

Uplink

June 1995

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

Uplink update

Check-up time.

Reporters are using computers to probe the medical industry. From the business of health care to dying babies, journalists are using databases for better stories. This month, Uplink focuses on those efforts. The coverage begins on page 4.

The Poynter Institute's Nora Paul tells you where to go on the Internet for information on health-care finances. Reporters from *Newsday*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *Hartford Courant* and *Tacoma (Wash.) News Tribune* offer tips from their work. Those range from examining transplant survival rates to uncovering hospitals that infect patients.

In addition, government agencies are beginning to offer certain reports only on-line. Check the back page for two that have started to release information only that way. More parts of the federal government are considering such moves. It's one more sign that computer-assisted reporting is not optional for newsrooms.

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Untapping dirty tap water

Oh, those dirty rats

By Alan Levin

The Hartford Courant

Dead rodents. Bloated the size of footballs.

These are what engineer John Wittenzellner found when he first lifted the lid on the drinking water storage tank supplying about 100 residents of bucolic Durham, Conn.

Local residents wondered why for years their tap water contained high levels of bacteria.

Bloated rodents aren't what commonly come to mind when we think of the results of a computer-assisted story. But we found Wittenzellner, who was one of *The Hartford Courant's* best sources in its three-part series, "A Drop of Safety," through computer data.

The series showed that even in Connecticut, which has one of the toughest enforcement programs in the country, about 750,000 people received drinking water from among the hundreds of systems cited for serious safety violations in the last five years.

The problem was particularly acute among systems serving fewer than 500 people. Well over half of those small water companies had chronically failed to test for contaminants, found potentially dangerous levels of bacteria, improperly treated the water or exceeded allowable levels of chemical contaminants in recent years.

Among the worst of these utilities, enforcement was a joke. In the system that Wittenzellner took over and repaired two years ago, the state had tried in vain for nearly 15 years to force the former owner to improve treatment.

We knew when we began that scientists were raising warning flags about drinking water safety. Studies estimated that as many as a third of stomach ailments are waterborne. A 1993 parasite outbreak in Milwaukee's water sickened 400,000 people and is believed to have killed up to 100 AIDS patients.

A key EPA database

The starting point we used to identify the risks in Connecticut was the massive federal database collected since the late 1970s by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. It is known as FRDS.

Every violation handed out to all but the smallest water companies across the country has been logged in the federal system. Every state and federal enforcement action also resides in the database. And very few people outside of EPA have ever looked at it.

State officials asked us for a copy because, even though they provide the data used by EPA, federal officials had not figured out an easy way to give the data back to the state in a usable form. Several water utilities downloaded our data when we put it on our bulletin board because they, too, had no other way to ascertain their record of violations without a lengthy paper search through numerous file cabinets.

The FRDS system is dizzying.

In total, it contains more than a dozen separate databases that are linked on an old mainframe system. Its contents — listings of violations, enforcement actions and names of contaminants — are

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Continued from page one:

Dirty water

all encoded. The records were created to mirror the federal drinking water regulations, which are also head-spinning in complexity.

But don't despair.

Though lengthy, the documentation is the most comprehensive, easiest to use I've ever encountered. It includes a separate page for each field. Its format is easy to read. The consultants who created the system were patient, even pleasant, as I asked questions about its form and function.

We opted to obtain only the Connecticut data. It included several databases. The ones we used most were: a listing of each of the 6,000 water utilities in the state, another file with data about each water utility's water sources and location, a database containing all 13,000 violations handed out in the last 15 years and another listing every enforcement action for the same period. The files were linked by an identification number.

Know what the data means

We created a series of additional tables that were used to more easily spell out the names of contaminants.

There was an awkward learning curve while we figured out how the federal drinking water regulations work. The computer records are worthless, even misleading, without this knowledge.

For example, for virtually every listed violation there is a contaminant, mostly grisly looking chemicals like benzene.

