Uplink

September • October 2006
Volume 18, Number 5

Published bimonthly by the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting
www.nicar.org

TRANSPORTATION

Monitoring airport activity

By Trebor Banstetter
Fort Worth Star-Telegram

Dallas-Fort Worth Airport is one of the largest airports in the world, with more than 2,000 daily flights to more than 170 cities worldwide. For travelers who live in North Texas, however, the mammoth airport has long been a mixed blessing.

It's home to a giant American Airlines hub, which means nonstop flights and high frequency service to countless cities. But American aggressively protects its turf and has a history of running off competitors. That's part of the reason why fares at D/FW tend to be higher than the national average.

So when low-fare carrier AirTran Airways launched a bid to operate a mini-hub at D/FW, travelers in Fort Worth and Dallas were watching closely. At the *Star-Telegram*, where I cover airlines and travel for the business desk, we explored U.S. Department of Transportation databases routinely used by transportation analysts and researchers to gauge the impact AirTran was having on fares, traffic demand and competition with American.

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SPOTLIGHT: MILITARY MANEUVERS

Databases show vets get uneven treatment

By Chris Adams, *McClatchy Washington Bureau*

All things being equal, a military veteran on the West Coast should get the same treatment as his colleague from the East, right?

You would think so. After all, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has but one set of regulations, which applies to veterans whether they live in Sacramento, Calif., or Syracuse, N.Y..

But in fact, a veteran from one state is unlikely to get the same service, treatment or monthly disability check as his

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SPOTLIGHT:

For more about the military see:

ROAD SAFETY

Tired truckers endanger Tenn. drivers

By Nancy Amons, *WSMV-Nashville*

Sammy Pruitt stopped at 6:30 every morning for bacon and biscuits at C & E market on a rural highway south of Nashville. Last summer he was pumping gas into his pick-up when a tractor-trailer came sliding toward the gas station on its side. Pruitt died instantly. The truck driver, Robert Peyton, told emergency workers he had fallen asleep behind the wheel.

Peyton had been driving all night to deliver a load of air conditioners. The trucker was never prosecuted or ticketed and still has a valid Kentucky commercial driver's license – which shows no sign of the fatal accident. He could be hired to haul hazardous material tomorrow.

How big a problem are sleepy truckers in Tennessee? WSMV's I-Team analyzed truck accident reports statewide over the last five years and found 64 crashes where a trucker who was

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Bits & Bytes

2007 CAR conference

The 2007 CAR Conference will be held in Cleveland on March 8-11, featuring panels by the best in the business as well as hands-on classes. *The Plain Dealer* hosts the conference at the Renaissance Cleveland Hotel. The conference is sponsored by the Gannett Foundation.

The best-practices panels will discuss using CAR to cover the census, crime, education, local and state government, Freedom of Information issues, and transportation, among others. In the hands-on classes, participants can learn to use spreadsheets, database managers, mapping, statistics and how to apply new technology and programming techniques in your work. IRE and NICAR welcome suggestions for panel topics, speakers or class offerings, too. Submit ideas to confideas@ire.org and reference the 2007 CAR conference.

The online registration form is available at *www.ire.org/cgi-bin/secure-form.cgi?form=clevelandReg*. Registrants who book their hotel rooms by Friday, February 9, can get the discounted rate of $119 plus tax per night.

If you have hotel or general conference questions, please contact Ev Ruch-Graham, senior conference coordinator at ev@ire.org or 573-882-8969. If you have registration questions, please contact John Green, membership coordinator, at jgreen@ire.org or 573-882-2772.

In the News

IRE and NICAR offer "In the News" updates to help journalists pursue in-depth stories while covering breaking news. These include databases, news articles and tipsheets related to the latest events.

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INSIDE NICAR

Time for Meyer awards

By David Herzog, *NICAR and Missouri School of Journalism*

There's no doubt that journalists using social science techniques – including computer-assisted reporting – have produced some great stories. Each issue of *Uplink* is a testament to that, as journalists recount how these skills helped them uncover or advance their stories.

Last year NICAR, a joint program of IRE and the Missouri School of Journalism; the Knight Chair in Journalism at Arizona State University; and IRE introduced the Philip Meyer Journalism Award to honor the best examples.

The inaugural first-place prize went to *The Oregonian* for "Unnecessary Epidemic," a series that used statistical analysis to show how the federal government missed opportunities to stop the growth of methamphetamine abuse.

"Discharged and Dishonored," which you can read about in this issue of *Uplink*, won second place for reporters in the former Knight Ridder Washington Bureau.

The awards are given annually to recognize the legacy of Philip Meyer, Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and father of "precision journalism."

