramble data, cajole bureaucrats and fix software

## Deciphering welfare fraud

**By Bradley Goldstein**

*The Lawrence Eagle-Tribune*

Do you think readers would like to know if a well-paid foreign consul general also receives welfare benefits?

Or if a sanitation worker walked into a Boston bank and used his Massachusetts welfare card to cash a \$25,000 disability check? And never declared the outside income to welfare?

Or if a man is legally entitled to receive a \$29,000 Social Security check while serving a two-year prison sentence?

Or what welfare dependency means to two women who have collected public assistance for nearly 20 years each?

Stories like these and a dozen others helped bring the complex subject of welfare and welfare abuse into focus when *The Eagle-Tribune* in Lawrence published a five-part computer-assisted series on the Massachusetts Welfare System in September.

The series found Massachusetts welfare officials doing little or nothing to prevent unscrupulous people from stealing tens of millions of dollars from taxpayers and the poor.

Daily circulation rose 1,000 papers above normal during the series. And requests from across the country keep trickling into the newsroom.

But the juicy stories were just one small part of a long and complicated project.

What the reader didn't see were the hundreds of hours spent inputting reams of data, the panic when software problems ate thousands of records or

the cajoling that went into getting government bureaucrats to hand over computer information free of cost.

The names of welfare recipients have been protected under state and federal privacy laws since the Great Depression. So when two years of welfare rolls for the Greater Lawrence area landed in our laps we started to computerize them.

Complicating matters was a 50-year-old law that makes it a criminal offense for anyone to possess welfare rolls or use them to derive statistics, and the task of deciphering the welfare department's code.

Two sets of lawyers told us the law was unconstitutional. And when a file layout was sent to us in the mail, the code was easily understood.

Welfare lists contain names, social security numbers, addresses, dates on and off public assistance, the grant amount, the type of assistance, the case workers' names and the reasons for

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## Coming Events

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**May 15-20**

NICAR Training Seminar  
*Columbia, Missouri*

**June 16-19**

IRE National Conference  
*St. Louis, Missouri*

**August 14-19**

NICAR Training Seminar  
*Columbia, Missouri*

**October 6-9**

IRE Computer-Assisted  
Reporting Conference  
*San Jose, California*

## **Uplink**

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Letter from an alumnus

# Let's educate the public

By Adam Berliant  
*The Tacoma News Tribune*

Reporters don't want to admit it, but there is a growing uneasiness among record-keepers, legislators and worst of all, the general public, that a person's ability to obtain government databases is not the greatest thing in the world.

This uneasiness, which goes way beyond legal issues and FOIA technicalities, could soon turn into a crisis for computer-assisted reporters.

Two examples from here in Washington:

I requested court records from our Office of the Administrator of the Courts (OAC), which makes individual court records available without difficulty in every corner of this state. Court records are so readily available, you can access them from your home on-line!

But when I requested a copy of the raw data, new laws suddenly started materializing. The OAC denied our original request based on judges' right to privacy ("huh?" did you say?). The OAC's data dissemination board backed away from this absurd notion later. They said what their denial really meant was that our access to the entire database raises new ethical and privacy dilemmas not considered by the creators of the original freedom of information laws. An entire database is different, they claimed, and new dissemination policies have to be created. (P.S.: They also said they worried about the commercial use of the data.)

So now the OAC's administrators are talking to record-keepers, record-keepers are talking to judges, judges are talking to lawyers, lawyers are talking to other lawyers, meetings are being held, advisors are being called, new policies are being written and in the meantime court officers are scrambling for any reason they can conjure up to delay my access to the information.

This has gone on for months and despite a great deal of rigorous support from my newspaper, our attorneys, local advocacy groups and even other news organizations (including the *Seattle Times*),

no progress has been made.

The OAC insists the delays and tactics are all in the public's interest. The people don't want you to have this data, they claim.

Even though I think they're just trying to cover their behinds, upon casually discussing this situation with friends over beers, basketball games, lunches, etc., I am forced to agree with the OAC — some people do see access to computer databases as a threat. Some really think a new set of dissemination ethics is needed, even though they recognize that the same information is already available in conventional formats. Reporters, me included, fall into shock upon hearing such a thing.

Another example: I obtained a copy of Washington's gun registration database. This file contained demographic and product information about every gun owner in the state. We used the data to run a two-part series on the rise of gun popularity in Washington.

Beyond the usual disgust from firearm-rights advocates, whose contempt we would expect even if we had a headline reading 'Handguns are Tops!', there was another, more disturbing development.

