

## FIRST VENTURE

### Tallying city spending on trinkets

By Eugene Mulero  
*The Arizona Republic*

My interest in city promotional items, or trinkets, started at a local history festival last fall in Chandler, Ariz., and led to my first CAR story.

The event took place at a park near the ruins of the old Southern Pacific Railroad line. To commemorate the event, city officials handed out small foam choo-choo trains. The trains looked like squeezable stress-relief toys. More importantly, they had the city's logo and Web site on their tops. I took one back to the newsroom.

A few weeks later, I talked to a former colleague in New Jersey. I told him I picked up the trinket, and he mentioned that cities in Jersey wouldn't spend money on those items.

I realized he was right. I never saw a city in New Jersey give away pens or notepads with their logos. If they did, residents would criticize officials for overspending.

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## SPOTLIGHT: PEOPLE AND PROFILES

### Records reveal ties behind charity scam

By Ronald Campbell, *The Orange County Register*

It's 7 p.m. and you're just sitting down to dinner when the phone rings.

Another phone solicitor.

He's pitching for the American Deputy Sheriff's Association or the Disabled Firefighters Foundation or the American Veterans Relief Foundation or one of dozens of sound-alike charities.

These groups use similar names,

similar pitches, similar techniques and many of the same organizers to reap tens of millions of dollars annually from American donors. In fact, they are all

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## SPOTLIGHT:

For more about the people and profiles:

- Tips for backgrounding people, p. 3
- Tracking a congressional aide, p. 4
- Data and resources from IRE and NICAR, p. 6
- The November-December IRE Journal

## AMERICAN COMMUNITY SURVEY

### Hard lessons in first big data wave

By Paul Overberg, *USA Today*

As summer rolled into fall and the data from the 2005 American Community Survey just kept coming, one thing became clear: Its maturation will be slower and more difficult than even the Census Bureau anticipated.

This year's release, the first of the full national sample of three million households per year, is already the sixth in the series stretching back to the Census 2000 Supplementary Survey. ACS won't emerge in full form until 2011. In journalism, that's almost geological time.

ACS has been changing all the time. This year, the data changed significantly from last year. The same thing will happen in each of the next two years. For example:

- The 2005 data was produced from a nationwide sample that included all states and congressional districts. PLUS: This allowed comparisons from place to place that could never be made before. CAVEAT: comparisons to earlier years were often suspect.

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## Bits & Bytes

### Boating data

The IRE and NICAR Database Library recently updated its U.S. Recreational Boating Accident Database.

Current through 2005, the database contains information on recreational boating incidents that resulted in a death or an injury that required more than just first aid. It consists of four tables (Prime, Dead, Injury and Vessel) and also lists vessel damage that costs more than \$2,000 to repair. For the first time, the database does not include data for California because the state declined to allow the Coast Guard to release the records.

For more information, visit [www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases](http://www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases) or call the library at 573-884-7711

### IRE Conference

Make plans now to attend the 2007 IRE Conference June 7-10 in Phoenix. *The Arizona Republic* is hosting the event, which will be held at the Arizona Biltmore Resort and Spa.

The annual gathering will feature more than 100 panels, workshops and presentations on covering courts, public safety, the military and business just to name a few. Register for the optional day, June 7, to attend special CAR panels or take additional hands-on classes in Excel spreadsheets and Access database manager.

IRE and NICAR welcome suggestions for panel topics, speakers and classes. Send your ideas to [confideas@ire.org](mailto:confideas@ire.org). Please make reference to the 2007 IRE Conference.

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## INSIDE NICAR

# On the FOIA front

By David Herzog, NICAR and Missouri School of Journalism

In the previous issue of *Uplink*, journalists wrote about how they obtained data from the federal government and analyzed it for their stories about the U.S. military. A common thread that ran through the articles was the authors' use of the Freedom of Information Act to get data from federal agencies.

The requests yielded data about civilian complaints against soldiers in Iraq, mental health referrals for service members and disparities in veterans' disability payments. In the latter case, the former Knight Ridder Washington bureau had to sue the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs.

But the shared theme here is that journalists can use FOIA successfully. That should be heartening news for journalists doing computer-assisted reporting. Despite the federal government's clampdown on information since 9/11, some journalists are persistent enough to get the data for stories that inform the public about those sent to war.

Let's hope these FOIA experiences encourage even more of us to use this essential, but underused, tool.

Contact David Herzog by e-mail at [dherzog@nicar.org](mailto:dherzog@nicar.org).

## About our contributors ...

**Ronald Campbell** started the computer-assisted reporting program at *The Orange County Register*. He has participated in many investigations, including a probe of the trade in human body parts. He has won the Gerald Loeb, IRE and National Education Writers awards.

**Jacob Jost** recently joined WBIR-Knoxville, Tenn. after two years with KOMU-Columbia, Mo. At WBIR, he has focused on political coverage and using CAR to report on campaign finance and examine claims in campaign ads. Jost is a 2005 graduate of the Missouri School of Journalism.

**Eugene Mulero** joined *The Arizona Republic* in 2005. His investigations so far have ranged from Arizona's ineffective recycling programs to the fight for exposure among local hip-hop artists. He completed the IRE and NICAR Boot Camp in 2005.

