## Inside:

## Uplink

# Seven Deadly Sins:

*Readers react to News & Record survey, rate sins, Ten Commandments in paper*

**Lex Alexander**
**Greensboro News & Record**

When I attended the MICAR seminar in February, I would have never guessed that the *Greensboro News & Record's* first computer-assisted reporting project would reach Biblical proportions.

But when 1,053 Greensboro citizens responded to a *News & Record* survey on sin, our computer-assisted reporting program realized its' genesis.

The Sin Survey and the idea of using the computer on it were the brainchildren of our religion editor, who understands the theory of computer-assisted reporting because she keeps up with the latest trends and is married to me.

One thing the *News & Record* wanted to emphasize was letting our news agenda determine how we would use the computer, not vice versa. The Sin Survey followed naturally from that.

Greensboro, N.C. is in the heart of the Bible Belt (home to

## The Top 10 Sin List

As compiled by the News & Record in a survey of its' readers

| | |
|---|---|
| 1. Having sex outside of marriage. | 84% |
| 2. Cursing. | 65% |
| 3. Gossiping | 64% |
| 4. Being Homosexual. | 62% |
| 5. Renting a hotel room for two people, and letting more stay there. | 60% |
| 6. Not counting all penalty strokes on the golf course. | 49% |
| 7. Dumping used motor oil in a field | 49% |
| 8. Not going to church | 40% |
| 9. Drinking alcohol | 36% |
| 10. Reading a Playboy magazine | 33% |

one of the Presbyterian Church's five largest congregations in the U.S.). The *News & Record* has covered religion as a standing beat for many years, and we have carried or written many stories this year about mainline religious denominations that are struggling publicly with such issues as whether to ordain acknowledged gay men and lesbians.

We emphasize reader participation in our news stories, so the reader survey was a logical idea — we've done plenty of them before on other subjects.

The new twist was using the computer. As I mentioned, in the two weeks we allowed, we received 1,053 responses. Our most popular previous survey — on soap operas — drew only about 700 responses. We got more after the deadline that we didn't use.

The survey, originally published on the religion page, and then repeated one week later in our local news section, asked readers whether each of 20 listed behaviors was a sin.

It also asked readers to rank the Ten Commandments in order of how important they were to obey, and to rank the seven deadly sins in order of deadliness. Readers also were asked to supply their sex, age bracket and religious denomination, and to say whether or not they were clergy members and whether they regularly attended worship services. We also asked readers to define sin in essay form, but those responses were not tabulated by the computer.

Using a Dell 325P and XDB, I set up a table for responses, taking yes or no responses for the 20 items and ranking the commandments and deadly sins using numerical values so that we could determine averages.

Asking people to rank the most important commandment as number one meant using golf-type scoring. The lower a commandment's average numerical value, the more important it was considered by respondents.

We were looking for relative value of commandments and sins, so if someone said all commandments were equally important to obey, I gave each a value of one. If someone said it was not important to obey any of them (and some did), I gave each a value of 10.

I checked the age brackets and sex against the 1990 Census Survey Tape File 1A data for our 11-county coverage area to determine how our survey respondents deviated from the population at large.

I'll be the first to admit that using computer-assisted reporting like this is like driving a Lamborghini to the corner for a six-pack and a bag of Doritos. It was worth the effort though, for several reasons.

First, the survey touched our readers like no other we've ever done.

Second, because of that response, tabulating the survey by hand would have been a nightmare.

Third, it was a way to finally get a computer-assisted project into the paper. After eight months of living Murphy's Law, I'll take it.

Finally, getting something into the paper got more of my co-workers interested in the computer — particularly the senior editors with budgeting authority.

## Scanners may eliminate data entry problems

Since their experience with data entry, the *Boston Herald* has spent $8,200 to buy a scanning system including hardware and software, said Manny Korkodilos, P.C. systems manager at the Herald.

The *Herald* bought a Hewlett Packard Scan Jet Plus black and white scanner, a 486 PC, a hard drive, and the software version of Wordscan+, that lets the scanner drop what it's scanning into a variety of formats including d-Base and Lotus, Korkodilos said.

