UPLINK
THE FORUM FOR COMPUTER-ASSISTED REPORTING
v1 1
November 1990

Ohio's Toxic Avenger

When the Smoke Cleared, It Was Not a Pretty Sight

by Dave Davis

Fifty-three year old Clyde King remembered with a laugh the time he came home and found his next-door neighbor mowing the lawn in a protective moonsuit.

As he watched from his backyard, King couldn't help but wonder if something had happened on the other side of the chain-link fence that he should know about. But when he asked his neighbor - the Armco Steel works in Middletown, Ohio - the reason for the rubber suit and respirator, company officials simply shrugged and pretended not to know what he was talking about.

Clyde King didn't press that matter. Some of his relations worked at Armco and he had already learned how many questions were enough.

When I asked king if the plant's releases were ırting his family's health, he smiled and said yes, the llution was probably killing them. When I asked what was killing them, King pointed to a thin stream of gray smoke coming from a tall stack in the distance.

King was wrong.

Though the black soot collected everywhere and made life unpleasant, the true source of concern was much closer - inside two tar-storage tanks about 20 yards from King's home.

No one told King that the tanks released benzene, a gas he could not see or smell. No one told him that the benzene was the reason for the moonsuit, or that it caused cancer such as leukemia.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency had estimated that Armco's release of one million pounds of benzene a year would cause two cancer deaths a year in King's neighborhood, which included an elementary school at the end of the block.

Clyde King did not know these things and he was not alone. Though generations of families have grown up next to the sprawling steel mills, paper plants and auto makers of Ohio, no one knew what toxics come from their industrial neighbors.

The Toxic Release Inventory is changing this.

TRI is a pollution inventory that contains estimated

"Toxics" Continued on Page 2

Washington's Secret Service

By Michele Ward

Steve Dutton was not your typical under-cover police officer. When accusations flew out of the mouths of the cocaine dealers he allied himself with, Dutton would silence them with the thrust of a knife deep into his leg. The leg was wooden.

"Cops don't have one leg," he'd calmly tell them. Dutton was the first amputee to graduate from Washington's police training academy. Crime reporter Scott North from The Herald in Everett, Wash., found this interesting character through the use of his database.

"Secret Service" Continued on Page 3

TRI/DART Seminar News

MICAR will hold its next week-long seminar on computer-assisted reporting on January 27.

These seminars, which are held every three months, train people with little or no experience with computers how to negotiate for computer tapes, download the data on those tapes to a personal computer using a nine-track tape drive, verify that the information has not been tampered with, and analyze it using database software. The seminar also discusses how to administer a computer-assisted reporting program and the legal implications of using government computer tapes.

Last year, MICAR trained 41 people representing 25 newspapers, the Associated Press and 2 universities.

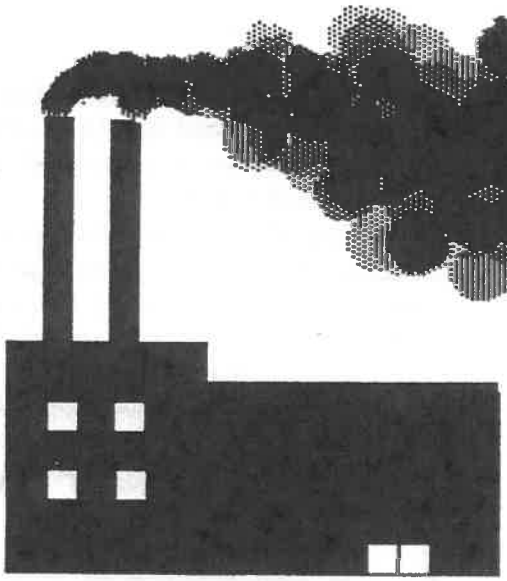
Tuition for the print media is based on ciruclation size and on market share for broadcasters.

For more information call MICAR at (314) 882 0684.

releases of more that 300 toxic chemicals by most companies. The information, required by the EPA since 1987, is presented by release for each company. The numbers include the total amount of toxic in pounds that escaped into the air, was discharged into out waterways or was buried in the ground for the reporting year.

With TRI, Armco Steel's benzene release figure was calculated in about an hour or two.

TRI is not perfect: the numbers are self-reported and I've often wondered how accurate they are. But TRI is a pretty good way to look at pollution in an area.