If you have a story or stories that you feel are worth consideration for the 2006 awards, see *www.ire.org/meyer-award* for more information. Works in print, television, books or online are eligible. Don't wait, because the postmark deadline for entry in the 2006 awards is Oct. 31.

Contact David Herzog by email at dherzog@nicar.org.

About our contributors ...

Chris Adams is an investigative reporter with the McClatchy (formerly Knight Ridder) Washington Bureau. He previously worked at the *Wall Street Journal* and *The* (New Orleans) *Times Picayune.*

Nancy Amons, chief investigative reporter for WSMV-Nashville's I-team, specializes in computer-assisted reporting and investigations into government. She is a member of IRE's contest committee.

Trebor Banstetter writes about the airline industry for the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. A 1992 graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism, Banstetter participated in several Boot Camps, ranging from a student session in 1991 to Advanced CAR Statistics in 2000.

Russell Carollo is a senior writer for *The Sacramento Bee*, specializing in computer-assisted reporting and long-term projects. Carollo, formerly of the *Dayton Daily News*, has used databases for three projects about the war in Iraq.

Michael Fabey is now the Pentagon reporter for *Aviation Week/Aerospace Daily*. He previously reported on air and space warfare for *Defense News*.

John Ferro, projects editor at the *Poughkeepsie* (N.Y.) *Journal*, joined the paper in 1987 as an agate clerk in sports and later became city desk editor. He is an alumnus of the March 2006 CAR Boot Camp.

Larry Kaplow, Middle East correspondent for Cox News Service, is currently stationed in Baghdad. He previously worked as state capital bureau chief for the *Palm Beach Post*.

Matthew Kauffman reports for the investigative desk at the *Hartford Courant,* manages the newsroom's in-house databases and assists colleagues on computer-assisted reporting stories. He's a 2005 alumnus of the CAR Boot Camp.

FIRST VENTURE

Staying afloat with boating data

By John Ferro, *Poughkeepsie (N.Y.) Journal*

A couple of years ago, when I was city editor, we sent our political reporter to the IRE and NICAR Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp at the Missouri School of Journalism. When he returned, I asked him how it went.

"I can't wait to use this stuff," he said.

I recalled that comment when I jetted off to Columbia in late March. I was sure I would be coming back flushed with a "CAR high." Instead, I returned CAR-petrified.

I had skills, but what to do with them? And the warning from IRE Executive Director Brant Houston's was ringing in my head – "Use it, or lose it."

So I started casting about.

We purchased the Environmental Protection Agency's Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Information System (CERCLIS) from the IRE and NICAR Database Library. Too many tables. Too many joins. No clear trends. I was in over my head.

Several journalists found timely summer stories in the boat accident data, including Mike Sherry of *The Kansas City Star* and Marc Chase of *The* (Northwest Indiana) *Times*. Find these stories and others in the Transportation archives of Extra!Extra!, www.ire.org/extraextra.

I sent a Freedom of Information request to the state education department for special-education data, but it took several months until the department and I worked out our differences over the request.

The clock was ticking. My bosses were tapping their feet, waiting for results. I could feel my little bitty CAR muscles atrophying each day.

I went back to the Database Library's Web site at *www.ire.org/datalibrary*. And there it was, after a few clicks:

> The Recreational Boat Accident database allows reporters to find information about the vessels, people and conditions involved in the accident. Because of the simplicity of this database, it is a good one for beginning CAR reporters to use.

Perfect. A database on training wheels.

I purchased the U.S. Coast Guard files, downloaded them from NICAR's FTP server and imported them into Microsoft Access database manager. Before I started running queries, I searched Nexis for stories that reported not only individual accidents, but also trends and recent legislation. I limited my searches to New York. (I kept hearing that line from the Jodie Foster film "Contact" – "Small steps, Ellie. Small, steps.")

In 2004, New York had completed its phase-in of a law that requires operators of personal watercraft to take an eight-hour safety course and pass a test before they revved up their JetSkis. My first queries examined accident trends involving personal watercraft.

The database has just four tables, and they are easily joined. I used Access to do counts and filter. Then I pasted the results into Microsoft Excel spreadsheets to create pivot tables and do percent-change calculations.

I am the kind of guy who spends a little too much time making sure his stack of *Poughkeepsie Journal* copies is piled neatly on his desk and reference books are organized by size. So, as the number of my Access queries increased, my efforts to name them became more, shall we say, compulsively obsessive.

I found it useful to name each query starting with its type: Filter, Count, MakeTable or Sum. So my list of queries looked something like this:

CountAllPWCByState
CountBoatTypesForHudsonRiver
CountEducationForPWCForNY
FilterForDutchessUlsterInjuries
FilterForHudsonRiverDeaths
MakeTableForDutchessUlsterAccidents

This saved time when I went back to my query list. All the counts were in one place, all the filters in another. (I got a little obsessive-compulsive rush every time I opened up the query window.)