When I first saw these chemicals, I thought we had an epidemic on our hands. It turned out benzene had never been detected in Connecticut drinking water. Instead, every benzene listing (and most of the other chemical listings) was there because the water utility had failed to test for it.

Figuring out formulas

These failures to monitor for chemicals were significant to our story, but hardly equalled evidence that the chemical was actually in the drinking water.

Then we had to figure out a formula with which to rate the thousands of violations so that we could identify the state's worst water

providers. Interviews with water engineers and regulators helped.

Once we got to this point, the data began to point us toward the human stories that turn a boring computer-generated story into something readable.

Data leads to real stories

That's what led us to Wittenzellner. It turned out he had extensive experience repairing some of the worst small water companies in the state. In addition to rodents, he told us he had found various species of dead animals in neglected water systems throughout the state.

Telephoning residents who received water from one system Wittenzellner had taken over, we found a man who made the mistake of drinking the water when he first moved in to his house. "It was like Cancun," he said, describing the illness that knocked him on his back for several days.

The data also pointed to numerous schools cited for serious water safety violations, ranging from high lead levels to bacteria exceedances. It showed that the state was powerless to force compliance on uncooperative water companies. It highlighted the state's largest drinking water system for its failure to install filters before the federally mandated deadline.

Just the beginning

The data, of course, was just a starting point. We also did extensive reporting on the emergence of the parasite cryptosporidium as a health threat in drinking water and the difficulty in funding new drinking water infrastructure projects.

Finally, the data proved to be the most popular posting to date on our budding electronic bulletin board. We placed a text file listing the violations logged against every water utility in the state so people with a computer could check out their utility's record. The hundreds of calls the first few days practically crashed our modest bbs.

Anyone interested in acquiring the FRDS data should contact Towana Dorsey, at EPA's Freedom of Information Act Office in Washington.

Alan Levin can be reached at 1-(800) 524-4242,
or send e-mail to courant@pcnet.com.

How to order convention tapes handouts

Missed you in Miami

If you missed IRE's national conference in Miami, you can still hear what the speakers said.

Cassette tapes are available from Sound Images. Each cassette costs \$9, and Visa and MasterCard are accepted. Call (303) 693-5511.

In addition, you can get any handouts distributed at the panels by calling the IRE resource center at (314) 882-2042. Prices vary.

Here is a list of the computer-assisted reporting panels, which were held on June 8, to choose from when ordering:

- Statistics Seminar: An advanced three-hour seminar led by Philip Meyer, author of *The New Precision Journalism*; and Steve Doig, *Miami Herald*.
- CAR on the City Hall Beat.

- CAR, Quick and Easy.
- Car on the Education Beat.
- Getting Started.
- Introduction to the Internet.
- Access.
- CAR on the Courts Beat.
- Powering Up, Plugging In.
- Polling: How to Write Survey Questions and Build on what Pollsters Provide.
- CAR on the Crime Beat.
- Introduction to Spreadsheets.
- Florida government: Electronic records.
- CAR on the Politics Beat.
- Introduction to Databases.
- Visualizing Information: Mapping, Charts and Graphics.

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:

- Federal Election Commission contributions data, including donations by individuals and political action committees.
- 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.
- Federal procurement data, 1992-1994, includes breakdowns by agency.
- Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms gun dealer records.
- National Bridge Inventory System data, includes inspection grades.
- FBI Uniform Crime Reports, a detailed compilation of crime data that includes statistical breakdowns of individual murders.
- 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.

- U.S. Department of Transportation truck accident and census data. It includes accidents by company and road.
- U.S. Small Business Administration loan guarantees, 1989-1994. 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, 1989-1994. This includes individuals and businesses, the amount covered by the SBA, and the status, including whether the loan went bad.
- U.S. Department of Education's Common Core of Data runs from the 1987-88 to the 1992-93 school year. It includes data on school enrollments, finances, staffing and dropouts.

