April 1995

Uplink

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

APR 25 1995

Uplink update

School is in. The education beat is made for computer-assisted reporting. In this issue, top journalists from Florida, New Jersey and Washington, D.C, tell you everything from analyzing segregation to SAT scores. These stories underscore how reporters can improve their coverage day in and day out by knowing how to handle electronic information.

In addition, Dateline NBC's David Hinchman recounts how he battled for data to show how the FAA doesn't enforce its rules, and how commuter airline safety suffers.

And we help you keep abreast of what's happening on the Internet, including tips on how to check the federal budget on line.

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Use computers for good education stories

The school of hard data

By Penny Loeb
U.S. News & World Report

If you want to do a computer-assisted story about schools, you have hit the jackpot.

Probably no other beat offers such a wealth of data at so little cost. Schools and colleges use data to track spending, and meet state and federal reporting requirements.

At *U.S. News*, we have documented school segregation, inequities in a key federal grant program, and the run-down condition of school buildings. Computerized records were vital to our Dec. 13, 1993 cover story "Separate and Unequal," documenting how special education programs are segregated, rife with misspending, and harming children.

Doing "Separate and Unequal"

The basic data for "Separate and Unequal" was the survey of racial makeup of schools, done every two years by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights. It encompasses all districts with more than 25,000 students, and a random sample of about a third of the smaller districts. The most recent data is for 1992. Historical data goes back to 1968.

The survey includes the number of students by race and gender by school. It also has a racial breakdown for those in special education, gifted programs, and those receiving corporal punishment. Journalists should get the additional documentation for the survey, which shows what data is missing. There are some major omissions and quirks.

We supplemented this data with state records. Connecticut, for instance, includes many more details.

We used this data to show that black kids are more likely to be in special education than white kids. It also showed that black kids are more likely to be labeled mentally retarded, while white kids get the less stigmatizing label of learning disabled. We found tremendous variation in the type of education for these students. Some are included in regular classrooms.

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What's affecting test scores?

By Rick Linsk
Asbury Park (NJ) Press

New Jersey encompasses more than 2,000 public high schools, but one factor divides them more than any other: poverty.

Nothing else correlated as closely in our school-by-school analysis of test scores. Newspapers from the *New York Times* to the *Philadelphia Inquirer* have done similar stories. We took on the task after the state decided it would no longer produce its own yearly "school report card," and lawmakers debated how to meet a court mandate to help poor districts.

Getting state data

The state still collects much of the data for the report cards: test scores, drop-out rates, enrollment,

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Don't sweat — You can learn in Miami

Go to IRE's annual conference

By Rosemary Armao
IRE executive director

Four days in Florida? Sounds like a junket. But in June?

Investigative Reporters and Editors' annual conference at the Intercontinental Hotel in Miami June 8-11 will include panels, discussions and hands-on computer-assisted reporting training at all levels.

There won't be time for little umbrella drinks. We're offering intense training on the conference's Optional Day, Thursday, June 8. The program is divided into three tracks that will run simultaneously. Each track contains five sessions. The rundown:

An introduction to computer-assisted reporting

1. Quick-hit story ideas for every section of the paper.
2. Getting started: Where to get training, what equipment to buy, what software to consider, getting editors interested.
3. Power Up and Plug In: On-line bulletin boards, government databases not covered in beat sessions.
4. Introduction to Spreadsheets.
5. Introduction to Databases.

Computer-assisted reporting on the beat

1. Crime: Cyber sources for crime reporters, plus how to track gun violence in your community and how to find out how bad crime really is.
2. Education: Cyber sources for school reporters, plus how to rate your school district's performance.
3. City Hall: Cyber sources for city hall reporters, plus how to ferret out zoning abuses.
4. Courts: Cyber sources for legal reporters, plus how to rate the performance of judges.
5. Politics: Cyber sources for political reporters, plus how to use the Federal Election Commission database to track campaign contributions.