My first analysis counted the number of boating accidents for each boat type – pontoon, personal watercraft, powerboat, etc. I did totals by year for New York and for the United States. I took each of those counts and pasted them into Excel. I used a pivot table to line up the totals for each boat type and each year. This allowed me to calculate the percentage of accidents for each boat type for any year.

I noticed the percentage of accidents involving personal watercraft in New York had dropped significantly during the 1995-2004 period I was examining. The rate of decline was faster than any of the more commonly used vessels.

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Bits & Bytes

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When British authorities disrupted a terrorism plot to blow up transatlantic aircraft in August, "In the News" offered resources to journalists for covering aviation safety and terrorism.

Another "In the News" package featured storm events and federal assistance data. The storm events database has helped in the reporting of enterprise stories, such as determining the most costly weather events to hit a certain area.

See these "In the News" reports and more by visiting *www.ire.org/inthenews_archive*.

Federal contracts

The IRE and NICAR Database Library's federal contracts database now includes the complete set of entries for fiscal year 2005. All together, the data includes some 1 million records for the fiscal year 2005, and the Database Library continues to update fiscal year 2006 contracts monthly.

The Database Library's federal contracts collection contains more than 2.7 million records. The database includes the contracting agency, name and location of the business, the worksite, the amount of the transaction, type of work, and much more.

Journalists can use the data to report on connections between businesses and government officials, cover the impact of federal dollars in their communities, and monitor federal agency contract expenditures. For more information about the federal contracts database, visit *www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases* or call the Database Library at 573-884-7711.

SPOTLIGHT: MILITARY MANEUVERS

Tracking problems with U.S. sky spies

By Mike Fabey, *Aviation Week/Aerospace Daily*

Space proved to be – if not the final frontier, certainly a new one – for the military trade publication *Defense News*.

The newspaper, where I recently worked as a reporter, had blanketed other military programs, but never those in space. Our editors decided to change that and assigned me to dig up what I could on Pentagon-related space programs.

It promised to be a fruitful fishing expedition. The Defense Department had mismanaged nearly every space program it had – most of the satellite systems were billions of dollars over budget and months or years behind schedule.

The question was this: what could I find that was different and had not been reported before? I simply could not serve up a reheated story.

But I also knew that for all of the coverage, there had been relatively little analysis, especially financial, to put it into context. Database analysis of program spending played a key role in reporting the story.

I started by contacting longtime source Loren Thompson, a space expert at the Lexington Institute in Arlington, Virginia, a think tank advocating free-market policies and limited federal governance.

Thompson told me the one topic that had not been looked into for years was the development problems of the nation's eavesdropping satellites and provided some starting information. But I needed to learn a lot more to report on classified projects that few people would want to talk about on the record.

Most of the material was highly technical, and I needed to find expert guides. I studied books on basic communications and the science of radio waves. I read more than a dozen technical books on satellites, the history of U.S. eavesdropping, space communications, and so on, for a basic understanding of the technology and the jargon of the field.

I also read nearly 30 articles from periodicals and after-action reports from Marine and Army divisions involved in the invasion of Iraq.

Because the focus of my stories was on the money issues, I read and reviewed a score of budgets, military planning documents, selected acquisition reports, special intelligence studies and other documents.

I rounded this off with a file drawer full of company reports, studies and brochures on the capabilities they were promising for commercial and military use. I focused on the companies that are the main satellite builders or developers: Boeing, Lockheed Martin and Northrop Grumman.

Most of these sources are available online. A good Pentagon budget summary for key programs is in the Selected Acquisition Reports at *www.acq.osd.mil/ara/am/sar*.

As I read all of the reports, the outlook seemed gloomy for the U.S. spy satellite programs. American eavesdropping and eavesdropping satellites, many built years ago to keep tab on the former Soviet Union, are proving ineffective in the war on terror, thanks to prevalence of the Internet and cell phones.

The U.S. military and intelligence communities are trying to fix the problem

with costs at $60 billion and climbing. The military's main satellite-builder – the National Reconnaissance Office – is struggling to maintain its relevance as critics charge the NRO is obsolete and out of touch with its "customers."

Defense Week purchased an updated federal contracts database from the IRE and NICAR database library. (For more information see *www.ire.org/datalibrary*). The database includes detailed information about federal contracts, including those with the Defense Department.

But I needed a way to find the satellite contracts I wanted. In some cases, the word "satellite" would not even appear in any of the contract fields, so I needed to find a way to capture any of the possible contracts for that work.

Most would be funded by Air Force, the military's financial clearing house for most satellite work, even for intelligence spacecraft. I called up *www.defenselink.mil* and searched its Pentagon contracts, plugging in "satellite," "space" or other terms. I learned the different possible contract numbers and types of services.