NICAR also offers inexpensive data transfer for journalists, and houses an expanding library of state databases. NICAR is also constantly adding up-to-date data.

Call NICAR for up-to-date prices and more information at (314) 882-0684, or send e-mail to nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu.

Get computer training:

- NICAR Internet training. A new program, July 14-16, Columbia, Mo.
- Associated Press and NICAR. July 21-22, Denver.
- NICAR Bootcamp, NICAR's week-long intensive training seminar, Aug. 6-11, Columbia, Mo.
- New York University, a special four-day bootcamp with NICAR trainers, Aug. 17-20, New York.

These dates are open to all journalists. For more information, call NICAR, (314) 882-0684, or send e-mail to nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu.

State and local databases trace a grim trail

When babies die

Thousands of patients
get sick every year
from infections spread
inside hospitals —
mainly from health
workers' hands. The
*Tacoma (Wash.) News
Tribune* examined 1.7
million records from
the state Health
Department's
Comprehensive
Hospital Abstract
Reporting System.
Thirty-five other
states have similar
databases. Reporters
Adam Berliant and
Elaine Porterfield
cited several instances
where patients died
from hospital-borne
infections. Even
though the health
department database
did not include patient
names, the journalists
were able to find
those cases by linking
the database with a
state death
certificates. They
found likely cases by
joining the day, place
and cause of death in
the two sets of
records. The series
ran May 28-29, 1995.

By Sarah Christian
NICAR staff

With the right information, the medical community is ripe for computer-assisted reporting and investigations.

Reporters at the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* and *The New York Times*, using very different methods and approaches, found infants and pregnant women are at risk of critical injury and death.

The *Plain Dealer* used computer databases from the beginning. The reporters said the story would have been impossible to do without them. At *The New York Times*, computer-assisted methods were the final phase of the reporting.

Cleveland reporters Joan Mazzolini and Dave Davis looked at Ohio's system for treating at-risk pregnancies and infants. A state formula gives hospitals designations to ensure that the sickest babies and most at-risk mothers are routed to the best medical care. But the reporters found that the system has broken down and that every year hundreds of extremely ill and premature babies are sent to hospitals that may not have the equipment and expertise to care for them.

Using birth certificate databases purchased from the state Department of Health, Mazzolini and Davis were able to identify how many premature babies were born in Ohio in 1992 and 1993, where they were born and where they and their mothers were transferred.

"This really allowed us to question hospitals about treating babies not suited to their designation," Davis said. "The thing we really tried to focus on was looking at hospitals treating premature babies they were not equipped for."

Death certificates were integral in identifying the babies. Ohio law requires that the names on birth certificates be removed before being released to the public, but names are included in death certificates.

"There was enough matching information to link (the two databases) and figure out names," Davis said. "In matching the birth and death records we identified the babies who had died and were able to find the families. We got some very moving stories. Without the computer we couldn't have done that. Matching

the birth and death records allowed us to find real people. Some of the stories were amazing."

The series also showed that low-income communities are prone to underweight babies.

"It's something we always kind of knew," Mazzolini said. "But it's nice to see it on paper."

Using census information and zip codes from the birth certificates, along with mapping software, the reporters were able to plot where underweight babies are born.

The three-month investigation published on Nov. 27, 1994, was "not as difficult as it looks," Mazzolini said. "Reporters need to find out what is in their state's birth certificates. Ohio's turned out to be a wealth of information. You can get great snapshots of your city, county or your state."

Davis advised reporters thinking about tackling a similar story to be ready for a fight.

"Hospitals are very powerful institutions. I've taken on a lot of different types of institutions and people, but I think doctors and hospitals are the most powerful I've seen," he said. "We had letters coming in threatening to sue us. And they weren't going to us. They were going to the publisher. That is a sinking feeling. You just have to be prepared for it."

