Uplink

December/January
1997/1998

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

Double Issue

Uplink Update

This issue, which will serve as the issue for December and January, should be twice as nice. It is loaded with tips, examples and ways to get more information.

Much of the issue is devoted to training – in the newsroom and the classroom.

Brant Houston explains what's to come at NICAR. Ronald Campbell of *The Orange County Register* gives some tips on how to avoid mistakes when using computer-assisted reporting.

From the world of academia, Charles Davis from Southern Methodist University describes his first semester teaching CAR and warns future professors of possible pitfalls. Jeff South and Steve Doig clarify some of the misconceptions about higher education.

Nora Paul explains where to find training sites on the Web.

Also included in this issue are looks at a military hospital investigation done by *The Dayton Daily News* and at CAR work in Australia.

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IRE/NICAR Notes

Road map for the future

By Brant Houston
IRE/NICAR Executive Director

After nearly four years and more than 175 seminars and conferences, the staff of IRE and NICAR have been assessing what the next step should be in training journalists in computer-assisted reporting.

We know that the demand for instruction in the basics — effective use of the Internet, spreadsheets and database managers — has not lessened.

But we also know that there are hundreds of journalists looking for a higher level of instruction and hundreds of managers and editors trying to figure out how to blend CAR into their newsrooms.

Past problems

When IRE and NICAR began its on the road training at the beginning of 1994 we were confronted by a set of problems that now seem to belong to another century (and soon will):

• There was no real curriculum or textbook for computer-assisted reporting.

• Managers expected reporters to learn everything they needed to know about CAR in one day.

• Reporters assumed they could learn CAR, but avoid math.

• Many news organizations had no personal computers for their newsrooms and many reporters did not know how to use a mouse.

• There was no point and click, visually pleasing World Wide Web.

• The word "database" was an unfamiliar term to most reporters and editors.

• The idea of training had only recently come into fashion at most news organizations.

As a result, some of our seminars were, at best, a show-and-tell about the electronic world that awaited journalists once they had the equipment, software

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Error Free

Goof-proofing CAR

By Ronald Campbell
The Orange County Register

Confession is good for the soul.

Last May, I very nearly made the most embarrassing error of my 21-year career. The only thing that saved me from printing the error was a skeptical remark from one expert. The only reason I made the mistake in the first place was because I got careless using a computer.

Computers have done wonderful things for journalism.

At the same time, however, computers have exposed a basic flaw in journalists: We are, most of us, terrible at math. We became reporters because we couldn't cope with chemistry or economics or, God save us,

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NICAR is a joint effort of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the University of Missouri School of Journalism. NICAR services include hands-on newsroom training on computer-assisted reporting, special academic and advanced training in data analysis. NICAR is supported by grants from The Freedom Forum and other foundations intended to help the institute deliver its services nationwide to news organizations and associations.

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Looking to the future

and databases.

Other seminars created frustration because reporters would get a jump-start on using spreadsheets and database managers, but then have to return to a newsroom where there was no time or support for them to continue to learn.

The more things change

While we still teach journalists who have not used a mouse and/or searched the Web, we find that most reporters, editors and news directors are much more aware of the power and potential of electronic information.

A journalist with superior computer-assisted reporting skills is assured of a good-paying job and the closest thing to job security in our profession.

Nonetheless, we still hear about the hurdles that journalists encounter in newsrooms when trying to take their new skills and turn them into stories.

The reporters are frustrated because they sometimes work for managers who still think one day on a keyboard and mouse should be enough. There seldom is a plan for follow-up training.

Access to equipment and the Internets are not always guaranteed. In small to medium organizations, the reporters work alone and have no one to talk to about CAR problems.

The managers are frustrated because they see reporters spending inordinate amounts of time jockeying with software. The managers don't see enough examples of using electronic documents and databases to save time and produce better stories. The managers seldom get training for themselves.

At the same time, some colleagues are still suspicious of the new-fangled ways. Some CAR journalists don't help the situation by slipping into geek speak, being supercilious about newly acquired knowledge, or disappearing into database inquiries that result in "so what" stories.

Fixing the problems

However, none of these problems is insurmountable. Over the past few months, NICAR trainers have been talking with other instructors and journalists who have completed NICAR seminars. Slowly a consensus has emerged. While the plan is not final, it is a start:

• First, we will continue the basic seminars for those journalists just getting the opportunity to learn CAR.

• Second, we'll concentrate much more on relating CAR training to particular beats. We've already done some of those kinds of seminars. In the coming year, we will focus on areas such as health care, crime, education, economy, business, environment and city hall. We hope that these seminars will show reporters and editors how to get faster results from training, even if it's only adding a key paragraph exposing an official's spin, finding a source or getting a number or salary that rounds out a story.

• Third, we'll offer special one-day sessions for editors and newsroom managers who don't have time to learn the details, but need to know how to get a handle on using the new technology for stories.

• Fourth, we'll work at improving the sophistication of journalists when dealing with numbers (see Sarah Cohen's article in this issue) so they can avoid the pitfalls of using CAR or statistics carelessly (see Ron Campbell's story).

• Fifth, we'll offer seminars on specialized topics, particularly on mapping and visualizing data and on how to write or broadcast stories that aren't buried in numbers.

• And sixth, we won't forget the leaders and pioneers in CAR in newsrooms who are trying to develop ways to make databases and electronic documents easier to use. In fact, in January we will hold our first advanced seminar on those skills.

A look at our program for our national conference this year, Indiana CAR, on our Web site shows our efforts to move in this direction.

In the coming months, our Web site also will carry more and more tutorials and tips on everything from learning the basics to covering beats to mastering advanced CAR.

As the year progresses, please let us know what is working and what is not and we'll change whatever we need to.

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Erasing the errors

engineering. On our worst days we struggle to remember how to calculate a percentage or a percentage change; some of us don't know the difference.

Yet computers invest us with the illusion that we have mastered numbers. Senator Sleeze collected $5,000,000 from 20 tobacco-industry groups; the computer says so. The crime rate is higher in North Palooka than in Detroit; the computer says so. The city's five top banks made no loans in the inner city; the computer says so.

In fact, the computer has said none of those things. We have said those things, and any of a number of errors could have led us astray.

Error #1:

Nominating the wrong denominator. Every percentage implicitly is a comparison of one value with another. Pick the wrong denominator (the number by which the numerator is divided), and chaos results.

Perhaps the most common example of this error in CAR comes each year with the release of FBI crime statistics. Crime rates are calculated by dividing the number of crimes in a city, county or state by the number of people living there; this number is then recast as a rate per 10,000 or 100,000 to allow easy comparison among cities or counties. The problem comes when you've got, say, 1990 population estimates for one city and 1995 population estimates for another.

I stumbled into a subtle version of the same mistake. While analyzing Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data for California last spring, I decided to calculate each major lender's market share of the loans originated for whites, Hispanics, Asians and blacks. After a few hours of coaxing these numbers out of FoxPro I reached a stunning conclusion: While the top 10 lenders originated 30-40 percent of all mortgages to whites, Hispanics and Asians, they originated just 13 percent of all loans to blacks.