I then used these contract numbers to find contracts and modifications in the Federal Contracts database from NICAR.

Armed with that information, I used Microsoft FoxPro 2.6 database manager to hunt through each year's data to find groupings and amounts of contracts (space, satellites, classified, etc.) Then I used SPSS statistical software to do some of the statistical work on those groupings. It's easier and much more versatile when working with millions of records.

I used SPSS to look at the percentage differences for classified and unclassified contracts. While I could have done this with FoxPro, it would have taken longer. Also with SPSS, I broke out other percentages for different types

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SPOTLIGHT: MILITARY MANEUVERS

Diagnosing troop mental-health ills

By Matthew Kauffman, *The Hartford Courant*

When reporter Lisa Chedekel and I set out to examine the adequacy of mental health screening and treatment for troops in Iraq and Afghanistan, we found powerful stories of soldiers and Marines who killed themselves after their mental problems were ignored by commanders. We could have built a series on just those tales, but we were determined to supplement our anecdotal reporting with a statistical analysis in an effort to determine whether there were systemic failures in the military's treatment of troubled soldiers.

We found a possible window in Defense Department Form 2795, the two-page pre-deployment health questionnaire that is supposed to be filled out by every deploying service member. The form asks whether service members have sought counseling in the past year, and that single question is the foundation of the military's mental health screening process. The form also indicates whether a referral to a mental health professional was made, and whether the service member was ultimately deemed deployable.

Three million of those questionnaires have been filled out since 1993, most – unfortunately – on paper. But we discovered that every one of those pre-deployment forms gets sent to an office in suburban Washington and entered into a database.

It is all stored in something called the Defense Medical Surveillance System, a massive database – 300 million rows – chock full of data protected under the federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act. But, for researchers, the military maintains a separate database that has been stripped of identifying information. It's all available to registered users at *http://amsa.army.mil/DMED_Items/DMEDOverview.htm*.

It was a gold mine. But getting access to it wasn't going to be that easy.

My application for online access was rejected. And when I contacted an official at the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, which oversees the database, I was told the data is available only to Defense Department personnel.

Citing the online user's manual for the database, I noted that it was supposed to be "available to all military and civilian researchers, policy makers and others with a need to evaluate the health of active duty service members."

Surely that applied to me, I argued. But my definition of "need" apparently differed from the military's. The answer was no.

But they also made an unexpected offer: While they were still refusing to give me unfettered access, they agreed to query the data and give me the results.

I still believed I was entitled to the raw database, and I wasn't thrilled about tipping my hand, fearing that making it obvious I was focusing on mental health might lead to the sudden withdrawal of their offer. But I was quickly seduced by the prospect of getting some numbers without an endless court battle that undoubtedly would have dragged on well past our publication date.

So I took them up on the offer, asking for data, aggregated by month, which would provide counts of the various permutations of three yes-or-no questions: had service members marked that they had sought counseling, were they referred to a mental-health professional, and were they ultimately deployed. I asked for data going back to March 2003 – the launch of Operation Iraqi Freedom – though I later came to wish I had gone back farther.

There were other data I would have liked, which would have allowed us to analyze any statistical differences among the branches of service, or among different military ranks. But in the end, I decided to stick with what amounted to a single, short line of SQL code that would yield a table with fewer than 400 records, hopeful that that simple request would be impossible for them to refuse.

I made the request in September 2005, two months after I began negotiating for access to the data. Had I been able to query the data online, I would have had it in seconds. I figured it would take the military a couple days to get around to running the query.

Six weeks (and a lot of prodding phone calls later), I was still waiting, and began to assume I would never see the numbers. But I kept pushing, and one day in November, a modest Microsoft Excel spreadsheet arrived by e-mail, offering a first-ever window into the military's pre-deployment mental health screening.

It took four months of wrangling – not too bad when negotiating with the military – and it was definitely worth the wait. Although the file was small, I imported it into Microsoft FoxPro database manager so I could work with the data more easily. Every way I viewed the data, the results were astounding.

We found that since the start of the war, fewer than 1 in 300 service members was referred to mental health professional, despite a 1997 law requiring that the military assess the mental health of all deploying troops.

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Mentally ill

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Even among troops who said they had sought mental health care in the past year, just 6.5 percent were sent for an evaluation before being deemed mentally fit for war.

In addition, despite the military's promises to pay closer attention to the mental health of service members following a spate of suicides in 2003, we found that soldiers who reported psychological issues were more likely to be deployed in 2005 than at the start of the war.

The numbers ratcheted up our comfort level that we had found systemic problems and not simply a cache of compelling anecdotes. And the statistics were widely cited in post-publication reporting on the series and were picked up by legislators pressing for reforms.