**Paul Overberg**, database editor at *USA Today*, helps train the paper's 400 journalists in addition to fielding IRE and NICAR questions about census issues. He's a former science and environmental reporter and editor at Gannett News Service.

**Thomas Peele** is an investigative reporter for the *Contra Costa (Calif.) Times* and previously covered city hall in Atlantic City, N.J. *The Times* won the 2005 AP Managing Editors award for Freedom of Information for Peele's investigation of access to government records at public agencies in Northern California. Peele is an alumnus of a 2005 NICAR Bootcamp for Knight Ridder employees.

**Matthew Waite** reports for the metro staff of the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times* with a focus on using CAR for news. He has used CAR for stories on home prices, census trends, test scores, traffic patterns and pedestrian deaths. Waite and *Times* colleague Craig Pitman received third place in the 2005 Philip Meyer Awards for "Vanishing Wetlands," an investigation that used GIS and satellite imagery.

**Duff Wilson**, investigative reporter for *The New York Times*, was elected to the IRE Board of Directors in June. His journalism honors include the Goldsmith Prize for Investigative Reporting, two Polk Awards, a Broun, Loeb and Oakes, and IRE awards; he was a Pulitzer Prize finalist three times while with *The Seattle Times*.

## SPOTLIGHT: PEOPLE AND PROFILES

# These sources speak when subjects won't

By Duff Wilson, *The New York Times*

There is a wealth of records, many of them available at your fingertips for profiling people who don't want to be profiled.

Some of these online tools are included in "Who is John Doe – and where to get the paper on him" at [www.reporter.org/desktop/tips/johndoe.htm](http://www.reporter.org/desktop/tips/johndoe.htm), a collaborative Web page hosted by IRE.

(For more of Wilson's advice on using documents and data to build an investigative profile, see "People Skills" in *The IRE Journal*, November/December, 2006.)

Obviously, you should be an expert in Google ([www.google.com](http://www.google.com)) and its News, Groups, Book Search and Alerts. Your research may benefit from some common Google search-term refinements: Put quote marks around "Full Names" or "complete phrases of words." Use a minus mark to exclude a term. Specify *filetype:doc* (or pdf or xls or ppt, etc.) to limit results to Word

documents (or Adobe Acrobat PDF files or Excel spreadsheets or PowerPoint presentations, etc). Put *site:gov* (or org or edu, and so on) to limit to certain domains.

Google has a good phonebook, but LexisNexis ([www.nexis.com](http://www.nexis.com)) is the best source for current addresses and phone numbers. Use the "Public Records Search" on your Nexis home page. (Subscription required)

Accurant ([www.accurint.com](http://www.accurint.com)) provides a fast background report on a subject's address history, real estate holdings, criminal or federal court cases, voting registrations, possible associates, possible relatives, and other basic background. Don't print or air any of this information without checking it with source material, such as court files. Consider it a source of leads. Accurant is owned by LexisNexis. (Subscription required)

AutoTrackXP ([www.autotrackxp.com](http://www.autotrackxp.com)) by

ChoicePoint, another personal information aggregator, is occasionally more complete but often more expensive.

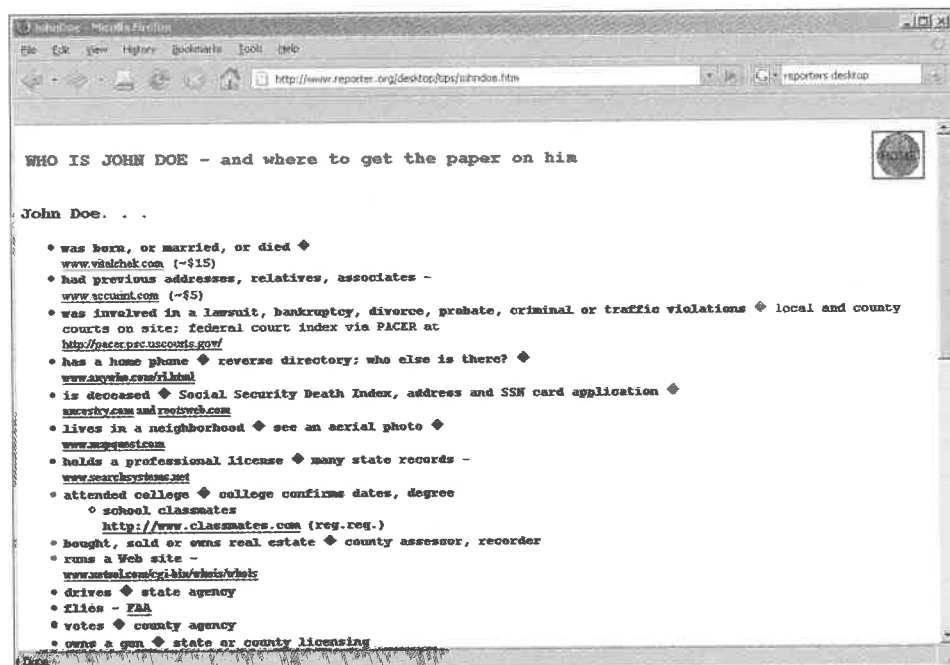
Once you have some basic information about someone, VitalChek ([www.vitalchek.com](http://www.vitalchek.com)) can lead you to birth, death, marriage and divorce records, though the site is harder to navigate than it should be. Access and cost vary widely by state. Often you can do better by calling the states' offices for vital statistics. This information leads to parents, siblings, and the wonderful ex's. A marriage license will also lead to the witnesses for the bride and groom – close friends.