The *Courant* is using a scanner to put campaign expenditures into a database format to use for a story.

"If the copy is good, there should be no problem," Houston said, "But nothing so far has been simple and it all takes work and verification."

Dave Davis, of the *(Cleveland) Plain Dealer* said his paper is not looking into scanners yet. "When scanners become more common they will be a great in-house data entry solution," Davis said. "We'll then have records as accurate as the paper ones," *Lisa Touye*

# Data: from p. 3

2,000 records were missing, according to Armstrong.

Joseph Curran, president of *Capitol Micro Systems*, said that his company did what it usually does and entered the standardized city name from the Post Office's zip codes instead of precise neighborhood names. Armstrong wanted precise neighborhood names so the company fixed the problems with the database.

Curran said the three-year-old company is more than willing to re-check databases and make corrections because it has a 100 percent accuracy guarantee.

"Accuracy is everything," Curran said.

The zip code problem delayed the stories two weeks, Armstrong said. Reporters worked 18-hour days getting the series ready for the week before the election.

Armstrong said the *Herald* used *Capital Micro Systems* again after the first mishaps because it was cheap.

"Up until this latest case, we could deal with the problems and although it took time it wasn't a major setback. But this last time, it was," Armstrong said.

The *Hartford (Conn.) Courant* and *The (Cleveland) Plain Dealer* use *Capitol Micro Systems* as well and are satisfied with the work the company has done for them.

"It's inexpensive so we don't expect perfection," said Brant Houston, a reporter at the *Courant*. "It's easier to do some of the corrections when we get it than to pound all of it in ourselves."

"Whether you are a data entry person, or someone doing it temporarily while you're going to school, you make executive-level decisions and the copy isn't perfect," Houston said. "I want to know what executive-level decisions they make so I have a feel for what kind of errors they'll make.

## You get what you pay for...

The *Courant* had used *Capitol* to make databases on gubernatorial and legislative campaign contributions and encountered the same problems that the *Herald* did and worked them out. Still, Houston said, for what the company charges it was worth it.

Curran said *Capitol* can charge less than other companies to do campaign data entry projects because his company has developed and marketed software on campaign PACs and software they use for data entry. Most newspaper needs for campaign contribution information coincide with what his company already has.

No matter who does data entry, the reporters using the database need to check it themselves, said Houston.

"It's a fool that doesn't verify the data he gets," Houston said. "If you don't enter it into the computer yourself, you need to verify it when you get it."

## Data entry problems:

# How do newspapers protect the integrity of information

Lisa Touye'
MICAR

Last year when reporters at the *Boston Herald* decided to look into state election campaign contributions, they found more than they bargained for.

They stumbled into the problems associated with data entry that many reporters working on computer-assisted projects have come up against—cost, time and accuracy.

Campaign contribution records in Massachussets, like many other states, are not computerized. They are available only as paper copies.

This can slow down or put off reporters interested in the data because a large amount of time must be spent putting the information into an easily manageable database format.

"We considered hiring people internally to do the data entry, but there were too many problems," said David Armstrong, a reporter at the *Boston Herald*. "We'd need a large number of people, computers and time for them to work on them and someone to watch over them. That wasn't feasible.

"Not every paper is like the *L.A. Times* which can hire an army of data entry folks and pay $80,000 to get the job done."

After speaking with other reporters, the *Herald* hired *Capitol Micro Systems* in Ohio, which charged them 13 cents a record, $8,000 total, and no consulting fee.

"There were numerous problems with the statewide records, but we could fix them ourselves," Armstrong said. "There were multiple entries of the same record, bogus amounts such as $30,000 donations instead of $3,000, and incorrect spellings of businesses and places."

*Herald* reporters did some data entry themselves to determine possible problem areas in the data, Armstrong said.

When the reporters looked into the mayoral campaign contributions they encountered a more serious problem, Armstrong said.