Upon reading the series, a state representative proposed new legislation in Olympia to specifically prevent the further release of the database. Crooks, the representative said, would obtain the database to get the names and addresses of people who own the particular brand and caliber of firearm they would most like to steal. He called the database a 'shopping list' for hoods who would break into your house for the purpose of obtaining your gun (did I hear you say "huh?" again?).

Once again, the representative was claiming that 'the people' need to be protected. The representative was not laughed out of the state,

nor was his proposal. In fact, the House included portions of his proposal in its crime bill, and it passed. Now we're crossing our fingers for a governor's veto.

The point is this: There are politicians who are crying out for new public informa-

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tion restrictions designed specifically for computerized information.

And what's most disturbing is that I think if they ever asked for public support — if there were a vote tomorrow — I think restrictions would win.

Reporters, meanwhile, continue to act very sure of themselves — these are records, they are public records, they are available under FOI laws. We act as though because the laws currently say we can get away with it, there is public support for the notion.

But are we really sure the rest of society agrees with us? I can tell you, many don't. In a world where people are inundated with junk mail, telephone marketing, electronic billing and other computer-generated hassles, many find computerized information despicable.

So what are news organizations doing about it? These days we are so busy arguing that current FOI laws protect our rights, we've forgotten to ask who is protecting the current FOI laws.

It's true that groups like the Reporter's Committee for Freedom of the Press are busy lobbying in government. But for what? At best, they argue for the continued acknowledgement that FOI laws are meant to include computerized information — or some version of that point. All of this 'politics' occurs without much consideration about what the public actually wants or thinks is fair.

I think what we need is a good, honest, hard-hitting PR campaign.

The most a news organization ever does to tout the values of computer-assisted reporting is to mention it in a story: "A (your news organization here) computer analysis of (your database here), a computer file containing hundreds of thousands of records concerning (fill-in-the-blank) showed that (nut graph)."

Not only is this line always included in computer-assisted reporting stories, but usually, we put in as if the reader will respond, "Gee, aren't computers great!"

NICAR's *Uplink* newsletter, which I helped create, is a worst case example of this. We constantly congratulate ourselves over our new found resourcefulness. But we're not the ones that need convincing.

It's pointless to continually stress that stories were made possible with the use of computerized information. What we need to stress instead is that the stories would have been impossible without it — and we need to do this in places other than our own newsprint or broadcasts.

## Bits, Bytes and Barks

### EEOC data offers another nugget

Persistence is paying off for the *Wall Street Journal*. Last month we reported that, after the paper requested Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) data, the reports arrived incomplete.

It took three separate Freedom of Information Act requests to obtain the missing information. But with the completed files, *Journal* reporters found that among ethnic groups, only blacks suffered a net job loss in the 1990-91 recession.

In a story once again using EEOC data, the *Journal* recently reported that black women's gains in corporate America dramatically outstripped those of black men between 1982 and 1992. The information was gleaned from an analysis of 1.7 million EEOC reports, which included 1992 reports covering about a third of the civilian workforce.

Considering that the EEOC reports include data on the race, gender and type of job held by 42 million U.S. workers, this probably isn't the last we've seen of them.

— Gwen Carleton

### Bulletin board surfing pays off...

We had just spent six months looking into a classic federal government screw-up. The FDA was supposed to insure that all food contaminated in a toxic warehouse fire got sent to local landfills in Kansas City, Kan.

Instead, thousands of pounds of food that was either clearly contaminated or most likely contaminated was sent to consumers worldwide. What's more, the FDA allowed laboratories hired by food salvagers to guarantee that the food they released was safe.

After analyzing how the FDA mishandled the matter, we found the story was still missing something. Then, as I was rummaging around inside the FDA's electronic bulletin board (which I reached through the FedWorld Gateway), I found what we needed.

"In Kansas City, 18 people received the Commissioner's Special Citation for their salvage efforts during an underground cave fire... FDA Kansas district office investigators reviewed reconditioning plans presented by firms whose products were adulterated in the fire."

So it turned out that the guys who screwed up got a medal for the mess. Hell of a kicker. They wrote it for us.

— Mike McGraw

### CAR reporters are getting more popular

Dan Browning (author of last month's food inspection article) has headed north from the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* to the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. David Armstrong has gone crosstown from the *Boston Herald* to the *Boston Globe* and his partner, Alan Levin, took Brant Houston's spot at *The Hartford Courant*. Actually, *The Courant* has expanded its CAR program by adding John Moran, a long-time reporter there, as its online reporter. (This issue's quiz: How many online reporters are there in the country? Find out next issue.) And, of course, Jennifer LaFleur of the *San Jose Mercury News* joined NICAR March 28.