It's best to visit all the courthouses in the areas where your subject has lived. Some state courts systems have good on-line indexes, but exclude the documents, as well as the misdemeanor and small civil cases where you can find unexpected gems and connections. (The Center for Democracy and Technology reports on state-by-state availability of online court records at [www.cdt.org/publications/020821courtrecords.shtml](http://www.cdt.org/publications/020821courtrecords.shtml).)

For federal courts, PACER (<http://pacer.psc.uscourts.gov>) offers an authoritative Web site with a searchable database. PACER offers PDF files on original court filings for many cases – as good as going to the federal courthouse. It also lists parties including their attorneys' phone numbers. The time frame varies by court. You need a login and a subscription to access the page-printing function (8 cents a page).

County recorders' offices are investigative gold mines, too. Today, many counties make recorded documents – deeds, mortgages, lines of credit, partnership agreements – available online. Google the county name and "recorder." If their records aren't online, go there – it's worth the trip.

Aside from the focusing on the basics, your investigation may take you to specialized information resources on the Web. If your subject is a lawyer, visit your state bar association Web



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## Bits & Bytes

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See details and online registration information at [www.ire.org/training/phoenix07](http://www.ire.org/training/phoenix07). Conference attendees must reserve a hotel room by Friday, May 11, to qualify for a discounted rate of \$150 plus tax.

### Training in Korea

IRE recently conducted investigative and computer-assisted reporting training for two of South Korea's leading news organizations.

In late October, Database Library Director Jeff Porter led sessions for the Korean Broadcasting System, the country's largest television network. In Suwon, 22 journalists attended classes in Excel and Access and learned about investigative reporting techniques. At the KBS headquarters in Seoul, reporters and producers heard presentations on using databases, mapping and social network analysis for stories.

*The Chosun Ilbo*, South Korea's largest daily newspaper with a circulation of more than 2 million, hosted David Donald, IRE training director, for four days in early August.

*Chosun* is starting an investigative reporting program and IRE was tapped to help get it started. Donald trained journalists in investigative and computer-assisted reporting. He also worked with other *Chosun* editors to put together an investigative team.

According to Donald, South Korea does not have a long tradition of investigative reporting. CAR has gained popularity only during the past few years.

## SPOTLIGHT: PEOPLE AND PROFILES

# Capitol aide's two jobs leave money trail

By Thomas Peele, *Contra Costa (Calif.) Times*

I have never met Steven J. Ding, chief of staff to the U.S. House Resources Committee and a top political adviser to its chairman, Rep. Richard Pombo, R-Calif., who recently lost his re-election bid. I've never been in the same room with Ding, and we have spoken on the telephone only a few times.

Yet after digging through congressional spending documents, personal financial disclosures, campaign finance reports and other records, and then using them to build databases, I was able to paint a picture of Ding for our readers.

Ding preferred *venti*-sized Starbucks coffee, parked often at the Sacramento airport, usually on Mondays, and left his car for four days. He spent a lot of time on planes and at Capitol Hill hotels. Between 2000 and 2004, he received at least \$114,240 in political consulting fees from California Republican politicians, some of it in violation of congressional rules.

Last year, two colleagues and I began to comb through records related to the land holdings of Pombo and his family in California's Central Valley. We heard that Pombo had allowed his top aide unusual job freedom, so I began gathering documents and eventually broke away to focus on Ding.

### D.C. travel

I learned that Ding traveled almost weekly between his home in Stockton, Calif., and Washington, where he stayed in a Capitol Hill hotel at taxpayer expense when the committee was in session.

To examine the travel, I needed copies of Pombo's "representational account" reports for five years. These documents, available only in the House Clerk's Office, show all salaries and

expenses paid from a House member's office budget. Two colleagues passing through Washington obtained copies for me.

These documents, in tiny type, contained dozens of references to "Ding airfare Sac-DC" or "Ding airfare DC-SF." There were other references to "Ding lodging" or "Ding sustenance." The hotel and food entries didn't specify where the money was spent, but the dates on the travel records told me that Ding had to have incurred them in Washington.

I entered all of the costs into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. They showed that during the three-year period in which Ding worked for the committee but lived in Stockton, he charged more than \$87,000 in travel expenses to Pombo's district office. Pombo appointed Ding to run the House Resources Committee when he became its chairman in 2002; Ding had worked for the congressman in California since 1992.

I also learned from the Pombo office spending documents that Ding was getting paid \$100 a month as Pombo's chief of staff. This was in addition to his committee salary of more than \$150,000 a year. That item in the office budget, Ding later said, permitted him to commute from California to Washington at taxpayer expense. By still doing some work on Pombo's district staff, he considered his congressional "duty station" to be California. That, he said, entitled him to government travel when he was needed back in Washington for committee business.