Sign of the times

In New York, reporters Jane Fritsch and Dean Baquet had already uncovered the horror stories of the city's public hospitals before computer-assisted reporting was employed to analyze mortality rates.

In a three-part series, "Mismanaged Care: How Public Hospitals Fail," beginning on March 5, 1995, the reporters showed that every year dozens of newborns die or are left to struggle with life-long injuries because they are treated by inexperienced doctors or poorly supervised midwives and nurses in New York City's overcrowded delivery rooms.

The story got started when *The Times* decided to look at how much litigation was taken against the New York Health and Hospitals Corp., a city agency that runs the public hospitals.

"It quickly became clear that there was something going on in the delivery rooms," Fritsch said.

Court records that allowed the reporters to take a peek at usually-closed hospital records, was

Continued on page six

Database uncovers abuse

By Seth Hamblin

University of Missouri

Health care is big business, but that doesn't mean it's a well-run business.

In Georgia, reporters found medical services were done haphazardly. In Florida, journalists uncovered a Medicare system with severe problems. And in both cases, databases were vital to the story.

The *Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel* examined Medicare HMOs, which are supposed to save patients' money. While these HMOs cover all medical expenses, as opposed to the standard Medicare rate of 80 percent, Medicare HMOs can still be a gamble.

The newspaper found some South Florida Medicare HMOs are half as likely as others to provide access to doctors and hospital services. Seven of these HMOs posted high rates of patients quitting their programs. In some cases, twice as many patients were leaving as were joining. More than 10,800 patients and their families complained about the care to state and federal officials — mainly about the HMOs' not paying their medical bills.

Reporters Fred Schulte and Larry Keller requested the Beneficiary Information Tracking System from the U.S. Health Care Financing Administration, but received little cooperation.

"We asked for a tape, but they said, 'Sorry, we can't send it to you that way. We'll send you a hard copy,'" Schulte recalled. The reporters took the paper records and entered them into a dBase database by hand before analyzing the information with SPSS statistical software.

Schulte said problems with Florida's access laws often leave him building his own databases. "Even when I find a database, they won't give it to me," he said.

The work led to a series on Nov. 7-11, 1993, "The HMO Maze: How Medicare Fails Seniors."

A year after the stories, Schulte teamed with Jenni Bergal for another investigation, "Profits From Pain," on Medicaid HMOs, which ran Dec. 11-15, 1994. Again, the reporters created their own database. This time the records came from the state's HMO peer review board for all hospitals.

"They just collected the data, put it in a box and left it sitting there gathering dust," Schulte

said. The reporters became the first to analyze what was in those boxes.

The results showed Medicaid HMOs had dangerously lower standards than private HMOs. At the same time, many Medicaid HMOs were spending much more on administrative and non-medical costs than private HMOs.

The series also showed that 12 of the 15 Medicaid HMOs got "poor" and "very poor" reviews when came to caring for children and pregnant women. These HMOs covered almost all of the 25,000 patients enrolled in Florida's Medicaid system.

In addition, the journalists found nearly 200 of the 300 Medicaid HMO doctors and medical centers failed to meet standards for treatment or proper documentation.

While building the database took the reporters two to three weeks, the drudgery was worth it, Schulte said. After the series, a state investigation ensued, and Florida is considering legislation to crack down on health-care abuses.

'In Sickness And In Wealth'

In Georgia, meanwhile, *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* found that health care doesn't run by the laws of supply and demand. Instead of medical need, costs are rising because of the number of doctors and hospitals beds.

The newspaper analyzed more than 600,000 health insurance claims and found a wide fluctuation in the amount of surgery and hospital care doled out from area to area. It found a seemingly haphazard delivery of medical services and published the results Sept. 30-Oct. 4, 1990.

In east Georgia, for instance, policy holders were twice as likely to undergo coronary angioplasty, where a balloon-like device is used to widen arteries. There happen to be more cardiologists in east Georgia than in the rest of the state.