As a result, my analysis suggested, blacks were unusually dependent on expensive "subprime" lenders.

Let me pause for a moment and admit that after four or five years of HMDA diving, I had grown quite bored with my annual mortgage story. Here, then, was a discovery worth savoring: a national story buried in a familiar piece of data. Every expert with whom I broached the subject — academics, analysts, even bankers — expressed surprise and enormous interest.

And then I ran across an expert at the Mortgage Bankers Association, an economist who spent even more time obsessing on HMDA data than I did. He didn't believe my results. With a certain amount of self-assurance, I offered to redo the analysis while he waited. Within a minute or so I had my numbers: My original analysis was flat-out wrong; the top 10 lenders had the same share of black mortgages as they did of whites, Hispanics and Asians.

Later, I redid my calculations; as near as I could tell, my original mistake occurred because I had divided the top 10 lenders' total volume to black borrowers by the overall loan volume to Asians — the group I had analyzed just before doing the analysis of lending to blacks.

Error #2:

What's less than nothing? The answer, of course, is nothing. But with just a bit of work you can calculate a percentage change showing that a quantity has dropped 150 percent — a remarkable feat, but one that routinely makes it into the newspaper. The easiest way to do this is to compare a negative and positive number, as when a company reports a profit after a string of losses.

While preparing this article, I posted a message on the NICAR list, inviting anonymous confessions. Here's one:

"Early in my use of spreadsheets, I did a percentage change formula backwards for a 50-state list. The scary part: It sailed right past two copy editors, even though it said some states' pollution had dropped by more than 100 percent. Now I hand-check formulas on a calculator, and people in our group double-check each other before we release calculations."

Error #3:

Comparing the incomparable. A murder is not the same as a car theft or a robbery. So why does anybody ever compare cities' crime rates without at least breaking down the rates between violent and non-violent crime? And why

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There's no way to make your reporting completely error-free. But a good way to insure yourself against silly mistakes is to get more training. And a good way to get more training is to attend NICAR bootcamps. For more information, call (573) 882-0684.

CAR Trips: First ventures

Beginner's lesson in teaching

Uplink is always looking for new people to tell our readers about their first CAR experience. If you have recently completed your first CAR project and would be willing to write a column about it, send an e-mail to brent@nicar.org or call (573) 882-0684.

Charles N. Davis
Southern Methodist University

When my new course, "Computer-Assisted Reporting and Research," met for its final session, my students were in full panic mode, frantically scheduling interviews they should have done two weeks before and double-checking spreadsheets that should have been finished a month earlier.

What happened? How did all those weeks go by so fast? And why didn't my students do more of the reporting work earlier in the semester?

Easy. I didn't require them to.

Staggered deadlines — having a rough draft due one week, requiring that all primary source interviews be done the next — would have saved my students a lot of stress and made my grading life a lot easier. It was one of several important lessons learned by this first-time CAR instructor, who will be fine-tuning his syllabus in the coming months.

Here are the major lessons I learned this semester, in no particular order:

Sparking enthusiasm

Undergraduate students at most institutions don't know what CAR is — and don't share your evangelical glee about doing CAR.

Upon my arrival at Southern Methodist University, I was approached by my departmental chair, a forward-thinking type who saw the obvious need for a computer-assisted reporting course. I'd done a bit of CAR dabbling in my previous life as a financial reporter, so I eagerly volunteered. A grant sent me to NICAR's CAR Boot Camp, where I saw the light.

I spent the summer honing lectures, developing spreadsheet and database exercises and lining up guest instructors from newspapers and television stations. I even invited a private investigator who uses the Internet to track people and assets for a visit. I was pumped. I was ready.

My students were not.

The first week, barely half of them showed up. My speaker was uninspired, and I was mad. But then it hit me: in my glee, I had neglected to give my students context. I had scarcely defined CAR, its importance to the reporter, its ability to break great stories. I forgot to start at the beginning, simple as it sounds.

So I made some changes on the fly.

I made the second week of class a sort of CAR "show-and-tell." Using a CAR videotape of award-winning IRE stories (a bargain at $20), I showed examples of CAR stories. I passed newspaper stories out, and had the students identify the CAR technique used and explain why the stories were newsworthy. This led to a great discussion of story ideas, and before I knew it, my students were fired up and ready to go tell stories.

And, just to make sure the enthusiasm lingered, I also came up with some type of homework or in-class assignment for every week the rest of the semester to keep them in the classroom.

Math lesson

Students don't know math.

I will now devote a lecture early in the semester to mathematics. My students had to be reminded how to average! I was stunned, until I thought about my own liberal arts education, when I deftly avoided all math courses.

Early bird data

Get your data at least six months in advance.

As a media law instructor who conducts research on freedom of information issues, I knew that the struggle for government information would be time-consuming and frustrating. I often made public records requests as a reporter, so I started early in the summer seeking data for my exercises and for student projects I had in mind.

Fortunately, I made one wise decision before starting the data hunt: I came up with twice as many data requests as I had students. That way, I could fail half the time and still have plenty of data.

As predicted, it was a long, frustrating process that left me at times wondering whether I was a participant in a democratic government or a meddling outsider. But I got enough data for the semester, and it became critical to several course assignments.

Student-led teaching

I have always been a vocal proponent of letting students voice their opinions. My students in CAR were all senior journalism majors. They were eager enough to report, but didn't know what they wanted to report on yet. So the first few assignments were directed toward story origination. I wanted them to find quality story ideas utilizing Internet research

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Teaching CAR in class

and/or government data.

They found dozens of great ideas, many self-generated. Some ideas were rejected, others were traded among students, but in the end everyone had a couple of great stories to chase.

Professional context

Lean heavily on the professional community.

When I began planning my inaugural CAR course, I knew I had allies. I spent the summer as a visiting professor at The Dallas Morning News, where I learned some data analysis first-hand with Shawn McIntosh. Shawn helped me with the course plan, with my student's projects, and with actually convincing me that I could pull it off. She was my first guest lecturer, wowing my students with a day-by-day account of how reporters used the Internet, dial-up databases and other techniques to chase the McVeigh story in the days after the Oklahoma City bombing.

Sheryl Rubinett, WFAA-TV's news researcher, came to class bearing dozens of great examples of how CAR has transformed broadcast reporting.

Not every journalism professor has such a rich media market to lean on, and some instructors will have to look as far as a neighboring state to find an expert. But don't hesitate to call upon the professional community. In fact, the unwavering support of the pros has been one of the most rewarding parts of teaching the class.

NICAR, CAR-L, IRE and FACSNET all provide a great deal of support. I recommend them all to aspiring CAR instructors as a source of expert advice and good classroom exercises.

Don't be scared away

CAR is important. So important, in fact, that if no course exists in your program, step right up and volunteer. It appears daunting, but if you don't teach it, who will? Am I a CAR expert? No. Not even close. But neither are my students.

We're getting better at spreadsheets and databases every day, with the students often teaching me. It's been an incredible learning experience for me, and it's rekindled my love for reporting.