If he had attempted to bill this travel to the committee, it would have been rejected. Committee rules state: "living and commuting expenses are not reimbursable."

Using several on-line databases, including Nexis, House Web sites, the District of Columbia Bar Association and the Republican National Lawyers Association, I found the primary residences for the chiefs of staff for all the other standing House committees. Each one lived in the Washington area.

### Outside income

In California, Ding frequently worked for Republicans with close ties to Pombo, an analysis of state and congressional records showed. Top House staffers must file annual financial disclosure statements. Ding's showed income from several political candidates and consultants, including a Sacramento firm that ran Pombo's campaigns.

Congressional rules limit the amount of money that staffers can receive each year on top of their government salaries. For one year, Ding reported that he received an amount that exceeded the limit. I started digging more deeply.

The California Secretary of State maintains a campaign finance Web site (<http://cal-access.ss.ca.gov/Campaign>) with advanced search functions. When I entered Ding's name as a vendor and searched all records, I got numerous hits. One showed that he received \$30,000 in one month from a candidate in the 2003 gubernatorial recall election.

I used Excel and Microsoft Access database manager to show how much Ding was paid compared to what he had reported to Congress. In all, the state finance records showed he received \$35,000 in payments for that year. In contrast, Ding reported \$20,000 in outside income on his House financial disclosure statement. Congressional rules limited outside income that year to about \$22,000.

The state records also showed that Ding received a \$1,000 payment in 2000 that he failed to report to Congress. Additionally, in 2002 he reported income that exceeded the congressional limit by \$5,000.

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# MAPPING IT OUT

*The latest uses of mapping in news reporting.*

## Prep for election mapping

By Jacob Jost  
WBIR-Knoxville, Tenn.

With the November general election over, now is the perfect time to lay the groundwork for mapping data in future elections.

Journalists reporting for print can follow races throughout election night and then analyze the data using geographic information system (GIS) software when the final results are released. Those of us in television and online media have another challenge: generating worthwhile analysis of the election as it develops.

Preparation can help your news organization provide thoughtful coverage of the election in advance and even as it happens. There's plenty you can do right now.

If an incumbent is running for office, you can analyze earlier results to see where that candidate's support was strongest. If there's a challenger, examine election results from the primary election or any earlier races that included the challenger.

You also can obtain information on the number of registered voters and voter turnout in previous elections. This can give you a sense of the "power precincts" within your voting area. With these maps in hand, you can either present an election preview story or simply make sure your anchors are well-briefed to analyze the election as the results roll in.

### Raw materials

Making maps now will also help you iron out any logistical problems before deadline on next election night.

To do election mapping you'll need a GIS program, such as ESRI's ArcView, data on voter registration and results, and mapping shapefiles that show voting precincts.

Many journalists have been able to obtain registration and results in common data formats (such as ASCII text) that can be easily imported into a database manager, such as Microsoft Access. Sometimes this information is only readily available in Adobe Acrobat PDF files. If that's the case, you will need to convert these to text tables using the no-cost XPDF or a similar tool from a commercial vendor. (See "Wrestling useful data from PDFs" in the July/August 2006 *Uplink*).

You also will need to get election map shapefiles required to display the data in ArcView. Check first with the elections division in your state's secretary of state's office. The cost, if any, will vary.

In Tennessee, a voting precinct shapefile for a county costs \$10. Tennessee has 95 counties, so the cost for the entire state would run more than \$1,000 after sales tax. If you're only seeking maps for your viewing or circulation area, the cost would be lower.

Another option is to check with the commissioner of elections in each county; you might be able to do better on the cost. If you're unable to obtain the precinct shapefiles, you may need to shift gears and examine results by county. County election commissioners usually total the results from all their precincts, and then send them along to the state. To complement the data, you can then use county shapefiles, which are available from a number of sources. (Today many counties employ GIS specialists who maintain local precinct shapefiles. If election officials insist that only paper maps exist, ask them what department produces the maps.)

### Must-have maps

A few maps can go a long way in your reporting.

## CLOSENESS OF RACES



Perhaps the simplest is a map showing which candidate won each county or precinct. If you're examining a two-candidate race you can easily calculate the winner in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. If there are more than two candidates, you may find it easier to move your data into a database manager, such as Access, and run update queries to indicate whether a candidate is the winner.

In addition to showing wins, you can show the strength of victory using a color scheme or other map graphics. I recently used a 10 percent margin as my benchmark for strong support. You can adjust the benchmark, based upon voting history in your area.

The victory-margin map helped for a WBIR report that showed how a powerful Republican sheriff nearly lost to a lightly funded challenger who made

inroads into a Republican stronghold. The strength-of-win map showed that, although the incumbent held onto the majority of the votes in that area, it was a close race. (See the story and maps at [www.wbir.com/news/archive.aspx?storyid=36850](http://www.wbir.com/news/archive.aspx?storyid=36850)).

Another informative map shows turnout. You can create this by getting data on registered voters and voter turnout records for past elections. That will show you the high-activity areas and help you see turnout trends.

These are just three examples of the maps you can make for election night. The simplicity of the numbers available limits the ways in which you can work with the data. On the upside, the maps are easier for everyone to understand.