"The law is not being followed as it was intended," Senator Joe Lieberman testified in support of a bill that would expand pre-deployment screening. "Alarmingly, the *Hartford Courant's* investigation found that only 6.5 percent of those indicating mental health problems were referred for mental health evaluations from March 2003 to October 2005. This is unacceptable."

The legislation, added to the Defense Authorization Bill, requires the military to go beyond a single screening question and also assess a service member's mental health history and any current symptoms, treatment or psychotropic drug use. The bill also mandates that service members who show signs of a mental health disorder must be referred to a qualified health professional before they are deemed deployable.

Getting these numbers did not require any heavy-duty analysis or sophisticated programming; it only took simple queries to evaluate the relationships (and the relationships over time) between three fields. But there are basic lessons worth repeating for those who do computer-assisted reporting.

Routinely look for data – the government's got loads of it, as do other institutions – to add a broader statistical element to your stories. And don't listen to the voice that says an agency will never, ever cough up the data you're seeking. Pursue it – creatively, doggedly. If you get it one time in 10, it's worth it.

Contact Matthew Kauffman by e-mail at MKauffman@courant.com.

Satellites

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of contracts – by military service, contractor, and so forth.

Most of the contracts I was trying to examine dealt with classified programs and could not be identified easily. In some cases, sources helped guide me. In others, I tailored my queries to find contracts dealing with "space services" or "telecommunications."

During the reporting I also put online contract information in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets and Access database manager for further analysis.

When the analysis was done, I learned that most of the satellite contracts were classified. Classified satellite programs had grown by one-third between 2001 and 2004, as had military contracts overall.

Brad Peniston, my managing editor, and I decided to start publishing stories so we could develop sources and build credibility on the subject as we published.

Our first story focused on the growth in satellite classified contracts, and the difficulties federal agencies such as the Congressional Research Service and Government Accountability Office faced in analyzing program spending.

The stories that followed zeroed in on the satellite program difficulties. I had a good foundation, but I needed sources to put it in perspective so I reached out to experts via ProfNet (*www.profnet.com*), an expert-finding service run by PR Newswire. I joined organizations like the Association of Former Intelligence Officers, which is a great resource.

I also talked to executives in companies doing commercial satellite work. While officials doing government work could not discuss classified programs, they could talk about their commercial work in similar areas. As they had to overcome many of the same technical hurdles in the commercial arena, their perspective was pertinent.

Also by writing stories about the commercial side of the business, I developed contacts, expertise and the trust of the satellite executives.

We had decided to run the hardest-hitting piece – detailing the NRO's woes in trying to build the next generation of eavesdropping satellites – in April, the same week of the Air Force's key space-systems conference.

The NRO said nothing about the piece.

When dealing with classified systems like this, the only time when you hear from the folks you're writing about, is when you screw something up so we knew we were right on target.

Contact Michael Fabey by email at FabeyShips@aol.com.


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Truckers

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listed as "apparently asleep" injured or killed someone. In 70 percent of those cases, the trucker never got a ticket. We found another 22 cases where "driver fatigue" was listed as a factor in a crash where someone died or was injured.

We used half a dozen databases to find out how often Tennessee truckers fall asleep at the wheel and kill or injure someone, and what happens when they do.

Tennessee, like all states, uses a standardized form to report accidents. It then forwards these reports – called Uniform Traffic Crash Report in Tennessee – to the federal government. If you remember taking those standardized tests when you were in school – the ones where you use the number-two pencil to fill in the bubble – that's what these crash reports look like.