When I used it as the basis for a series on pollution in Ohio, I found it could help change the long-standing relationship between polluters and the press. Typically, companies had been tight-lipped about what came out of their plants. But when they found out we were going to publish the numbers they had given the federal government, they treated us to plant tours, interviews with company engineers and press conferences where pledges to lower emissions were made.

The lesson Clyde King taught me was a valuable one: that when it comes to toxic releases, what you see often isn't what you're getting.

Using a PC, we were able to track down previously undetectable emissions, adding up the total releases for each county in the state. Then we looked at each city in the state, and each zip code in out area. We put together a pollution map for our area , which looked like a multi-color weather map.

The "Every Breath You Take" series showed that some of the area's neighborhoods were among the dirtiest in the nation. Millions of pounds of toxic chemicals had been released and many of the most polluted neighborhoods were inhabited by workers like King and their families who have accepted pollution as necessary to their paychecks. Also, some companies have avoided reporting their releases by playing a complicated toxics shell game that hides their waste from public view.

"I found TRI could help change the long-standing relationship between polluters and the press."

The series from start to finish took a couple of months. The most time consuming process was cleaning up the data. For example, we wanted to break down the information by zip code, but the codes were often wrong. Sometimes, the reported zip code referred to the corporate headquarters rather than the manufacturing plants.

Since coming to Cleveland, I've found TRI helpful with daily stories, too. Daily stories usually take just a couple of days and they don't require a lot of PC sophistication.

For example, a local unpopular polluter, a plastics company that proposed to be allowed to triple its size, fudged its emissions numbers on the environmental impact study presented to a local town council. A quick check of TRI showed that the amount of toxics released by the firm already was more than double what was predicted in the impact study for the new, larger company.

TRI data is available on floppy disk for 1897 from the National Technical Information Service at (703) 487-4650 for $75 per state, or $1100 for the entire country. (It's available for 1987 and 1988 for $726 from the Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting at (314) 882-0684.

Happy hunting and if I can help anyone just ring me at The Plain Dealer, 216-344-4808.

If You Want To Use The Toxic Release Inventory.....

The 1988 volume is available in 4 Reels, ASCII, 6250 bpi, 32450 block-size. Record length is 550.

NTIS sells TRI for $1100. The Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting will provide the entire volume for $726.

MICAR also can provide 1987 TRI data for the same price.

Boston Reeling-In Stories

By Paul Martin

Since the Boston Herald got its computer-assisted reporting program going in April, reporters David Armstrong and Alan Levin have produced computer studies on Massachusetts polluters, dwindling defense contracts and suprising sources of campaign money.

The Herald got the toxic-release inventory tapes for Massachusetts companies last spring. Levin, who had attended the Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting's TRI/DART seminar in April, downloaded the tapes and analyzed the data with XDB software.

He found that Massachusetts companies were using inreasing amounts of Freon 113, a chloroflourocarbon known to damage the ozone layer. Levin and reporter Nick Tate put togeher a three-story package that ran on page 1 of the July 2 issue.

Among the Herald's findings:

- Massachusetts industry ranked third in the nation for Freon use in 1987 and 1988.
- Thirty-one of 48 Freon-using plants increased usage from 1987 to 1988.
- Increases by small and mid-sized companies nullified reductions made by the state's largest users, General Electric Co. and Raytheon. Overall, Freon use went up.

One of the package's smaller stories explained how Freon destroys ozone, allowing the sun's ultraviolet rays to reach the Earth's surface and wreak havoc on food chains and increase incidences of skin cancer. Another side-bar explained new ways to replace Freon, which is used to clean circuit boards and electronic equipment. Digital Equipment Corp., for example, "pioneered a new cleaning method" that isn't so new to most of us: soap and water.

Perhaps the most sobering fact in the package was that Freon released today will still be destroying ozone 140 years from now, wiping out up to 300 times its own weight of the protective gas before it's done.

Defense Department tapes were the source for Armstrong's study showing how Massachusetts manufacturers and their workers are suffering from defense cuts. The effect of the cuts was not news when the three

"Reeling-In" Continued on Page 4

Secret Service ...

"(Dutton's) name kept coming up," North said.

A year ago, North went to his editors with a story idea. He wanted to report how the war on drugs was being fought in Snohomish County. North and reporter Dale Folkerts began their reporting by scouring 1,134 drug cases on file with the county. This data was entered by hand into their computers and information about the defendant, charges, depositions and names of the officials involved were examined.