Contact Jacob Jost by e-mail at [jjost@wbir.gannett.com](mailto:jjost@wbir.gannett.com).

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## CAR TOOL

# Tame unruly notes with a wiki

By Matthew Waite, *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times*

After 18 months of reporting, interviewing and studying, Craig Pittman and I sat down to write a series on Florida's vanishing wetlands. We had interviewed hundreds of people, reviewed tens of thousands of pages of documents and analyzed satellite imagery for the whole state. In short, we had a lot of stuff to go through.

And we had no real way to manage it all, aside from boxes, so we muddled through the old-fashioned way – with a lot of paper shuffling. But it didn't have to be like that.

A year earlier, Derek Willis of *The Washington Post* showed me how journalists there were investigating lobbyist Jack Abramoff and storing their information in a wiki.

## Wiki, what?

A wiki is a mouthful of an idea, but what it boils down to is this: it's a Web-based text database. Users can edit any page and add text, which the wiki software makes browsable and searchable. Wikis can run on a Web server, or they can run on your desktop. To edit the wiki, all you or your users need is a Web browser.

As for who the users are, that's up to you. You could set up a wiki for yourself on your computer. You can set one up on a server where you or a wiki administrator can control who gets a password and login. You can set wikis up to use your existing newsroom security accounts, or just throw the whole thing wide open to anyone (not that I would recommend doing that).

Let's be clear on something: this is not Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. This is using the idea – you can even use the same software Wikipedia uses – of a Web-based editable text database to store and manage the massive amount of stuff we all collect during the course of reporting a story.

Now, more than a year after the first two stories in the wetlands series ran, we store nearly all of the information we collect for our continuing series on a wiki. We have more than 200 interviews transcribed on the wiki, thousands of pages of documents stored, literally millions of words comprising our research, all organized and searchable.

Instead of pawing through boxes or notebooks, I can type a term into the search area and find every instance of that term in all of our notes at once. For a follow-up story, I remembered that a source had talked about a specific issue in an interview we'd done a year before. I typed in a few keywords, and the interview popped up in seconds. No quote, fact or idea we've had on the project is out of reach anymore.

Our original wiki, which I hosted on a personal server, worked so well, and so many reporters in the newsroom wanted to use it, that we set one up for the *St. Petersburg (Fla.) Times* newsroom. Unveiled in late October, it's in its infancy. Wikis work extremely well managing projects, but it's an open question to see how they do in a daily environment.

## The set-up

For anyone wanting to set one up in a newsroom, there are some questions you need to answer first:

1. Who will use this wiki? Is it just you? Or is it everyone in the newsroom?
2. What do you have to run it? Do you have your own web server?
3. Do you have any support from your company's IT department?

## A selection of wiki software

Mediawiki | [www.mediawiki.org](http://www.mediawiki.org)

Software that runs Wikipedia. Requires database and Web servers. Installation is easy if you've done any Web work before. Built for large user base (i.e. a whole newsroom).

Instiki | [www.instiki.org](http://www.instiki.org)

Runs on the scripting language Ruby. If you have a Mac, Instiki installs quickly and easily. Very easy to use; can be deployed on a server.

Zulupad | [www.gersic.com/zulupad](http://www.gersic.com/zulupad)

Very stripped down wiki – more like a notebook with links. Personal wiki, easy to deploy on one machine.

Tiddlywiki | [www.tiddlywiki.com](http://www.tiddlywiki.com)

Similar to Zulupad, but with more wiki features. Meant to be deployed on one computer.

Stikipad | [www.stikipad.com](http://www.stikipad.com)

Need to share your wiki with a co-worker but don't have the server? Try Stikipad. Some features costs money – starting at \$5 a month – but you'll get a password-protected wiki you can share.



The reasons are simple: if the wiki is just for you, there are plenty of options for wikis that run on your computer. If it's for the whole newsroom, then your needs ramp up. I started our wiki on a personal server because I had no access to any servers at the *Times*, and none of our servers had the right software to run one. We now have two new servers running our internal wiki. Our IT staff bought into the idea right away, and we got what we needed.

A bright side: there's no need to spend a dime on software. There are several open-source wiki programs that cost nothing.

Our internal wiki runs on MediaWiki, the software that runs Wikipedia, is open-source and free of charge. MediaWiki requires PHP, a free scripting language, and MySQL, a free database program that stores all your information. If you already have an Apache-based Web server in your newsroom, you can set up a wiki without spending anything.

With the back end set up, making it work is a snap, and it's an open-ended

question. The wiki is a series of Web pages that are all linked together. How you create them and how you organize them is up to you. On our internal wiki, I've created areas by project, beat, bureau and down to individual reporters. How we'll do it in the future I don't know; we'll see how the wiki evolves. But that's the beautiful thing about it – it can constantly evolve.

Creating pages in MediaWiki is simple. You open up an edit screen (by clicking the cleverly named "edit" button) and enclose the name of your page in double brackets. Let's say I wanted to create a page with this article in it. In my edit screen, I would type `[[wiki article]]`. When I hit "save," the wiki software creates a new page in the database – an empty place for you to store your text – and turns the words "wiki article" into a link. I could then click on the link, and it would automatically take me to an edit screen to add the text of this article. As soon as I hit "save," I can search for any word in the article.