Special skills

1. Introduction to Internet.
2. Florida's open government: Electronic records available to journalists.
3. Polling: How to write survey questions and build on what pollsters provide.
4. Visualizing information: Mapping, charting, investigative graphics.
5. Access: Electronic data - What you're entitled to and how to get it.

Statistics

In addition, Philip Meyer, author of *The New Precision Journalism*, will teach a session for those with advanced skills.

Internet demo room

Multiple hookups to the Internet in a room staffed with experts. Find out how to better use this exciting research and communications tool.

For information and to register, call IRE at (314) 882-2042.

Get computer training

By Jennifer LaFleur and Brant Houston

NICAR's U.S. tour continues training around the country. These are open to all journalists:

Advanced Seminar on Computer-Assisted Reporting

NICAR and the University of North Carolina School of Journalism will conduct this session at Chapel Hill, N.C., for those who already have some basic computer skills, May 7-12. Call NICAR for more information.

Virginia Press Association

NICAR will conduct training June 1-3, in Richmond, Va. Call Deb Roberts at 804-550-2361.

California AP

NICAR and the Associated Press will conduct training June 19-21 in the Los Angele area and Sacramento. Call the AP's Daniel Da at (415) 621-7432.

NICAR Bootcamp

NICAR's weeklong intensive training sem nar, Aug. 6-11, Columbia, Mo. Call NICAR fc more information.

Call NICAR at (314) 882-0684, or send email to nicar@ muccmail.missouri.edu.

Data shows lax FAA enforcement

Finding the toothless tiger

By David Hinchman
Dateline NBC

The FAA official paused for a long time, especially for prime time television, as he groped for response.

Dateline NBC's David Bloom had just told him, "Our research shows that for every $100 that the FAA fines a commuter airline they actually collect $12. That doesn't seem to have much teeth."

The moment culminated a long and exhausting data dance with the FAA.

The story started six months earlier, when we decided to probe commuter airline safety. I knew the FAA's Oklahoma City office kept an inspections database, so I asked for it. They seemed cooperative. I didn't need to file a FOIA. After waiting several weeks, I received an inspections database.

But I discovered there was no information on violations or fines. I called Jack Price, the FAA point man in Oklahoma City. He said "Oh, you want to know what they found when they inspected." I groaned.

After several more weeks, I received a version of the Enforcement Information System (EIS) database. It tracks every fine and violation the FAA dishes out, including the proposed fine and final settlement. There was only one problem: many of the names of the carriers were missing. I called Price again. He told me to call someone in Washington. About 50 phone calls later I discovered Jack had left out the "violator" field.

Several months went by. But in the meantime, I found valuable information in the EIS database. It included case numbers, dates, locations and fines. I used that to send a number of FOIA letters to get the case files of those fined for the biggest amount. The most important information comes from the FAA field office handling a case.

I soon found something remarkable about Mesa airlines, the largest independent commuter in the country. It seemed the airline went nine months using substandard parts in many of its planes. To make sure no one found out, Mesa falsified records. The coverup unravelled when an engine failed in flight, forcing an emergency landing.

That wasn't the only time the FAA accused Mesa of flying "unairworthy" planes. Cracks, dents, missing rivets and numerous other incidents stretched back 10 years. The database revealed a wide array of problems with maintenance, flight operations and security.

When we started talking to pilots, we found near unanimity both at the airline and within the industry that Mesa had serious safety problems. We couldn't convince former Mesa managers to go on camera. Several Mesa pilots did agree to talk if they were disguised. They told viewers about safety problems and predicted a crash if things didn't change.

We used the Mesa story as part of a larger probe of problems in the commuter airline industry.

We covered a lot of ground using standard paper trail reporting, but the databases set the story apart. NASA's Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS) revealed pilots who fell asleep at the controls. The National Transportation Safety Board's investigations database showed every crash during the past 20 years, including several at Mesa. The FAA Service Difficulty Report (SDR), showed 13 in-flight engine failures at Mesa during a recent two-year period.