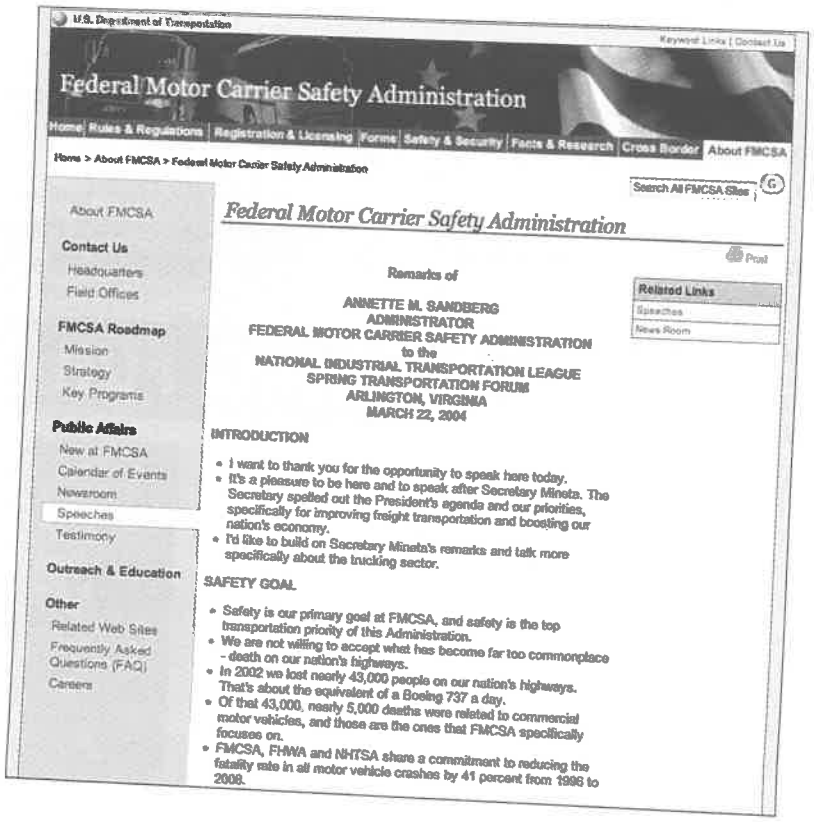
I had reviewed accident reports in the past and knew there was a collection of fields that describe "driver factors." Police officers can check up to three boxes that describe the "driver factor conditions." One of the driver conditions is "apparently asleep," another is "fatigue." (If you do a similar story, request a blank crash report so you will know all the fields.)

I asked the Tennessee Department of Safety to extract reports that involved crashes that involved a large truck and injuries or fatalities. We looked at five years' worth of data.

If your state law does not require officials to write programs to extract specific data, you might have to work with a larger set of data.

The Tennessee Department of Safety produced the data within a couple of weeks of my request. It came on CD, already in a database format. It contained two tables: the main table, called "crash parent" and a second, named "driver vehicle." The latter table contained details about the truck driver. Each table held 8,700 records and 25 or so fields. I used Microsoft Access database manager to join them and run queries. The analysis was straightforward: we isolated cases where the driver condition field met the criteria we were interested i – "apparently asleep." We had to b careful because "apparently asleep could appear in any of the three fields that describe the driver condition. We were able to very quickly calculate how many sleepy drivers were involved in fatal or injury accidents.

Courtesy of WSMV-Nashville



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Remarks of

ANNETTE M. SANDBERG
ADMINISTRATOR
FEDERAL MOTOR CARRIER SAFETY ADMINISTRATION
to the
NATIONAL INDUSTRIAL TRANSPORTATION LEAGUE
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INTRODUCTION

- I want to thank you for the opportunity to speak here today.
- It's a pleasure to be here and to speak after Secretary Mineta. The Secretary spelled out the President's agenda and our priorities, specifically for improving freight transportation and boosting our nation's economy.
- I'd like to build on Secretary Mineta's remarks and talk more specifically about the trucking sector.

SAFETY GOAL

- Safety is our primary goal at FMCSA, and safety is the top transportation priority of this Administration.
- We are not willing to accept what has become far too commonplace - death on our nation's highways.
- In 2002 we lost nearly 43,000 people on our nation's highways. That's about the equivalent of a Boeing 737 a day.
- Of that 43,000, nearly 5,000 deaths were related to commercial motor vehicles, and those are the ones that FMCSA specifically focuses on.
- FMCSA, FHWA and NHTSA share a commitment to reducing the fatality rate in all motor vehicle crashes by 41 percent from 1996 to 2008.

Besides the "driver factor condition" field, there was another critical field in the data: one that indicates whether police wrote a citation, and why. That's how we calculated the percentage of apparently asleep truckers ticketed after an accident that killed or injured someone else. We started pulling case files and asking questions.

In Sammy Pruitt's case, we discovered that accident investigators had never forwarded the case to the district attorney, who would have been the one to decide if the trucker should be prosecuted.

When we called to find out about the case, we discovered it had never been turned over to the district attorney. The District Attorney took a quick look at the case after our calls, and declined to prosecute, saying that no drug or alcohol test had ever been done by the investigating officers. Three months after our story, we learned the District Attorney had obtained a blood test from the hospital where the trucker was treated and planned to present the case to a grand jury. What complicated "sleepy trucker" cases is that Tennessee, like most states, does not have a law making drowsy driving a crime.

But other laws do place limits on drivers' time behind the wheel. The trucker in the gas station case had not been driving more hours than legally allowed – the limit is now eleven hours – but thousands of truckers are caught in Tennessee every year violating federal law by driving too many hours. We wanted to find out what happens to those truckers.

We started by asking for inspection and citation records from the Tennessee Department of Safety. The charge was about $40 for a separate file provided in Microsoft Excel format, which we imported to Access for analysis. The first set of data omitted some key fields, and the second had been corrupted during the process of exporting it from Business Objects Crystal Reports, but the third set was fine. Three years of inspection reports contained about 17,000 records. In particular, I wanted to isolate those cited for federal violation 395.a1/R., or driving more hours than allowed.