— Uplink editors

# Deciphering welfare fraud

Continued from front page

being on welfare.

Because the lettering was too small to scan — we tried — we had to spend hundreds of hours inputting the data into a DBASE 4, version 1.5, file. We have been using DBASE for the past three years.

On at least four occasions, I was entering the 500th name, when all of a sudden, the computer froze while in the middle of the date field. Cold panic struck. The only way out was to hit the control/alt/delete buttons and reboot the system. We lost all 500 records and hours of work.

When this problem first happened, we thought it was the keyboard. So we changed to a new one. It happened a second time in the same location: The date field. Again the records were lost.

We switched computers, thinking it was a hardware problem. Finally, after the fourth time we called the Borland Hotline to see if it was a software problem. Borland purchased DBASE from Ashton Tate.

They suggested we had a "corrupt header" — the computer equivalent of scrambled eggs. The code that tells the computer where the fields are within the database had somehow become corrupted, throwing everything out of whack.

The only way around the problem was to convert the file from DBASE into ASCII format. Once that was done, the file had to be transferred back into DBASE. We also purchased a program called DSALVAGE, designed to clean up problems like the one we kept experiencing.

This problem did not always happen when I was entering data into the computer. It struck again when we transferred 500,000 records from the newsroom 386. At first the data was fine. But as we began to cut and slice, we appeared to lose half our files.

Fortunately, we backed our data up on a tape and were able to try again. Borland has still not been able to explain the inputting problem. We are now looking at other databases like FoxPro for Windows.

Once we had the welfare lists computerized we were able to match it with other databases. We knew from a previous computer-assisted project that people collecting workers' compensation often failed to report the income to the welfare department. As a result, they could earn a very good wage taxfree at the expense of the taxpayers.

I spent four months negotiating with the Industrial Accident Board Commissioner to give me a computerized tape of all workers' compensation cases.

At first, the state wanted to give me just the names, dates of birth, insurance company, business, accident date, board identification number and settlement of everyone who filed a claim at the IAB. The names were worthless. I wanted the social security numbers. They were the one unique field I needed to conduct matches.

I argued that the registry of state motor vehicle uses social

security numbers on most drivers' licenses. And many banks put social security numbers on deeds.

They agreed to give me the social security number if it did not come with the name and date of birth. Why not? We had all the names we needed in our welfare database. It worked.

Once the match was done, I gave the state a list of names and board identification numbers and asked for paper copies to check my findings. They had no idea what I was trying to find. The paper records gave us something to fall back on and double check our findings.

We found Greater Lawrence businesses paid more than \$1.5 million in settlement claims in the last two years to welfare recipients. We also found 99 percent never declared the outside income to the welfare department as required by law.

When we asked the welfare commissioner why the state never performed such matches with workers' compensation records, he told us the two computers were not compatible. The state compensation was not where most fraud occurred.

After our series came out, the state started performing matches and found thousands of double dippers trying to beat the system.

Another ripe area was prisons.

We knew from the Essex County Sheriff that inmates in the country jail were collecting welfare benefits behind bars on a somewhat routine basis.

Four years ago, an inmate told *The Eagle-Tribune* how easy it was to collect welfare while serving a prison sentence. The state keeps track of prisoners through the Criminal History Systems Board. But records cost \$25 per inmate, making that cost exclusive.

We did have, however, our own criminal systems history board. Several years ago, I asked our court reporter to save disks. I converted the files into a database making a match possible.

In two separate interviews both the Massachusetts welfare commissioner and the state's top fraud prosecutor told us that computer matches were impossible. They both cited the lack of a central registry. Our series showed them how to perform a match.

The fallout from the series has been tremendous. U.S. Senator Herbert Kohl, D-Wisconsin, asked for a copy. Two members of Congress are proposing legislation banning inmates from collecting Social Security while behind bars.

Gov. William F. Weld came to the newsroom and revoked a law making it illegal for welfare officials to provide U.S. Immigration and Naturalization with information to apprehend criminally convicted aliens. And welfare reform has a good chance of getting through the state legislature.

If you would like more information on deciphering welfare codes, welfare data in general, privacy issues we dealt with, the pitfalls of DBASE or a copy of our series, please call me at *The Eagle-Tribune* in Lawrence. My phone number is (508) 685-1000; ext. 189.