Having searched for years for a better way to manage and organize the proj-

## Wiki Resources

Matthew Waite spoke about wikis at the 2006 Annual CAR Conference in Newark, N.J. You can view his PowerPoint presentation online at [www.mattwaite.com/conference-materials](http://www.mattwaite.com/conference-materials).

Panelists at the Special Libraries Association News Division 2006 Annual Conference also discussed wikis. An MP3 audio file of the panel and supporting materials are available at [www.ibiblio.org/slanews/conferences/sla2006](http://www.ibiblio.org/slanews/conferences/sla2006).

ects I'm working on, I've never seen anything better than a wiki. It's simple, sophisticated and extremely flexible. Every journalist I've shown the wiki has immediately grasped what it could do for them. It's definitely worth looking at for your newsroom.

Contact Matthew Waite by e-mail at [waite@sptimes.com](mailto:waite@sptimes.com).

# CAR Boot Camp



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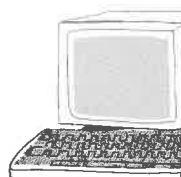
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# Charity

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connected to one man: imprisoned charity telemarketer Mitch Gold.

In "Network of Deception," a story published in March 2006, I documented the connections among more than a dozen ostensibly independent charities. Together these organizations raised \$82 million in four years and spent just \$5.6 million on charity.

The story's heart was an interactive graphic, created by *Register* artist Geoffrey Anderson, that showed connections among about 70 individuals, charities and companies. (To see the graphic, go to [www.ocregister.com/multimedia/gold](http://www.ocregister.com/multimedia/gold).) A long paper trail provided the documentation for linking the charities to the convicted felon. Social networking software provided the glue that held the story together.

I started this story with one big advantage: When Gold was sentenced to federal prison, a state regulator had sent the judge an eight-page, single-spaced list naming Gold's many associates, including several charities. Sending Gold to prison, she wrote the judge, would send all these people a message.

Everyone on my list had dealt with

Gold or one of Gold's apprentices. Every organization on my list used tactics similar to the ones Gold had perfected.

But a list is not a story. It's merely a skeleton. I tried to put flesh on the bones with interviews. Gold agreed to talk and then, three days before the scheduled prison interview, backed out. Gold's former legal adviser, an ex-convict, would-be parricide and full-time charity administrator named Joe Shambaugh, agreed to talk. Then he canceled the interview.

One of the few Gold associates who did talk, David Tubbs of La Verne, Calif.-based Shiloh International Ministries, candidly explained why a charity would do business with someone like Gold.

"Even I knew that Mitch was a pretty bad character," Tubbs said. "But we needed the money."

Since very few people were willing to talk, I relied mostly on documents to link people and organizations. The richest source of information was IRS Form 990, the annual report filed by every charity that raises at least \$25,000. I used the 990 for two purposes. The first was conventional: I monitored at least four years of financial data, in some cases more, for more than 20 charities. This information became the

source for several graphics.

But the 990 is also a rich source of social information. It lists all the officers and directors as well as the top five contractors. From the beginning, this story was like the celebrity-linking game, "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon." Except, of course, that the central character was a convicted fraudster and several people within one or two degrees of him were more likely to be found in lawsuits than in *People* magazine.








Take Joe Shambaugh. He served several years in federal prison during the late 1980s after a botched murder-for-hire attempt against his own father. (The "hitman" turned out to be an undercover FBI agent.) When Shambaugh first came to my attention, he was managing four charities from a rundown office in Orange County.

One might ask why the Association for Disabled Firefighters or the Coalition of Police and Sheriffs would hire a felon to manage their affairs. The quick answer is, they didn't. They hired a company, SR-1 Financial Services, which Shambaugh controlled. Each charity's Form 990 dutifully reported their six-figure payments to SR-1.

By reading several years worth of 990s, I could watch directors and contractors flowing in and out of the organization. I also could see people who played multiple roles, in some cases drawing salaries from three or four charities. The charities overseen by Shambaugh were particularly fascinating. A handful of people appeared as directors for several charities, forming a daisy chain of links.

Shambaugh's name never appeared in any 990. The only way to connect the ex-con and a police charity was through a California corporate filing, listing him as the incorporator of SR-1.

Commercial fundraiser reports, which are filed in California, New York and several other states, were a vital supplement to the 990. While chari-

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| ShambaughJ  | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1   | 0   | 0   | 1    |    |    |     |
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| AVRFound  | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 0   | 1    |    |    |     |
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ties only have to report their top five contractors — and many don't even do that — fundraisers must file reports for each of their clients, no matter how small. The commercial fundraising reports disclosed dozens of relationships that the charities had not reported in their 990s.