Charles Davis can be reached at (214) 768-2775 or send e-mail to cndavis@post.cis.smu.edu

One way to get in touch with professional experts is through the NICAR-L listserv. To subscribe, send e-mail to listproc@lists.missouri.edu and in the body of the message type: subscribe NICAR-L<your name>

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Repairing errors

does any editor sit still for such journalistic malpractice?

Error #4:

Missing the obvious. I hadn't intended to write a screed about the FBI Uniform Crime Report, but my data is leading in that direction. Another anonymous confession:

"I was doing the FBI Uniform Crime Report thing, ranking California cities by crime rate. When I was all done, I started calling all the usual suspects for reaction. One cop-management guy said, "hmm," or something, then "What's the top 10?" I read them. He said, "hmm," again, then "Where's Oakland?"

"Well, the long and short of it is that, as you probably can guess, Oakland didn't get its data in on time and wasn't on the list, and of course the FBI doesn't bother to point this out."

So what is a conscientious reporter to do? It seems to me there are a few good answers:

First, if any finding takes your breath away, then breathe in again, hold your breath for a good 30 seconds, let it out — and recalculate your finding from scratch. Do it slowly. Look at your own numbers the way you look at a particularly squirrelly pol's conflict of interest form.

Second, widely share your findings before publication.

Third, don't use statistical methods that you can't explain while nursing a hangover. I am very comfortable with percentages, percentage changes, medians, means, modes and margins of error. But I seriously doubt that I could explain a chi-square or another sophisticated measure of statistical significance under the best of circumstances.

So I avoid using them in my research. I might use them someday — after I've finally finished reading those two big statistics books I've got in my "to read" pile at home.

Ronald Campbell can be reached at (714) 664-5030 or by e-mail at Ron_Campbell@link.freedom.com

Lesson Plan

What teaching is really like

One way to make teaching CAR in the classroom easier is to show students examples of effective CAR investigations. The IRE Resource Center has many of these available. For more information, call (573) 882-3364.

By Jeff South and Steve Doig
Virginia Commonwealth University and
Arizona State University

It sounds so tempting, to ditch the frenzied pressures of the newsroom for the sedate, ivied halls of academia.

Teach a few courses, spending perhaps 10 hours a week in classrooms filled with eager journalists-to-be. Be part of a respected institution of scholars who prize your research and technology skills. Take summers off, but enjoy a year-round salary. And do all the freelancing and consulting you can — it's considered a credit to the university.

That glowing job description is legendary. Its allure has encouraged some of the number-crunching propeller-heads among us to consider new careers as journalism professors, teaching computer-assisted reporting. After all, anyone in a newsroom who can calculate percentage change reliably already has been nicknamed "professor."

But before you surrender to this warm and fuzzy vision of leisurely semi-retirement, take a reality check. Teaching, at least teaching well, is every bit as demanding and harrowing as analyzing and mapping election-night precinct returns on deadline. University life can be as frantic and challenging (and political) as life in a newsroom. And colleges had more on-the-job fatalities than newspapers did in 1995.

Oh, and about those "10 hours a week"? For each hour in the classroom, plan on spending four or five more preparing your lessons — and praying you won't fall flat on your face like a bad comic on open-mic night.

Not that we want to discourage you. As longtime journalists who recently became professors, we have no regrets about joining The Academy. We see the rewards every day: Students buzzing with energy and enthusiasm — learning the skills needed to help the news media survive and prosper in the 21st century.

But when we switched careers, we had few clues beyond tweed jackets and a whiff of chalk dust what a professor's life would be like. We want to share lessons learned since then, and for good reason: You, too, soon may face similar career-change choices.

As more and more journalism schools realize the importance of computer-assisted reporting, they will be encouraging, even recruiting, CAR-adept reporters. The authors of this article illustrate the trend: We each spent two decades in newsrooms, specialized in CAR, then recently became full-time professors.

Here are some things we learned that you should know if you, too, are considering making the jump from newsroom to classroom:

1. Teaching is hard work.

You're often barely 24 hours ahead of your students, madly grading their work from the last class and trying to create meaningful lessons for the next. Reporters-turned-professors typically spend more time each week doing their new jobs than they had spent doing their old ones.

Many of us learned writing in the newsroom, where a better writer or a tough editor coached us one-on-one. In a typical journalism class, you'll have 20 students who need that kind of tough-love coaching.

If you don't invest the time, students know they're being cheated — and they'll be rightfully angry: They're losing far more than the cost of a newspaper.

2. Being an expert is necessary — but not sufficient — to make you a good teacher.

When standing before a roomful of students, you have to be as much a performance artist as fount of wisdom. You must learn how to engage students, generate discussions, anticipate questions, set and enforce rules, explain, listen, explain again. Remember those boring lectures back in college where the professor droned on and on? Today's students don't like them either.

3. Though we both think that working with students is our most important task, teaching still is only one-third of a professor's functions.

We're also responsible for research/scholarship, and for service. Research can be doing full-fledged academic studies, developing new training materials, publishing an occasional article, and so on. As for service, we are expected to work with journalism professionals and organizations, advise student groups and publications, and serve on myriad committees. Often, you need to spend about 50 percent of your time on each of those three functions.

As a CAR expert, you are likely to be appointed to a slew of university advisory commit-

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Continued from page six: # Learning to teach

tees: on curriculum development, technology, faculty recruitment and other subjects. Many weeks, you'll spend more time in committee meetings than in the classroom.

As a faculty member, you also spend considerable time advising students.

Sometimes it's on official matters like selecting courses, graduating and getting a job. In addition, you'll often be asked for advice on unofficial topics ranging from immigration problems to apartment hunting to help with a problem in some other class. Walk-in visits from students are fun but time-consuming.

4. Students and reporters have different learning styles.

As the CAR wizard in your newsroom, you were used to working with reporters focused on learning a particular computer skill so they can get their story in tomorrow's paper. But to journalism students, you must teach a continuum of skills and show how they fit together and could apply to any number of stories.

Reporters are quick to make the connection between data crunching and the story. They don't need much direction after you've run that list of school bus drivers against the list of drunken driving convictions. But students inexperienced in journalism may have trouble seeing where the story is headed. As a professor, you'll spend a lot of time helping students conceptualize stories, not just SQL queries.

5. Students defy the stereotypes.

They're not unmotivated slackers snoring away in the back rows. They're not necessarily computer whiz-kids, either.

These days, many students work part-time or even full-time jobs. Some are single parents. And they're taking three, four or five other courses as well as yours.

Most aren't willing to learn by rote, simply swallowing what they're told without challenge.

Classroom discussions on ethics, diversity, civic journalism, invasion of privacy and other topics often are as interesting and heated as any we've heard in a newsroom.

Compared to a newsroom, a journalism classroom generally is filled with a much wider range of abilities and weaknesses.

You'll have some students who haven't learned to conjugate verbs properly, and a few who can write better stories and CGI scripts than you can. It takes time and thought to tailor lessons, assignments and grading strategies for such a diverse mix.

6. Just as newspapers still struggle to mainstream CAR into the reporting process, journalism schools are struggling with how to put it into their curriculum.