The variation in treatment by itself doesn't prove that care is rationed in some places or wasted in others, the *Journal-Constitution* contended. But the newspaper cited experts who said the gaps represent billions of dollars in unnecessary procedures.

Hal Straus, who wrote the stories with Mike King in late 1990 as part of the series "In

Continued on page six

After finding gaps in a Centers for Disease Control database that extrapolated cancer rates, *Newsday* built its own database. The newspaper used U.S. Census records to find 75 similar counties — places with large populations and high development. Bob Tiernan, senior editor for projects, said the newspaper surveyed the health departments for those counties. The results were a key part of reporter Ford Fessenden's story on June 27, 1993, which showed Long Island posted one of the biggest cancer rates.

Newsday also used a New York State Health Department database to examine how area hospitals treated breast cancer with surgery. The Sept. 11, 1994, story revealed a vast difference in the rate of lumpectomies versus mastectomies, including one controversial hospital that performed twice as many mastectomies as other facilities in the region.

U.S. News & World Report used the Federal Drug Administration's MedWatch database for a Jan. 9, 1995, cover story that examined drugs with dangerous side effects, including the Norplant birth control implant. *U.S. News'* Penny Loeb said the database is "tough to work with," but helped yield a powerful story. The magazine also discovered many drugs banned by the FDA are still sold legally over the counter in pharmacies across the country. That, according to the May 15, 1995, story, includes drugs sold at a Rite Aid located inside FDA headquarters.

Using data from a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Hartford Courant* reporter Robert S. Capers Jr. tracked survival rates of transplant recipients at area hospitals. He downloaded the data, which was compiled by the United Network for Organ Sharing, into an Excel spreadsheet. The organ-by-organ, hospital-by-hospital analysis ran March 26, 1995.

Continued from page four: When babies die

central to the investigation, Fritsch said, adding that they used the whole spectrum of document-gathering, from public records to FOIA requests.

"The computer stuff really came at the end," she said. "I resist depending on the computer and I think some other people resist it because you can end up with stories that report the obvious."

Fritsch added, however, that the statistical analysis for Mismanaged Care, gave the reporters more information to work with, confirmed hypotheses and "rounded things out."

"The overall point of the computer study was our ability to put into perspective the claims of the city people and the hospital people who said they had more problems because they have a vastly sicker population," Fritsch said. "It turned out the computer study brought that assertion into question."

The reporters had much anecdotal evidence to back up the story and statistical analysis of infant mortality rates done by Josh Barbanel made the narratives difficult to dismiss. Even accounting for such variables as poor prenatal care and the mother's health, the statistics showed infant mortality to be significantly higher at public hospitals in the city compared to the private institutions.

While the computer-generated information gave the reporters more ammunition for their story, Fritsch advised reporters wanting to do similar work to avoid the computer at the outset of the investigation.

"Start with sources, with documents, with real people. Otherwise you could end up with something that is theoretical and distant from the subject," she said. "Use the computer to test hypothesis — but develop the hypothesis first."

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Continued from page five: Following the money

Sickness and In Wealth," said the idea came from earlier academic studies on prostate surgery rates in Connecticut.

"The studies showed a lot of variation, and we wanted to see if the same thing was going on in Georgia," Straus said.

To test the theory, Straus and King needed data from a handful of different sources. They obtained demographic data on Medicare enrollees, as well as data on the procedures and hospitalization days for these enrollees, from the Georgia Medical Care Foundation. The foundation reviews Medicare spending in Georgia under a contract with HCFA.

For similar data on privately insured patients, Straus and King turned to Blue Cross and Blue Shield, the state's largest insurer.

They fed nine-track tapes from both sources into the newspaper's mainframe computer and, using SAS statistical software, compared it with data on physician and hospital bed supply for various parts of the state. That data came from the U.S. Health Resources and Services Administration and the Georgia Hospital Association.