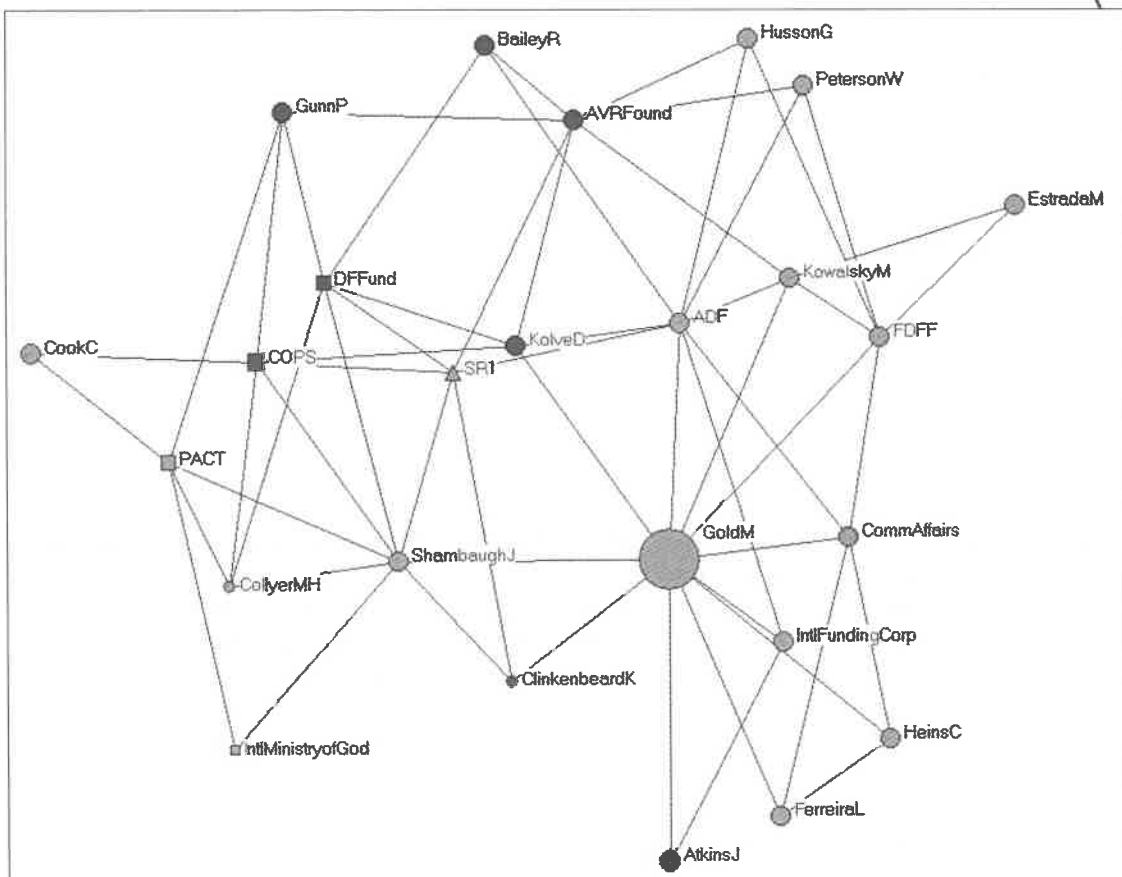
Other public records provided more information. Court records, including a deposition Gold had given in 1999, provided dozens more connections. Corporate records helped me trace the people behind several fundraisers and contractors. I had not intended to learn new software for the story on Gold. My idea, at first, was to draw the growing network on butcher paper and then hand the results to *The Register's* graphics staff.

My drawings quickly became way too complicated, dashing any remaining illusions I might have had about artistic talent. So I persuaded my boss to shell out \$250 for UCINET, social network software published by Analytic Technologies. ([www.analytictech.com](http://www.analytictech.com)) For more information about social network analysis visit the IRE's online guide at [www.ire.org/sna](http://www.ire.org/sna).

A software package like UCINET is ideal for explaining indirect relationships like this. Using a spreadsheet-like matrix, the user enters a "1" to represent connections.

I entered a "1" in the cell where the SR-1 Financial column intersected the Association for Disabled Firefighters row. And I entered another "1" where the SR-1 column intersected the Shambaugh row.

And I entered a "1" in dozens upon dozens of other cells, mapping connections



among 123 "nodes" or participants. (In network-speak, each individual, charity or company is a node.)

UCINET is neither easy to learn nor easy to use. But the program comes with NetDraw, a network charting application, which is easy to use. NetDraw quickly converted my butcher paper scrawls into what looked like a hairball. I drastically pruned the network, removing long-defunct charities and individuals on the periphery. That got me down to fewer than 100 nodes, and a slightly smaller hairball.

Here is where UCINET showed its power. One of the most important concepts in network analysis is "centrality" — the idea that some nodes are especially important because they have a lot of connections to other nodes. UCINET can calculate the centrality almost instantly for every actor in a network.

A tool in NetDraw, called EgoNets, makes it easy to examine individual branches of a network. An egonet is

an individual node's connections. One can add egonets "Six Degrees of Kevin Bacon" style, until you have added everyone in the known universe. Or you can turn off egonets, paring down to the essential players.

Working with artist Anderson, I switched egonets on and off until we identified about 70 key players. Together, centrality and the egonets helped to reveal Shambaugh's behind-the-scenes role. Several operators appeared to be better-connected than Shambaugh. His centrality score was 8, nowhere near the top. But as soon as I expanded the scope, adding charities associated with his company, SR-1, the number of connections tripled.

The social networking software made that indirect connection between the convicted felon and the police and fire charities clear to everyone who read my story or viewed the interactive network graphic online.