There's no widely-accepted model of how CAR should be taught:

Stand-alone courses, integrated into existing courses, or some hybrid. As the new CAR expert on a university faculty, you may be called on to build a program from scratch.

Also, you may be surprised at the limits on what you can teach. Academic freedom is very real, but your dean will decide what courses you will handle, based on the needs of the school. You can't just barge in, whip together a course in spreadsheet reporting, and require students to take it. Because of accreditation requirements, journalism students take only a fourth of their credits in journalism.

By the time they have taken the mandatory courses, they'll have room for very few electives. That's why you start looking seriously at ways to work CAR concepts into other existing courses.

7. While some parts of the university may be on the cutting edge of technology, journalism schools often are lagging.

They've been using computers, mostly Macs, largely for newspaper design. As a professor, you may be hard-pressed to find the CAR hardware and software you used back in the newsroom. Moreover, school budgets often are tighter even than those in the newsroom; getting that faster CD-ROM, that software upgrade, even that trip to NICAR's next data extravaganza, may require some blood, sweat and tears.

Again, we hope this doesn't scare you off. The work may be considerable, but the satisfactions are immense. And you'll find it stimulating to learn and practice these new skills at mid-career. If you bring from the newsroom the same dedication to knowledge and pride in doing good work that you practiced there, you'll make a happy — and successful — professor.

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The bound edition of the 1997 Uplinks will soon be available. Look for more information to come soon on how to order this edition.

IRE Regional Conference
WASHINGTON, D.C.

• January 31 — February 1, 1998 •

Investigative Reporters and Editors is hosting a two-day conference at American University that will offer panels and hands-on training in the latest and best reporting techniques.

Whether it's covering Congress or campaign finance, localizing federal stories, or just honing your skills in the basics such as backgrounding people or going online, this conference will have something for every editor, reporter, and journalism student.

The first day will be divided into three tracks of panels. The second day will offer two four-hour hands-on CAR tracks – one basic and one on campaign finance. There will also be showcase panels on the job market and on the importance of good reporting to society.

HERE'S DAY ONE: Saturday, 9 a.m. to 7 p.m.

TRACK ONE: COVERING THE '98 CAMPAIGNS

- **Your Congressperson:** How to tell readers or viewers what their congressperson has been up to in Washington.
- **Opposition Research:** Detective games played by the candidates' camps.
- **Dissecting TV Ads:** Exposing the slant and misinformation in political ads.
- **Covering Statewide Campaigns:** Creating and analyzing the campaign contribution databases for better stories.
- **Advanced Campaign Coverage:** Going beyond the basics, uncovering the latest loopholes and tricks.

TRACK TWO: TAKING FEDERAL STORIES BACK HOME

- **Education Reporting:** Using the wealth of federal data for national and local stories.
- **Welfare to Work:** How a federal policy hits the hometown.
- **Development and Sprawl:** Covering urban and suburban land issues with census data.
- **Consumer and Government Fraud:** A guide to using records and sources to uncover and unravel scams.
- **Getting Inside a Federal Agency:** How to mine an agency for great stories.

TRACK THREE: BASICS

- **Who is John Doe?** Using hard copy and online records to background individuals.
- **Sourcing:** How to improve interviews and develop sources.
- **Crime Beat:** Using federal crime data to look at your community.
- **Paper Trails:** Going to the National Archives to excavate the great story.
- **The Quick Hit:** Organizing and writing small projects.

DEMO AND DISPLAY ROOMS

The conference will provide space for the Center for Public Integrity, Center for Responsive Politics, Campaign Finance Information Center and other relevant non-profit groups. There will also be presentations on bringing diversity to newsrooms and show and tell sessions by broadcasters.

SHOWCASE PANELS

★ **Good Jobs:** Finding and getting them.

★ **Bringing It All Back Home:** The stories that matter and bring reform…

HERE'S DAY TWO: Sunday, 8 a.m. to Noon

TRACK ONE: Campaign Finance: Using state and federal data.

TRACK TWO: Basics: Web; spreadsheets; intro to database managers.

Conference site: American University, 4400 Massachusetts Ave. NW
Hotel with conference rate: The Westin, City Center, 1400 M St. NW

For reservations call: 800-847-8232
Room cost: $89 (single/double occupancy)
Westin cut-off date: January 9, 1998

Alternate hotels in the area:
Sheraton, Washington, 2660 Woodley Rd.NW
Reservations: 800-325-3535
Omni, Shoreham, 2500 Calvert St., NW
Reservations: 800-THE-OMNI

Write carefully! This information will be used to make your name tag.
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Name: _____

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City, State: _____

Zip Code: _____

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Conference Fees:

★ To attend this conference, you must be a current IRE member through 2/1/98. Please indicate your membership status:

_____ I am a current IRE member through 2/1/98

_____($40) I need a professional membership **[Please circle: new or renewal]**

_____($25) I need a student membership **[Please circle: new or renewal]**

_____($55) I need an international membership **[Please circle: new or renewal]**

Newspapers w/ Sun. cir. less than 50,000, broadcasters in market above 50, free-lancers, academics

_____($50) One day _____($75) Both days

Newspapers w/ Sun. cir. between 50,000 and 100,000, broadcasters in 25-50 market, magazines

_____($75) One day _____($100) Both days

Newspapers w/ Sun. cir. greater than 100,000, broadcasters in top 25 market

_____($100) One day _____($150) Both days

_____($15) Late fee for registrations postmarked or faxed after 1/21/98

_____**Total**

Please send this form and your conference fee(s) to:
IRE, 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211. Fax credit card registrations to 573-882-5431.
IRE accepts personal and company checks. Or, you may pay by Visa or MasterCard. American Express is not accepted.
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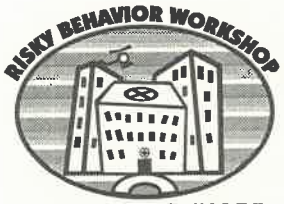

"RISKY BEHAVIOR": A Workshop on lifestyle and health databases

• January 23-25, 1998 •

IRE and NICAR are offering a special three-day seminar on reporting on lifestyle and health issues Jan. 23-25, in St. Louis. The seminar is cosponsored by the Missouri School of Journalism and the Division of Chronic Disease Prevention and Health Promotion of the Missouri Department of Health (MDOH).

This exciting new kind of seminar will include panels by health experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), the Missouri Department of Health and top journalists in the field.

Unlike other health-care seminars, this one will focus on how to use databases that apply to a wide range of beats – hard news, features, business, health and science – and monitor the day-to-day health habits of readers and viewers. The seminar will also offer a day and a half of training in computer-assisted reporting (CAR).

The seminar is inexpensive with financial assistance available to those journalists whose news organizations cannot support them. Please keep in mind that seating is limited for CAR training.

The seminar will take place at the St. Louis University campus. For more information, please call IRE/NICAR at 573-882-2042.

HERE IS THE PROGRAM:

FRIDAY

8:30 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. Registration: Coffee and donuts.

9:00 a.m. Welcome.

9:15 a.m. Overview of public health: How the CDC addresses chronic disease prevention, control and surveillance. How the media can learn from public health officials and how public health officials can learn from the media. Speakers include top officials from CDC and MDOH as well as top journalists.