That's how North found Dutton.

After they had completed the process of entering the data, they discovered that they had hundreds of files in their computers, but no way to manipulate the files.

Last April, North attended the Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting's TRI/DART (training reporters in data acquisition retrieval technologies) seminar to learn how to manipulate the data already entered into his database.

The trianing resulted in the Herald's "War Without Victory" series.

The reporting team responsible for the series consisted of reporters from the county courthouse, political and crime beats plus a reporter who specialized in demographics.

They found that the drug offender wasn't so very different from a typical Snohomish County resident. The demographic description of both were quite similar in relation to age, race and educational level. This kind of activity could be found in any neighborhood; this kind of criminal was often one's neighbor.

"Myths were unmasked...our numbers showed that these cases are happening in your own back yard," North said.

Unfortunately, the sentence doesn't always fit the crime. The reporters found that 76% of the cases resulted in convictions with 93% of those plea-bargained for a lesser sentence. Of those who were sentenced to serve time, the median jail sentence was only two and a half months. In 30% of the cases the offender served a month or less, often serving nonconsecutive days. Prosecutors tend to focus on getting convictions at the expense of reducing punishment. Prosecutors are working against time — they put together a case quickly because they don't want it postponed, often up to two years, before it gets to court. One police officer noted that a person with a suspended driver's license is apt to serve more time than someone convicted of a drug offense.

The Herald will continue to use this drug database in police reporting, especially homicides where there is drug involvement. "We often beat our competition with stories on crime," North commented.

day series was published in August. Contractors were already laying off hundreds of employees and announcing plans to lay off thousands more.

But Armstrong's articles put the problem in perspective. Day one's stories explained why the end of the Cold War and Reagan-style deficit spending could mean a dim future for Massachussettes' defense-reliant economy. The Reagan Administration's defense buildup had been a major force behind the 1980s boom in the Massachusetts economy, Armstrong's study showed.

"Candidates who were making a campaign out of Dukakis-bashing were also relying on the Duke's former contributors for campaign money."

The second day's stories were about congressmen's attempts to bring home a piece of the shrinking defense-contract pie. Armstrong grouped the state's contracts by congressional districts to show exactly which congressmen had garnered the biggest pieces.

The series finale reported how government-dependent contractors in Massachusetts were trying to wean themselves by looking for contracts with civilian companies at home and overseas.

The Herald reporters has a major obstacle to clear before they can attempt a computer-assisted study of the campaign contributions in the Massachusetts governor's race: The state's contribution records are not computerized.

Herald management decided to ship the records to a data-entry company for the considerable task of creating a computer database of contributions. So far, the paper has spent more than $10,000 competerizing the records. Armstrong said it's well worth it.

The Herald also bought complete records of contributions to the 1988 presidential race. By comparing these contributions to those of the governor's candidaties, Armstrong and reporter Jonathan Wells were able to show that candidates who were making a campaign of Dukakis-bashing were also relying on the Duke's former contributors for campaign money.

Armstrong's study also found that a surprising amount of contributions had crossed party lines. Both Democratic primary candidates had tapped former Bush supporters for more than GOP candidate Steven Pierce. And the other Republican candidate, William Weld, had received $61,500 from 1988 Dukakis supporters, nearly two-thirds as much as he had gotton from Bush contributors.

Lately, Armstrong and Levin have had to help out with the Herald's campaign coverage, and computer-assisted projects have taken the back seat. But not for long, Armstrong said.

"After November, we're really going to go bonkers on this thing," he said.

MICAR Library News

MICAR makes available to reporters a library of data stored on 9-track computer tapes. A complete list of these tapes can be promptly mailed toanyone upon request.

This month, MICAR has attained three new sets of data.

From the Federal Aviation Association:

- a report on "service difficulty," which includes a list of all malfunctions and defects on commercial aircraft flown in the United States ($36).

From the Food and Drug Administration:

- a medical device report, which lists all injuries, malfunctions and deaths caused by medical devices ($336).

-a problem-reporting program record, which lists all problems logged by the FDA by doctors from hospitals concerning medical equipment ($204).

This newsletter is a publication of the

Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

120 Neff Hall
University of Missouri
Columbia, MO 65211
(314) 882-0684

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

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