The resulting story shows gaping holes in the state's system of determining when to use

medical procedures. Nevertheless, there has been little fallout from their study, Straus said.

"We did the story a couple of years too early," he said. "It would have meant a lot more when there was a big push for health-care reform. But maybe people are more likely now to say to their doctor, 'I don't want this surgery unless it's absolutely necessary.'"

For more information, call Hal Straus at (404) 526-5348, or send e-mail to hal_straus@ajc.com. Fred Schulte can be reached at (305) 356-4591, or send e-mail to ferds@aol.com.

Seth Hamblin, a student at the University of Missouri, is interning this summer at The Washington Post.

Organ transplants tracked on-line

The United Network for Organ Sharing, a federally funded non-profit that tracks transplant surgery, offers an Internet site filled with data. It includes information on organ donations, survival rates and waiting lists.

The site is <http://www.infi.net/~shreorg/unos.html>

Medical coverage sites

The health-care insurance debate continues. Here's an array of sites with background information, key historical documents, statistical reports, source lists, and database sellers, that can help you cover this complex and critical issue.

The Health Care Financing Administration's site is full of useful background material. The text to the 1995 Medicare Handbook is there, covering topics such as "What is Medicare?" "What Medicare Does not Pay For," "How to Appeal Medicare Decisions," and "Events That Can End Your Medicare Protection."

There are also other pamphlets, and a helpful listing of commonly asked questions about Medicare (good for sidebars). There are statistical tables available by state and county, such as "Standardized per capita rates of payment — aged and disabled — parts A and B," which allows quick comparisons between regional Medicare payments. Speeches and press releases from the agency, and links to other sites with information related to health care, round out the service. Put this on your bookmark list. <http://www.ssa.gov/hcfa/hcfahp2.html>

The Census Department's Statistical Abstract of the United States lists percentages, by state, of people without health insurance for 1990-1992. http://www.census.gov/stat_abstract/hlthtb.prm

The document http://www.census.gov/stat_abstract/health.gif is a color coded map indicating levels of non-insured persons.

This very ugly address leads to a very pretty application, a searchable "Guide to Sources" of other data from the Census Bureau, other Federal agencies, and private organizations. Type "medicare" into the query box and get a leads list to places you should check for more information. <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/htgrep/file=source.txt&style=pre>

A press release from President Clinton, dated Oct. 27, 1993, discusses the Medicare plan for older Americans. <http://docs.whitehouse.gov/white-house-publications/1993/10/1993-10-27-the-health-plan-appendix-i.text>

Text of the Health Security Act of 1993 is a key background document. <http://sunsite.unc.edu/nhs/executive/x-Summary-toc.html>

The Bipartisan Commission on Entitlement and Tax Reform Interim Report to the President,

August 1994: Finding No. 4 discusses the impact of increased health care costs. Links to a graphic showing a timeline of "What our future looks like — if we fail to act," illustrates that by 2030, Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and federal employee retirement will consume all federal tax revenue. <http://www.charm.net/~dcarolco/interim/interim.html>

Meanwhile, Arent Fox Kintner Plotkin & Kahn, a law firm in Washington D.C., has put together an interesting list of Medicare-related cases it has worked on. Although this is obviously a promotion for the firm, the types of cases might be an interesting read. <http://www.arentfox.com/e1.4.html>

For one interest group's interpretation of the health-care financing situation in America, check out the International Society For Individual Liberty pamphlet called, "We Can Have Affordable Health Care." It's worth visiting just to see the graphic of the doctor coming at you with a stethoscope. <http://w3.ag.uiuc.edu/liberty/isil/healthcare.html>

HCIA Inc., a health-care information company, harbors an interesting inventory of health-care related databases, including order forms for data on 6,500 U.S. hospitals, 16,000 nursing homes, and more than 2.5 million detailed patient records. It also includes links to the Centers for Disease Control, which also sells data. <http://www.hcia.com/index.html>