10:15 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. Break.

10:30 a.m. Valuable data: what is in the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS) and how journalists can obtain the free CDC database. What other valuable public health databases are available to journalists. Speakers include NICAR trainers, as well as officials from CDC and MDOH.

12:30 p.m. to 1:30 p.m. Lunch.

1:30 p.m. Misunderstandings and misuse of databases, health information, common mistakes, bad writing, exaggerated problems, and misuse of software. Limitations on the use of the BRFSS and other public health surveillance databases. Speakers include health officials and the IRE and NICAR training director.

3:15 p.m. Break.

3:30 p.m. Journalists and health officials collaborate to show how to do good health reporting. Examples of translating correctly, good use of data and good writing.

4:45 p.m. to 5:00 p.m. Q and A.

5:00 p.m. to 6:30 p.m. Reception.

SATURDAY AND SUNDAY

Overview and Q & A: Review of Friday's sessions and the limitations of public health databases.

All day hands-on training. Journalists will learn how to use and analyze databases, including the BRFSS. These databases allow journalists to measure if and how health habits such as smoking, drinking, diets and physical exercise have changed. Although we will focus on Missouri data, there is similar data for all 50 states. The trainers will be overseen by NICAR, which has conducted more than 150 seminars nationwide in the past three years.

Conference site: St. Louis University, School of Public Health, 314-977-8100.

Directions from Hwy. 40/I-64 - Exit at Grand Blvd. in midtown St. Louis (approximately 2.5 miles west of the downtown riverfront). Take Grand Blvd. north a few blocks to Lindell Blvd. Turn left (west) on Lindell Blvd. The School of Public Health is located in O'Donnell Hall at 3663 Lindell Blvd. O'Donnell Hall will be the third building on your right.

Parking - There is usually metered parking available on Lindell Blvd. If you have difficulties, however, there is a $2/day parking lot directly behind O'Donnell Hall. The lot can be accessed from Olive Street, which is one block north of Lindell off of Grand.

Hotels in the area:
Holiday Inn, Convention Ctr., 811 North 9th St., 800-289-8338
Hyatt, Union Station, 1 St. Louis Union Station, 800-233-1234
Omni Majestic, 1019 Pine St., 800-843-6646
Grand Heritage Mayfair, 806 St. Charles St., 800-757-8483

Write carefully! This information will be used to make your name tag. Use one form per person.

Name: _____

Affiliation: _____

Address: _____

_____

City, State: _____

Zip Code: _____

Phone: _____

Fax: _____

E-mail: _____

Conference Fees:

★ To attend this conference, you must be a current IRE member through 2/1/98. Please indicate your membership status:

_____ I am a current IRE member through 2/1/98

_____($40) I need a professional membership **[Please circle: new or renewal]**

_____($25) I need a student membership **[Please circle: new or renewal]**

_____($55) I need an international membership **[Please circle: new or renewal]**

Newspapers w/ Sun. cir. less than 50,000, broadcasters in market above 50, free-lancers, academics (financial aid is available)

_____($25) One day _____($40) All three days

Newspapers w/ Sun. cir. between 50,000 and 100,000, broadcasters in 25-50 market, magazines (financial aid is available)

_____($40) One day _____($75) All three days

Newspapers w/ Sun. cir. greater than 100,000, broadcasters in top 25 market

_____($50) One day _____($85) All three days

_____**Total**

Please send this form and your conference fee(s) to:
IRE, 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO 65211. Fax credit card registrations to 573-882-5431.
IRE accepts personal and company checks. Or, you may pay by Visa or MasterCard. American Express is not accepted.
Card Number: _____ Expiration Date: _____
Card Holder Name: _____ Card Holder Signature: _____
No refunds after Jan. 26, 1998. Refunds requested on or before that date will be granted, minus membership fee and a $15 processing fee.

On the Internet

Driver's education

Want more tips from Nora?
Look for Internet tip sheets at the Poynter site.
Point your browser to www.poynter.org

By Nora Paul
The Poynter Institute

As Jerry Garcia said, "Somebody has to do something and it's just incredibly pathetic it has to be us."

If you are feeling that way because you have to do something about CAR training in your newsroom, don't get all pathetic, there is a lot of help out on the Internet.

I'm going to break down the types of CAR techniques and resources you might be needing to do training on and will list a few places with good tutorials, handouts, or explanations that you can use.

General

• Free Academy

http://www.freep.com/jobspage/academy/index.htm

The *Detroit Free Press* FREEP Academy page has a great listing with links to handouts on topics from getting started with computer-assisted reporting to transportation stories to cleaning computer data to why you should know financial journalism. A very nice resource, written by and for working journalists. Thanks, FREEP Academy Dean Joe Grimm.

• Computer Assisted Journalism Front Page

http://www.nyu.edu/pages/journalism/caj/home.htm

John Garcia, formerly a professor at NYU, put this guidebook together as a teaching aid for his classes.

It will help you in yours, too. He's put together great reporting exercises and examples.

Statistics

Statistics Every Writer Should Know

http://nilesonline.com/stats/

Having to teach about mean versus median (when you don't always keep them straight yourself).

This tutorial on statistics is geared for journalists.

Here's your manual, but contact Robert Niles at robert@nilesonline.com before using it.

As he says on the site, "Hey, since he went to the trouble of making this site, it's the least you can do."

• News & Numbers: Help for placing "scientific" and statistical claims in perspective.

http://www.facsnet.org/cgi-bin/facsnet.cgi?alpha=Nwr5r.67ujU5E1

Victor Cohn, former science editor at the *Washington Post*, wrote these chapters, which should be the required reading of anyone teaching, or taking, a class on numeracy.

Databases

Databases Basics

http://www.indiana.edu/~ucspcc/training/db/database.html

A brilliant tutorial on databases, their use and their construction, by Indiana University.

It is an Adobe Acrobat file, so you will need the reader installed on your computer to get it.

Look, too, at the files on Filemaker Pro and Access.

Spreadsheets

Excel training basics

http://www.indiana.edu/~ucspcc/training/db/database.html

This tutorial, also from Indiana University, includes sample files you can use in your teaching.

The Spreadsheet Page:

http://www.j-walk.com/ss/

An incredible collection of information about spreadsheets with specific links to pages with information about Excel, Lotus 1-2-3, Quattro Pro, and other programs.

And to liven up those training sessions, there is even a section for spreadsheet jokes.

Internet Overview

Nora Paul's Computer-Assisted Research: a guide to tapping online information

http://www.poynter.org/car/cg_chome.htm

OK, I'm allowed to put mine first, aren't I? Anyway, this guide has chapters on the main tools of the Internet and an overview of the uses of computer-assisted research techniques in news-gathering.

The structure focuses on the whats and the whys of using these resources.

Continued on page eleven

Continued from page ten:

Training on the Web

Mike Wendland's Wired Journalist
http://www.rtndf.org/programs/century/wired/wjforward.html

With Mike's focus on broadcast journalists' needs, this book is a terrific guide to the uses of the net for journalists.