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## INSIDE NICAR

# Meeting yields tips on fed data

By IRE and NICAR Staff

IRE and NICAR Database Library Director Jeff Porter in early October attended the Association of Public Data Users Conference outside Washington, D.C. Highlights of interest to Uplink readers:

- One conference panel highlighted the Office of Management and Budget's Information Collection Review. The OMB requires federal agencies to file a review of their information-gathering processes every three years, creating a great data-hunting resource. The reports are available online at [www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAMain](http://www.reginfo.gov/public/do/PRAMain), and you can search by agency to see what types of information it collects on a regular basis.
- The American Community Survey was a hot topic at the conference. Constance F. Citro, director of the National Research Council's Committee on National Statistics gave a critical review of news coverage. Journalists reporting on the ACS will want to review her PowerPoint presentation, available at [www.ire.org/datalibrary/uplink.html](http://www.ire.org/datalibrary/uplink.html)
- The APDU ([www.apdu.org](http://www.apdu.org)) includes public data producers, disseminators and users. It describes itself as "a mechanism to share news and concerns and advocate on behalf of public data users." IRE and NICAR are members of the organization.

For more information visit  
[www.apdu.org/conference/2006](http://www.apdu.org/conference/2006)

## ACS

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product. The problems make a good cautionary list for next year's release:

- The bureau provided table shells as thousands of rows running down through heavily formatted spreadsheets. A table shell labels and identifies each column of each table. This made the table shell readable to the eye, but not to the computer. It was very difficult to convert into something that could be used in a database to import and keep track of dozens or hundreds of tables.

**So far, you can think of ACS as the early precinct returns on election night. You can write them up with couching like "appears to be." For closer races and fine-grained analysis, you'll have to wait for more data.**

- Many tables continue to be misleadingly labeled with a universe – the group being counted – of "total population," instead of "household population." ACS still does not include group quarters – dorms, barracks, prisons and the like. That's where about 2 percent of Americans live, but it may be 20 percent in military, college or prison towns.

- Bureau officials and spokespersons flip-flopped repeatedly on whether ACS 2005 data could be compared to Census 2000 data. This was critical on the subject of income because median income was 4.4 percent higher on Census 2000 than on ACS the same year. In some states, the difference was more than 7 percent.

- During the media embargo, bulk downloading was limited or not available. Some derivative tables – such as subject tables – weren't available. Neither was a simple Web-based tool to calculate confidence intervals. These are critical in stating differences accurately. Census specialists often weren't available to answer questions. NICAR's CENSUS-L and NICAR-L Listservs hummed with dozens of questions, shared tips and workarounds.

### Common problems

Some journalists struggled with problems of their own making.

- Lack of preparation. ACS isn't a report that can be skimmed for a quick story. The Census Bureau's "webinar" before the first wave release was loaded with questions from journalists who had not even read basic material on the Web site.
- Misunderstanding what a survey does. Several newspapers ran stories that made light of ACS population totals because of their error margins and because a comparison to the 2000 Census showed that the city's population could be up or down. But a survey isn't supposed to tally a population precisely. That's where it is weakest. Think about it – would you ask your pollster how many voters are in your state? Surveys are designed and best used to count internal proportions, such as race percentages or the ratio of old to young.

An extra note: ACS population totals are complicated. ACS state and county totals are controlled – forced to agree – with the comparable annual estimates produced by the Census Bureau and the states. For the rest of the decade, those estimates will remain the official between-census totals for states and counties.

But ACS totals for cities and other areas don't get the same treatment. Results are simply reported with the error margin. For smaller cities, those can be several percentage points. It's a published number, but it's not comparable to Census 2000.

And it's a mistake to think that a city's ACS population stated as, say, 193,332, +/- 8,455, means that it's as likely to be 184,877 or 201,797 or anywhere in between. An error margin shows the range into which a number would fall if the survey were repeated many times. But those many repetitions would cluster at the center of that range, in the familiar bell curve distribution. The Census Bureau uses a 90 percent confidence interval for surveys. That means that if the survey were taken 100 times, the result would fall into the range 90 percent of the time.

## Lessons learned

- Be patient. So far, you can think of ACS as the early precinct returns on election night. You can write them up with couching like "appears to be." For closer races and fine-grained analysis, you'll have to wait for more data.
- Be prepared. Read the documentation. Practice on American FactFinder (<http://factfinder.census.gov>).
- Be careful making comparisons to Census 2000 results. For state and national comparisons, compare to ACS 2001. For big cities, try ACS 2002, when data was first released for places with populations of 250,000 or more. Or think about stories based on same-year comparisons – such as ACS poverty rates in 2005 for your state and its cities.
- Dig back in. Now – off deadline – plow into the tables on a topic that matters locally. Figure out what they say clearly, and what they say that's not so clear.
- Educate newsroom customers in advance. Several reporters told me that they had to make comparisons that made them uneasy because of pressure from editors.

*Contributing to this article: Brian Bowling, Pittsburgh Tribune-Review; Paula Lavigne, The Dallas Morning News; Gordon Trowbridge, The Detroit News; and Lori Weisberg, The San Diego Union-Tribune.*

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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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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](mailto: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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