The compilers at Global Network Navigator have put together a wonderful list of sources on a variety of health related topics. It links to the best sites for background on alternative medicine, disabilities, diseases and conditions, general health, mental health, nutrition, professional medicine, and health organizations. <http://nearnet.gnn.com/wic/med.toc.html#policy>

Finally, for news groups, look for talk.politics.medicine

Let me make a little pitch here for Infoseek. For \$9.95 a month (first month free) you get access to a powerful free-text search service. You can search the text of thousands of messages groups by any word. A great way to find people who are talking about a particular topic. To find out more about Infoseek (no, I'm not a stockholder nor do any relatives work for them) go to <http://www.infoseek.com>.

If you have suggestions for this column, email Nora Paul at npaul@poynter.org. Visit the Poynter Institute's website at <http://www.nando.net/prof/poynter/home.html>. It features Paul's Hot News/Hot Research in the Poynter Institute's library section. It takes news stories and links you to some good sources for information to cover that story. To go directly to the page: <http://www.nando.net/prof/poynter/hrintro.html>

Nora Paul is a former Miami Herald librarian now at the Poynter Institute. She is the author of Computer Assisted Research, available from the Poynter Institute and NICAR.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

You're on the 'Net or you're nowhere

The U.S. Census Bureau recently started making some of its reports available only on the Internet. The agency's government division began this year by issuing government finance reports only on-line. That included surveys on state and local government finances, employment and retirement systems. Reporters were also sent short summary sheets. The key reason, according to the Association of Public Data Users, is to save money and get reports out faster. Census may issue some of that information later on CD. The Internet address is <http://www.census.gov>.

It's not the only agency to take that step. Among the others is the Federal Deposit Insurance Corp. Its quarterly Statistics on Banking is available only on the Internet. So is its Historical Statistics on Banking, 1934-1993. It is also in the process of putting massive databases on its site. The Internet address is <http://www.fdic.gov>.

Join NICAR on the Internet

Don't forget to keep up with NICAR on the Internet. Subscribe to our listserve, and join as reporters talk about how to do the job better. E-mail to listserv@mizzou1.missouri.edu. In the message, on the first line, write: subscribe nicar-l your name.

To join Investigative Reporters and Editors on the Internet, the instructions are the same except, on first line, write: subscribe ire-l your name.

St. Pete hires new reporter

The *St. Petersburg Times* recently hired Brad Goldstein to become its lead computer-assisted reporter. Goldstein, a recent Neiman fellow, had worked at the *Lawrence (Mass.) Eagle-Tribune*.

Back to school CD

The National Center for Education Statistics has made its data even more user-friendly with a new CD-ROM of the Common Core of Data, 1987-88 through 1992-93. This combines all previously separate data on school enrollment, finances, school district census, staffing and dropouts. It even has Chapter 1 funding, which hadn't previously been available from the agency.

The CD runs in Windows and DOS, and is simple for looking up individual schools and districts. Downloading data for a single district or state is also easy if done as a CSV file. Downloading the entire country might be more difficult.

Neil Mara of the *Charlotte Observer* used the first version of this CD to do stories on school segregation last year. He cautioned against using the minority percentage calculated on the disk; the enrollment numbers by race seem to be accurate, though. The CD is free right now. Order by calling John Sietsema at (202) 219-1335.

— Penny Loeb, *U.S. News & World Report*

Call (202) 955-2640 or send e-mail to ploeb@capon.net

Working overtime with a spreadsheet

The *Waterbury (Conn.) Republican-American* used a Quattro Pro spreadsheet to examine city payroll records. The analysis by reporter Stephanie Reitz showed dozens of police officers and firefighters nearly doubled their salaries with overtime pay; a legacy of staffing shortages.

The April 23, 1995, story also showed how a 1986 state law designed to attract top teachers — a program later stripped of state funding — meant some of the city's highest salaries went to teachers.

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