For you trainers, his chapter V, Training Exercises, is a life-saver with real life-like reporting assignments for which the Internet can provide information.

E-mail/Newsgroups/Listservs

The Reporter's Guide to Internet Mailing Lists
http://www.daily.umn.edu/~broeker/guide.html

Timothy Broeker, in nice clear language, covers all the various aspects of Mailing List use.

It's focus on use in journalism is particularly helpful.

Everything E-Mail
http://everythingemail.net/discussion.html

Mary Houton-Kemp's Everything E-mail is just what it is billed, EVERYTHING e-mail! If you are doing a class on e-mail use, this is your one stop shop.

There are e-mail tips, a glossary of terms, finding e-mail addresses, getting news by e-mail.

The listing of resources about listservs, how to find them, etc. is very useful and great handout material.

Searching the World Wide Web

Researching on the Internet
http://www2.dgsys.com/~editors/articles/excerpt.html

The Internet Newsroom's Tim Maloy put this quick overview of ideas and tips for searching the net together, it would be a good quick read for starting web search instruction sessions.

Finding Data on the Internet
http://nilesonline.com/data/

This is a terrific site, particularly the compilation of "Links to Potential Story Data", compiled by Robert Niles. Check it out.

Finding Information on the Internet: A Tutorial
http://www.lib.berkeley.edu/TeachingLib/Guides/Internet/FindInfo.html

The librarians at Berkeley have put this very comprehensive self-teaching guide together. Why not try doing some virtual training, have everyone, on their own time, step through this tutorial and then meet for a brown bagger discussion of what they encountered along the way.

Evaluating information on the web

ICYouSee A to Z: T is for Thinking
http://www.ithaca.edu/library/Training/hott.html

Written by the librarians at Ithaca College, this site gives a good overview and some directed exercises for looking at and evaluating information found on the World Wide Web.

Evaluating Web Resources
http://www.science.widener.edu/~withers/webeval.htm

Written by librarians at Widener University, this is the ultimate website for critical thinking about evaluation of information. There is even a PowerPoint program: The Web as a research tool: evaluation techniques. The handouts on evaluating different kinds of web sites (advocacy, news, informational, etc.) are great.

The Online Journalist:
Part 1: How "good" is information on on the Internet?
Part 2: What's in a Domain Name?
http://www.facsnet.org/cgi-bin/facsnet.cgi?alpha=Nwr5r.67ujU5E1

Randy Reddick, of FACSnet and author of the Online Journalist, put these two chapters on the website.

They are good explanations and would be wonderful handouts, for helping journalists learn how to check the credibility of information and sources they find on the Web.

Nora Paul can be reached
at (813) 821-9494, or send e-mail to
npaul@poynter.org

Nora is always looking for ideas for the Internet column. If you would like help finding topics on the Internet or would like to see Nora address a certain issue in her column, e-mail her at npaul@poynter.org Or send an e-mail to Uplink's new managing editor, Brent Johnson, at brent@nicar.org

Broadening a CAR program

For a detailed description of the *Daily News'* military hospital investigation, look to page 13.

By Dave Gulliver
Dayton Daily News

Finding the military's problem doctors took a year for a veteran reporter.

Finding problem roads and out-of-town campaign contributors took some computer-assisted reporting novices just a few days.

In October the *Dayton Daily News* published a series on how the military can hire unlicensed and unqualified doctors, and how they are rarely held accountable for errors. The series was picked up in papers coast-to-coast and on TV's "20/20."

Reporter Russell Carollo, a computer-assisted reporting veteran, spent more than a year finding and acquiring military and state medical databases, then cleaning them and creating more of his own.

The result was another chapter in the paper's history of long, comprehensive CAR projects. But until recently databases hadn't been a part of regular news coverage, and only a handful of reporters had the know-how.

In July the paper set a goal of getting more computer-assisted work into smaller projects and everyday reporting.

The first step was hiring me, to have a newsroom CAR resource. That role entails some heavy lifting, teaming up with reporters on projects, and general cheerleading on computer use.

The second step was bringing in a veteran for some basic training.

My background is on PCs and this is a Mac shop, so Griff Palmer of *The Daily Oklahoman* came in for a three-day Boot Camp.

He ran four reporters through some basic training, and then he and I worked on advanced SQL for data cleaning and table-building.

Using CAR every day

With only an occasional pointer, schools reporter Lynn Hulsey has been using Excel and FoxPro in much of her everyday work. Last week she used Excel to analyze the differences between education plans proposed by the governor, Senate and House.

In September, we imported state proficiency test data. She analyzed it for a next-day story, then did more analyses for a weekender.

Now, with several tables built, she uses it as a resource in daily work.

Next step: Linking test performance data with spending data.

City hall reporter Laura Bischoff wanted to check tips about the police department's response time to 911 calls. She negotiated for the dispatches — 53,000-plus of them — and we imported them from a nine-track tape.

That analysis only led to another question, one that requires the record of all received calls.

We expect to receive those records in December.

But as we worked on that project, the interim campaign finance reporting deadline arrived in the mayoral race.

We had nine days to analyze the records before the election.

In the past, the paper had not tried to do more than a cursory analysis. This year, we went for a broader story.

Laura, one of the more computer-savvy reporters, built her own database structure. With help from clerks, we inputted the bulk of some 1,400 records. In four days we had turned a story in four days showing how money from affluent suburbs figured in the race.

Finding the trends

Trends reporter John Keilman and I wanted to look at crime patterns in Dayton and some two dozen nearby cities and towns. So we put FBI UCR data and Census population figures into Excel, and assembled per-capita and percentage change tables for the region.

That sparked John's interest, so he sought out traffic accident data on a rapidly growing adjacent county.

We downloaded the 25,000 records from a state FTP site, then imported it into FoxPro.

With some careful sorting and traditional reporting he was able to pinpoint some trouble spots and surpass the findings in a state report that came out just as we finished the project.

Two investigative reporters, Jim Bebbington and Steve Bennish, already had some database experience.

But the three-day in-house boot camp has them aggressively pursuing major state databases for projects.

Business reporter Mike Drummond also so-

Continued on page nineteen

Medical Malpractice

Military hospitals report

By Brent Johnson
NICAR

The teenage daughter of an Army hospital nurse in Colorado underwent a routine exploratory procedure to determine whether her severe abdominal pain was due to appendicitis or a tubular pregnancy, but emerged permanently crippled in her right leg after a main artery was punctured by a doctor not licensed to practice in the state. That doctor, who had a history of malpractice allegations and disciplinary actions against him, was approved for transfer to the hospital by its chief of gynecology, who himself had a history of allegations and disciplinary actions against him, because the department was short-staffed.

In Washington, D.C., a Navy lieutenant who had an abnormal grouping of veins and arteries at the base of his brains now suffers from memory problems, mood swings and sleep disorders caused by an unsuccessful catheterization attempt that tore an artery. The new problems have kept the lieutenant from achieving the mandatory promotion needed to continue in the service. The internationally known doctor at a nearby university hospital where the lieutenant was transferred was later unable to catheterize the same artery that had healed but was by then almost completely closed. The doctor did make the following reflection: "There are two kinds of doctors in the military. They're either fabulous, wonderful doctors, or they're spectacularly incompetent."