When I finally got a complete and updated version of the EIS from Price, I compared the proposed fines with the final settlements, and discovered that during the past five years the FAA reduced fines against commuters by 88 percent.

When the camera rolled, the FAA representative in charge of commuter airline safety fumbled for a response. After his moment of silence, he said, "I think the FAA does have teeth. We do surveillance. If we find something that shows us that there isn't full compliance with the regulations or company procedures we take action...I really can't comment on the terms of the fines that are suggested and what the final settlement is."

Where to get the data

Enforcement Information System (EIS): Call Jack Price at (405) 954-7156, Federal Aviation Administration Data Processing Division in Oklahoma City, OK

NASA Aviation Safety Reporting System (ASRS): Call Bill Reynard at (415) 969-3969, National Aeronautics and Space Administration, near Menlo Park, CA

NTSB Accident and Incident Investigations Database: call Stan Smith at (202) 382-6538, National Transportation Safety Board in Washington.

David Hinchman can be reached at (202) 885-4405.

Finding nepotism in school districts

All in the family

By Scott Anderson
Fort Lauderdale Sun-Sentinel

The Broward County school district— the seventh largest in the nation — has spent millions of dollars in questionable personnel practices. It's happening in a system where nearly one in five employees are related thanks to one of the weakest nepotism policies in the state.

In addition, substantial overtime was paid to employees and high-ranking administrators were retiring with six-digit golden handshakes because of policies that paid off an unlimited amount of unused vacation and sick leave.

The series ran May 22, 1994. A preview ran May 13 when district officials made policy changes — primarily because they knew we were about to publish a series about the problems.

We used the school district's nine-track tapes of all personnel information available to the public. This being Florida — blessed with one of the best open records law in the country — that translated into virtually everything the school district collected about employees except their most recent evaluations and medical history. Then we built our own database and did numerous sorts. That included who were the highest paid employees, who had the most vacation and sick leave saved up and a dozen other categories. The most interesting and productive sort matched everyone who had the same home telephone number, giving us a list of employees (most of whom had the same last name) who were probably related. That gave us the lead on our nepotism story, even though we knew that it did not catch most sibling and parental relationships.

We've also used computers for other education stories, including an analysis that found teachers who were teaching subjects they were not certified to teach. The data was obtained from the local school board.

Scott Anderson can be reached at (305) 356-4590, or send email to flscotta@sunsent.com.

From the NICAR library

NICAR offers a number of federal government databases. Here is a list of our growing collection:

— Federal Elections 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.

— Truck Accidents and census data, includes breakdowns by company and road.

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 email to nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu.

Continued from page one: # The school of hard data

Others spend all day in separate classrooms, which makes them feel inferior.

We also examined the high cost. Early research shows reimbursement formulas often influence the number of children in special education.

Chapter One inequities

The Johnson administration established Chapter One as the cornerstone of federal education policy. It is supposed to provide money to schools to enhance opportunities for impoverished students. At $6.2 billion a year, it is now the largest single federal school aid program.

The money is distributed using a convoluted formula that invites inequity. In the end, schools can use the money as they please. Said one Connecticut official: "Chapter One, that doesn't have anything to do with poverty. It's for reading scores."

The federal government has no central database for where Chapter One money goes. So we asked 42 states to supply us with their data. They all complied amazingly fast — within a week. We then hired a temp to input the numbers, and we check each of the 12,538 entries. We compared the results with three federal databases that show poverty and per pupil spending per district. We found Chapter One money going to schools that were spending as much as $20,000 a student. We found places like Beverly Hills and Scarsdale, N.Y., still get Chapter One funds, though they are wealthy communities with few poor students.

School segregation

For the 40th anniversary of Brown v. Board of Education, we looked at school segregation. We profiled the four districts whose cases led to the landmark Supreme Court decision. We did two kinds of analyses. We produced detailed statistics, and looked at the racial makeup for both the school systems and their communities.