According to the database there were no contributions for the mayoral campaign from the suburbs or towns surrounding Boston, yet the addresses of some contributors were definitely in surrounding suburbs and towns. The reporters learned that the data entry company had used a zip code program that replaced the actual suburb or town name with Boston. The database was sent back to the company to correct this, but when it came back

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> —David Armstrong

*Portrait of a slum lord:*

# Database analysis helps Oregonian uncover a neighborhood tragedy

*Reporter turns follow-up into explosive story*

**Jon Schmid**
**MICAR**

At the *(Portland, Ore.) Oregonian*, computers and databases are becoming regular reporters tools used on a daily basis to ferret out slum lords.

"It's accessible, cheap and ought to be used every day," said *Oregonian* reporter Dee Lane about computer-assisted analyses of data bases.

One of Lane's articles last March demonstrated how these new techniques, when combined with good old fashioned reporting, can help turn over a story fast.

Lane was assigned to do a follow-up story the day after Darius Martin, a Portland man affiliated with the Bloods street gang, allegedly shot off a gun while showing off in front of friends. The bullet entered a neighboring home and killed 5-year-old Charlie Johnson.

Lane began her paper — and computer tape — chase by running the address of the house through the Multnomah County Assessment and Taxation database at the *Oregonian's* library.

"We're trying to get in the habit of finding out who owns a house whenever there is a fire or shooting," Lane said. "We're basically looking for slumlords."

The names Gail and Carol Bash came up as the owners of the house where Martin lived. Natural curiosity led Lane to wonder what other properties were listed under those names. With this information just a few keystrokes away, she had her answer in only about 15 minutes.

## Typical pattern

It turned out 25 other properties, mostly in North and Northeast Portland, were owned by the Bashes. Many of the properties had been acquired in 1989 and 1990.

"It's a typical pattern of slum lords that I've seen before," Lane said.

A later check on the same database showed that the value of these properties was on the low end of the scale.

Next, Lane turned to the Department of Motor Vehicles for biographical information about the Bashes. DMV records revealed that Gail was a man and that the couple owned a motorcycle and 10 cars, including a Mercedes and a Cadillac.

## Warning letter

Moving on to City Hall, Lane's sources there said a warning letter regarding the Martin house was issued under the drug-house ordinance in September of 1990. Lane knew she had scored big with this information because warning letters are sent out to landlords when there are re-

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Eviction records at the county courthouse showed that the Bashes had regularly evicted tenants for failing to pay rent. The Martins, however, had received no such threat. Other landlords often use drug-house warning letters to get rid of dangerous drug-dealing renters.

peated allegations of drug dealing or other crimes at a property.

What's more, the city attorney's office was looking into prosecution of the Bashes for liability in the death of the little boy.

### House was a problem...

Following the paper trail, Lane found out from the Bureau of Buildings that the Bashes had three code violations, all of which were reportedly being dealt with.

Lane checked her own Bureau of Buildings database, which was a year old, but did include the records of two other buildings owned by the Bashes that were "red-tagged" for violations. The city couldn't find any information on these houses but Lane's suspicions of neglect and mismanagement were reinforced.

### Complaints filed

The Portland Organizing Project put Lane in touch with neighbors, who said the Martin house was a continual problem, even after the drughouse letter was issued. The neighbors said they had repeatedly called the Bashes and complained about drug dealing at the home.

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Furthermore, Police Bureau records showed that there had been disturbances at the home, which supported the neighbors' complaints.

For example, Lane explained, a gang member escaped from a school of detention and was captured in the basement of the house by police.

### Slum lord profile grew

Other complaints about Bash properties included a report of suspicious plants at one location and of heavy traffic at a boarded up house. While these complaints did not involve the Martin house, Lane said, they contributed to the profile of typical slum lords.

After only a day of computer-assisted leg work, Lane was ready to call Gail Bash and ask him some tough questions.

*"Computer-assisted reporting starts at a newspaper with just a few people. But some things are so easy everyone should be doing it."*
*— Dee Lane*

Since Lane's story ran, Bash is being sued for wrongful death and neglect in the killing of Johnson. Lane said the suit is seen as an important test case.

The story shows that computer-assisted reporting isn't just for lengthy investigative pieces. It can add depth to the "quick and dirty" stories that make up the bulk of news content.

"Computer-assisted reporting starts at a newspaper with just a few people," Lane explained. "But some things are so easy everyone should be doing it."