It is that spectacular incompetence that a recent series in the *Dayton Daily News* detailed painstakingly. The series, led by reporters Russell Carollo and Jeff Nesmith and editor John Erickson, was more than a year in the making.

"Whenever you take on the military, you have to have time on your hands," Erickson said. "The military tries to drag out requests for public records."

Malpractice loopholes

The reporters documented a secretive atmosphere destined for trouble. Military doctors are not required to have either malpractice insurance or licenses from the states in which they practice. By law, they cannot be sued. The defendant in malpractice claims is the U.S. government, not the doctor. Furthermore, claims cannot be filed by active military personnel or personnel stationed overseas. They conclude that the military is "a magnet for problem doctors," a fact only made worse by recent downsizing.

The team used more than a dozen databases to lead them to the appropriate records and interviewees that shaped the series on care provided by the 115 hospitals and medical centers and 471 clinics that comprise the Military Health Services System. Some databases were acquired only after a federal judge ordered them released by the military; some were built by the newspaper itself based on information from state medical boards; and some were updated and combined from two prior series on the military.

The *Dayton Daily News* also went to court to obtain the Department of Defense's TORT2 database, which identifies individual doctors, their qualifications and their links to medical malpractice claims. The paper still has not acquired it.

Similar records identifying civilian doctors with malpractice claims are required by states and available to the public.

The National Practitioner Data Bank, too, is used daily by hospitals, HMOs, insurance companies and state medical boards for background checks. But the newspaper found, for instance, that from 1994 to 1995, though the Army paid $66 million of taxpayer dollars in malpractice claims, only one of its doctors was reported to the Data Bank.

"The military employs about 18 of every 1,000 doctors in America, yet it accounts for just two of every 1,000 malpractice reports in the database," Carollo and Nesmith wrote.

The reporters also discovered that the military's own confidential database contains nine times the number of malpractice cases it has reported to the Data Bank.

Unable to force its release, Erickson said the newspaper instead used the tort databases maintained by each branch of the military.

Those databases do not include the name of the doctor involved as in the TORT2 database but do include the name of the attorney filing the claim and a synopsis of each case.

Sorting through the records for leads on the most egregious examples, he said the team would, for instance, isolate claims of brain damage and

Continued on page fifteen

Brent Johnson will be *Uplink's* new managing editor starting in January. If you have suggestions or questions about the monthly newsletter, you can reach him, by e-mail, at brent@nicar.org

Taming crime statistics

The Philadelphia Inquirer has a Web site devoted to CAR. The site includes tools for analysis (adjusting for inflation, calculating growth rates and percent change), downloadable data, tips on how to use Census data and statistics lessons. Go to: http://161.188.250.24

By Jere Downs
Philadelphia Inquirer

This story began when the *Inquirer* screwed up crime statistics reporting.

In July, the *Inquirer* followed the annual release of the Pennsylvania State Police UCR report with a front page story trumpeting that overall crime fell 17 percent in Delaware County, the Philadelphia area's most urban county. But what the *Inquirer* missed was that Delaware County looked so good because it's second-most crime ridden town had been completely omitted from the state's crime report.

Upper Darby Township was left out of the annual report, state officials told us, because police there had simply failed to report on a timely, monthly basis. The second-day, front page story was a feature-length correction that began something like "Delaware County residents, put down the champagne." Meanwhile, back in our suburban headquarters, reporters and editors broke out the annual crime reports to better our understanding of crime statistics.

Getting a handle on the stats

In his spare time, an editor began inputting two years of crime statistics into Excel to try to get some perspective. That effort grew to a five-year analysis of crime in 255 suburbs in seven suburban counties surrounding Philadelphia.

All the data was entered by hand from printed state reports into Excel. Most "Part One" or serious crimes were included: murder, manslaughter, rape, robbery, aggravated assault, burglary, larceny and car theft. Our goals were first to save face with a sound analysis of suburban crime, and secondly to build a permanent five-year database that reporters could use to write breaking news about crime in its true historic context.

We learned early that crime statistics are rife with error and tricky to interpret. Larceny in one town may mean shoplifting at a major mall. In another, larceny could mean a rash of thefts from unlocked cars. As far as errors went, many crimes appearing in the state's report seemed patently wrong. For example, one suburb showed 92 arsons in one year. Impossible. The state police told us that must have been a data entry error. In addition, about half of our 255 towns had submitted only nine months of reports, and the state police ended up estimating missing months. We printed out all the data and scanned for what seemed like anomalies. Reluctantly, staff writer Larry King and I concluded we would have to conduct phone interviews with local police departments to be sure we got the numbers right. That took about three weeks. In the end, we interviewed 100 police chiefs to correct the data.

I ran into another snag when Jennifer LaFleur was visiting the *Inquirer* from the *San Jose Mercury News*. Looking at our data, LaFleur, who is head of computer-assisted reporting in San Jose, correctly pointed out that state police population numbers did not seem to reflect suburban growth over the five year period. When state police numbers were compared to U.S. Census estimates, it turned out LaFleur was right. The state police population estimates were thrown out, and I substituted U.S. Census estimates. Where none were available for off certain years, like 1993 and 1995, I calculated the compound average growth rate of each town's population for an estimate.

Getting the story

The intensive effort to correct the crime data was worthwhile because we also learned about trends in detail along the way. For example, when it was time to do spot reporting to highlight instances of crime, we were able to pinpoint exactly the communities and chiefs we wanted to focus on because of the prior interviewing and data analysis. This cut down a lot on time spent searching out anecdotal trends. Correspondent interns helped out by spot-reporting in towns on their beats.

The result was an 80-inch story which focused on property crimes as the major offenses of substance in the suburbs. We mapped the average, five-year property crimes of burglary, larceny and car theft throughout the region to show which suburbs were hit hardest. Neill Borowski, the *Inquirer's* director of computer-assisted reporting, mapped a five-year-average crime rate throughout the suburbs for a large, inside regional map. In addition to the front page story, each of the seven county 'Neighbors' sections ran that day with a unique crime story about trends in that area. Inside each 'Neighbors' section, read-

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Continued from page fourteen:

Crime statistics

ers were also provided with extensive graphics listing car theft, burglary and larceny rates in their towns and neighboring suburbs for the last five years. All of the data was posted to Philly Online, the *Inquirer's* web site.

I hope the story debunked widespread paranoia about violent crime. We learned that old established suburbs near Philadelphia's border were often not the most vulnerable to theft because of tight neighborhoods where neighbors look out for each other, and crammed roads that make poor escape routes for thieves.

The story also showed that new suburbs have lost the exclusive, protected aspect they once had, because malls and new highways lure thieves to affluent areas.

However, suburban dwellers stubbornly cling to the notion they don't have to lock up. Police chiefs know otherwise, and said theft could be cut way down if only homeowners would lock their belongings.

Reader response was fantastic. In the week after the story was published and the historical data put on-line, a reporter in our Delaware County bureau looked up one town's rape record to report on a string of rapes in that town.