We also looked at school segregation nationwide, using data that goes back to 1968. Then we followed the methodology of Harvard University Professor Gary Orfield, who recently found that schools were becoming more segregated for the first time since the 1960s. We measured segregation by the percent of blacks in schools that are more than 50 percent minority.

Rundown school buildings

We used three years' worth of the Census Survey of Governments, Education Finance Record, to examine spending for school construction. We combined this with racial and poverty data to show that minority inner-city schools spend less than white suburban districts.

Penny Loeb can be reached at (202) 955-2640, or send email to ploeb@capcon.net.

Where to get data

For the Office of Civil Rights racial makeup survey, call (202) 205-9566.

For reports on special education spending, call the Center for Special Education Finance (415) 493-3550.

For poverty, get the 1990 School District Census. Call (202) 219-1731.

For more on poverty and racial makeup, call for Common Core, (202) 219-1522.

For spending, get the Census Survey of Governments, Education Finance Record. Call (301) 763-4502.

For historical racial data, call the National Archives, (301) 713-6630.

There are countless other databases available. Check the Abstracts of the Summer Data Conference of the National Center for Educational Statistics. Call (202) 219-1522.

The U.S. Office of Educational Research has a directory of dozens of databases compiled during the last two decades. Call (800) 424-1616.

Many of these databases are in the NICAR library. Call NICAR at (314) 882-0684.

We used FoxPro to examine the data.

Also, be sure to get your local school budgets on a computer diskette, or create your own spreadsheet. Look where spending goes up or down. Compare spending on art versus football, or girls' sports versus boys' sports. Get test scores. And collect data on crimes committed in schools — several places have started to gather this information, including Florida and New York City.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

Tracking hospitals that mistreat babies

Reporters at two major newspapers recently analyzed birth records to probe how hospitals mistreat newborn infants.

In their December series "Babies at Risk," *Cleveland Plain Dealer* reporters Dave Davis and Joan Mazzolini used birth records to show that three-quarters of Ohio's 127 community hospitals have been trying to care for sick and extremely premature babies they weren't qualified to treat.

According to regulators, such babies should be transferred to one of the state's 13 highly sophisticated regional medical centers. This was often not happening. According to critics, the blame falls largely on a system where hospitals compete too aggressively for patients.

Shortly after the series ran, Ohio's top health official called on lawmakers to give him more power to prevent such practices in the future.

The New York Times' Dean Baquet and Jane Fritsch, in "Mismanaged Care: how public hospitals fail," compared the city's public and private hospitals when it comes to delivering babies.

A computer analysis of 1993 city and state birth records produced some dramatic numbers. For babies weighing more than 5.5 pounds — the cutoff doctors use as an indication of good health — the death rate for babies born at the public hospitals was 80 percent more than the rate at the private hospitals. Public hospitals also had higher rates of serious birth injuries. The differences remained significant even after Baquet and Fritsch took into account the differences in the health of mothers at the various hospitals.

Check Clinton's budget on-line

The federal budget comes in four cumbersome books or four searchable text files. The choice is yours.

The 1996 proposed budget and free full-text searching software may be obtained on-line through the U.S. Commerce Department's STAT-USA information service. The documents are available through STAT-USA's Internet service using file transfer protocol (ftp), gopher and the World Wide Web (www) at the following addresses:

The ftp site is ftp.stat-usa.gov/pub/budgetfy96

The gopher site is gopher.stat-usa.gov/budgetfy96

The web site is http://www.doc.gov/inquery/budgetfy96

At the sites, look first for information about Adobe Acrobat, the software that lets you search the text. The accompanying readme file tell how to load the software in Windows. The budget text files require PKUNZIP, and that's provided, too.

For more information, call STAT-USA at (202) 482-1986.

—By Beth Marchak
Cleveland Plain Dealer
(202) 638-1366

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. Email to listserv@mizzou1.missouri.edu. In the message, on the first line, write: subscribe nicar-l your name.

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