We found that in three years, more than 1,900 truck drivers were cited for driving more than the allowable number of hours. The database had an interesting field that contained details of the infraction. Some drivers had been on the road 15, 17, even 22 hours straight. Another field showed what happened to the drivers: in 733 of the 1,900-plus over-hours cases, the truckers were only given a warning. State troopers told me that, because the hours-of-service rules had recently changed, they were given warnings rather than tickets. The data also contained a field for the name of the trucking company – useful for finding which trucking companies are chronic violators.

Yet another database I already had on hand showed what happened when over-hours truckers went to local traffic courts. I recycled some old traffic court databases I had used on a speeding story. I specifically looked at data from the county where the state truck-inspection station was located. I found that the average over-hours trucker paid just $231 in fines. One driver, whose logbooks showed he hadn't stopped in 21 hours, paid $166.95.

If you want to do a story about trucking violation and don't know what data to request, start at your local roadside inspection stations, where most over-hours tickets are written.

There are many databases you can use to report on truck accidents. I used several in order to cross-refer-

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More tips for reporting on trucking accidents:

There are great Web sites for trucking stories. Start with the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration at *www.fmcsa.dot.gov*. One useful feature is the crash profiles online, where you can query Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) data to get detailed information about fatal traffic accidents.

In March, the administration released a detailed report about big-truck crashes to Congress and found legal drugs were a big factor. See *www.fmcsa.dot.gov/facts-research/research-technology/report/ltccs-2006.htm*.

The administration's Web site also has state accident-comparison tables at *http://ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/CrashProfile/NationalCrashProfileMain.asp#statereports*. State-by-state summary data on enforcement activities can be found at: *http://ai.fmcsa.dot.gov/ProgramMeasures/Intro/ProgramMeasuresMain.asp*.

The National Transportation Safety Board Web site has accident investigation reports and other documents online at *www.ntsb.gov*.

The American Trucking Association is the largest trade association representing the trucking industry. Its Web site (*http://truckline.com*) has industry news and legislative and regulatory information.

For more detailed guidance, see "Investigating Trucking" (Tipsheet No. by David Barnes, director of public affairs for the U.S. DOT's Office of Inspector General. IRE members can search for and download the tipsheet from the IRE Resource Center at *www.ire.org/resourcecenter*.

– Nancy Amons

Boats

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So what was the story here? Could it be there was an unsubstantiated presumption among lawmakers and the general public that personal watercraft are more dangerous than other boats? In my Nexis searches, I found many municipalities were passing their own regulations limiting where and how fast personal watercraft could go. Were those laws unfair?

Or were the declining numbers an indication that the law requiring safety education was working? One of the tables in the database has a field that indicates whether the operator in a boating accident had received any safety education, and, if so, what type. So I began including the education field in my Access queries.

Some more filters and another pivot table or two later, I had my story: New York's rate of accidents involving operators who had never taken a safety course had remained relatively flat over the 10-year period and was significantly higher than the national average.

Some searches on the state Legislature's Web site uncovered a good news peg: Two bills were pending that would mandate education – one for all operators of a powered vessel, the other for those under 18 and those who had been convicted of a moving violation.

Then the real reporting began. I attended one of the safety classes given by the Dutchess County Sheriff's Office. The sheriff's deputy ticked off details from a couple of sample accidents. Little did he know, one of the anonymous accident reports he used in the class detailed the final moments of a Dutchess County woman who had died when the boat on which she was traveling struck a stone jetty in Long Island. I tracked down the woman's mother and interviewed her.

The rest of my reporting was based on interviews with boating law administrators and industry officials from around the country. Different states have different laws regarding boating education, some more strict than others. Many of these officials clearly had black belts in boating law. They knew their stuff.

The two-day series was published shortly before the state Legislature went on its summer break. The state assemblywoman sponsoring the comprehensive bill said she would continue to try to get her bill approved. In the meantime, the stories were picked up by some of our sister papers in New York and prompted an editorial in one.

What I gained from the experience, other than how to apply the technical aspects of my training, was a deepened appreciation of one of the mantras I heard during my week in Columbia – that is, CAR analyses generate questions, not answers. The answers come from traditional research and interviews.

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Air traffic

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the number of passengers on each route produces the load factor.

I shared a portion of my analysis with a friendly source at one of the airlines, who confirmed that the load factors I had calculated were accurate.

The results were somewhat surprising. While AirTran's low fares had spurred more people to fly, American Airlines was getting the lion's share of that new demand. American flights from D/FW to Orlando, for example, were 87 percent full, compared to a 71 percent average for its entire domestic route system.

That same route on AirTran was 67 percent full, below that carrier's average of about 73 percent.

The numbers were telling. After our story was published, AirTran's expansion at D/FW slowed dramatically, and the airline has pulled some routes, citing the intense competition with American.

Valuable tool

The AirTran story was just one of many *Star-Telegram* articles that have benefited from delving into these databases in recent years. The T-100 datasets also include information on freight and mail carried by airlines, aircraft types used on different routes, scheduled and actual departures and other operational information.

Other Form 41 databases have detailed financial and employment information for every certified airline in the United States. The Origin and Destination data contains information about travel patterns at every commercial airport in the nation.

The DOT also has detailed data on on-time performance and information relating specifically to small airlines.

While it takes some time to learn the lingo and understand all of the fields, it's well worth the effort, and your readers will appreciate the insight. The data has become one of the most valuable tools in my CAR toolbox.

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Truckers

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ence accidents. I bought the U.S. Department of Transportation's truck accidents database from the IRE and NICAR Database Library (see *www.ire.org/datalibrary* for more information), but it only has accidents that were reported to the Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration, and not all accidents are. The local data was the most complete. According to Jeff Porter, director of the Database Library, the data should include all truck accidents that involve a fatality, injury or at least one disabled vehicle. However, not all states do that consistently.

Get paper reports for the cases you profile. You'll find witness names and phone numbers, and diagrams that don't appear in the electronic data. I also requested accident photos from the state patrol, which they burned to a CD for me.

Don't ignore the trucker's point of view. We worked with a variety of truckers' trade associations but found we got the best perspective in the parking lot of the interstate truck stops. You'll get an earful about the hours-of-service rules, shippers that make unrealistic demands on truckers, and long delays at loading docks that cut into a driver's hours. Some drivers candidly told us you can't make a living if you follow the hours-of-service limits.

The Uniform Traffic Crash Reports can be mined for other stories about why truckers – and other drivers – crash. The "driver condition" field is also marked when an officer suspects a driver is drunk or on drugs. A recent federal report to Congress found that truck driver prescription drug use was the top driver factor in all accidents.

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IRE and NICAR Services

Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. is a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting within the field of journalism. IRE was formed in 1975 with the intent of creating a networking tool and a forum in which journalists from across the country could raise questions and exchange ideas. IRE provides educational services to reporters, editors and others interested in investigative reporting and works to maintain high professional standards.

Programs and Services

IRE Resource Center: A rich reserve of print and broadcast stories, tipsheets and guides to help you start and complete the best work of your career. This unique library is the starting point of any piece you're working on. You can search through abstracts of more than 20,000 investigative reporting stories through our Web site.
Contact: Beth Kopine, beth@ire.org, 573-882-3364

Database Library: Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. The library has copies of many government databases, and makes them available to news organizations at or below actual cost. Analysis services are available on these databases, as is help in deciphering records you obtain yourself.
Contact: Jeff Porter, jeff@ire.org, 573-882-1982

Campaign Finance Information Center: Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. It's dedicated to helping journalists uncover the campaign money trail. State campaign finance data is collected from across the nation, cleaned and made available to journalists. A search engine allows reporters to track political cash flow across several states in federal and state races.
Contact: Brant Houston, brant@ire.org, 573-882-2042

On-the-Road Training: As a top promoter of journalism education, IRE offers loads of training opportunities throughout the year. Possibilities range from national conferences and regional workshops to weeklong boot camps and on-site newsroom training. Costs are on a sliding scale and fellowships are available to many of the events.
Contact: David Donald, ddonald@ire.org, 573-882-2042

Publications

The IRE Journal: Published six times a year. Contains journalist profiles, how-to stories, reviews, investigative ideas and backgrounding tips. *The Journal* also provides members with the latest news on upcoming events and training opportunities from IRE and NICAR.
Contact: Brant Houston, brant@ire.org, 573-882-2042

Uplink: Bimonthly newsletter by IRE and NICAR on computer-assisted reporting. Often, *Uplink* stories are written after reporters have had particular success using data to investigate stories. The columns include valuable information on advanced database techniques as well as success stories written by newly trained CAR reporters.
Contact: David Herzog, dherzog@ire.org, 573-882-2127

Reporter.org: A collection of Web-based resources for journalists, journalism educators and others. Discounted Web hosting and services such as mailing list management and site development are provided to other nonprofit journalism organizations.
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Uplink Info

A newsletter of the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

NICAR is a joint program of Investigative Reporters and Editors Inc. and the Missouri School of Journalism.

NICAR services include supplying journalists with government databases, training programs, tipsheets and data analysis.

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573-884-7711

Subscriptions
573-882-2772

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Subscriptions
IRE members $40
nonmembers $60

Uplink Address
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