The long term usefulness of the data made the project more rewarding than a one-day story. I hope reporters continue to use the on-line database in this way. I have also received many queries requesting the data from local planning boards and agencies such as the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce.

When the Pennsylvania State Police release their 1997 annual crime report, the *Inquirer* will be ready. Never again, hopefully, will state police crime statistics be reported out of context here.

The crime report seems to have changed how editors approach data stories in the Philadelphia suburban bureaus. A year ago, it was difficult to interest suburban editors in data analysis stories. They were rightly anxious to fill the book and get stories in by deadline. However, it seems editors are finding that the projects can work to their advantage.

Always eager to fill large Neighbors sections, zone editors have embraced the idea of listing large charts of data specific to small towns, so readers can compare communities.

When the Census recently released population data showing shifts between 1990 and 1996, I wrote a story about the decline in population in Philadelphia and its older, affluent suburbs. Curious to see if there was indeed an "inner ring" of stagnant suburbs around the city, I asked Neill Borowski to map the changes using GIS software.

The next day, suburban editors were so wowed by the color maps they commissioned a population treatment in the crime model. That is, big regional map and story accompanied by zoned sections with specific charts and stories.

Using data this way has also created some of the most substantial cooperation between our six, far-flung suburban bureaus that has ever existed at the *Inquirer*. For each data project, editors and reporters in the Pennsylvania and New Jersey suburbs meet and discuss the trends and plot coverage strategies.

The result is it enables us to take a broad regional look, and zero in on local angles using the zoned sections — exactly the mandate of suburban editors. I am pleased they view computer-assisted reporting as a way to get there.

Jere Downs can be reached at
(610) 832-8328, or send e-mail to
Jdowns@Philly.Infi.Net

Want to enhance your local coverage by using data to add weight to your stories? Consult Brant Houston's "Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide." Cost for the book is $26 plus shipping. To order a copy, call (573) 882-2042.

Continued from page thirteen:

Hospital probe

see whether they occurred at the same base or involved the same attorney.

Erickson stressed the importance of creating your own databases. By entering state medical board information, "we were able to supplement what little we got from the military."

Erickson said the series has generated a strong response. The newspaper has received hundreds of calls from people wanting to tell their stories. "The reason is that the problem is there . . . It's a bad system and many think they're mistreated."

Brent Johnson can be reached at
(573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to
brent@nicar.org

Stats on the road

Math for every reporter

If you have been stumped by statistics recently but found a way out, we would love to have you write something for our monthly statistics column. If you have been stumped and haven't found a way out, why not ask Sarah Cohen and have her address it in her column? Contact Sarah by e-mail at sarah@nicar.org

By Sarah Cohen
NICAR

"We do not expect reporters to be mathematical geniuses. But we do expect them to sidestep their mind-numbing fear of mathematics long enough to ask, 'Does this make sense?' 'What would I conclude from these numbers?'"

— A.K. Dewdney, in 200% of Nothing: From Percentage Pumping to Irrational Ratios, an Eye-Opening Tour through the Twists and Turns of Math Abuse and Innumeracy

At a recent seminar, an editor recalled a tax issue in which the funds raised would amount to a two-thirds jump in spending on a project. She dutifully reported every relevant number her sources gave her, acknowledging much later that she had no clue what any of them meant.

She mentioned that numbers meant nothing to her, other than a quite effective way to mess up a perfectly good story.

It wasn't until years later that she knew enough about numbers, about perspective, and about selectively using statistics in stories, to make sense of the budget issue.

So when it comes time to write about the math that every reporter should know, it's also time to step back and attack the journalist's fear of numbers.

This month, I'll give you a mercifully short list of techniques you must know, and your editors expect you to know.

Next month, I'll give you a couple of tricks you can play on yourself to help overcome the panic, or glazed eyes, that come when you have to deal with numbers or statistics.

Fractions and percents

A percent is just a fraction, expressed as 100ths. You know one-quarter is 25 percent. You may not remember why.

It's because 1 divided by 4 is 0.25. So think of the words, "out of" when you have to figure a percent of total.

Formula: (Portion / Total) x 100 = Percent

Example: If 250 people voted for Councilman Jones, and 270 voted for Councilwoman Smith, then the percentage of people voting for smith is 270 out of (270+250), and the formula is:

270 / (270+250) x 100, or 52 percent.

Percents

This is just the change over time, divided by the starting level.

Remember, it's NOT the little number divided by the big number. Changes can be greater than 100 percent.

Formula: (Difference / Old value) x 100 = Percent difference, or ((New - Old) / Old) x 100

Example: A budget item rose from $1,500,000 to $1,600,000. Rounding off, the percent change is:

(16-15) / 15, or 1/15th, or 0.06667 x 100, or 6.7 percent.

Notice that you can reverse the process: 1/ 0.06667 = 15, so the fraction is 1/15th.

Per capita, and other rates

You often need to level the playing field. It's not fair to say that New York has more crime than other areas, or that drivers of Fords die more frequently than Hyundai owners.

You need to figure a fraction, and often raise it to a bigger base than a percentage, to make a fair comparison.

This is no different than percentages, only the "out of" word gets changed while you change the base to 1,000, 100,000 or something else.

There's nothing magic about 100 as a base. It's convenient, and lots of people think that way. But sometimes, that turns into too small of a number, like in the number of infant deaths each year.

The hard part is figuring out the base. Often, it's the corresponding population of a county, a state or the nation.

For instance, crime rates are computed by dividing the number of crimes by the number of people living in the area, and multiplying by 100,000.

Other times, it's something else that levels the playing field: Infant deaths divided by live births, driver deaths divided by the number of cars on the road.

Formula: (Number / Some base) x whatever will give you a round number, usually 1,000 or

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Math for all

100,000.

Example: There were 80,000 crimes in Pittsburgh out of a population of 2.5 million. There were 60,000 crimes in Tuscon out of a population of 700,000. How can you compare the two numbers?

Pittsburgh = 80,000 / 2,500,000 x 1,000 = 32 crimes per thousand residents

Tuscon = 60,000 / 700, 000 x 1,000 = 85 crimes per thousand residents.

Different kinds of averages

You almost never hear anyone talk about average incomes or average home values. There's a reason they focus instead on the median value.

It's because medians ignore the effects of very high and very low values.

Average: (Sum / Number of items)
Median: The middle item, in a sorted list
Mode: The most common value.

So in a list of home values [$60,000; $65,000; $70,000; $80,000; $85,000; $130,000; $250,000; $250,000] here are the three possible answers:

Average = $148,125, or $1,185,000 / 8

Median = $82,250 (average of the 2 middle values)

Mode = $250,000

Most people would agree that the median is the more "typical" value.

That's often how you can express it in a story, too.

Adjusting for inflation

It may not be necessary for you to ever know how to adjust for inflation, only that you know you should adjust for inflation.

There are plenty of tools available on the Internet for you to use.

Many newsrooms keep on hand and inflation calculator.

But should you want to try it yourself, make one decision first – what year's dollars do you want to use?

I usually choose the most recent, since our audiences understand what a dollar buys today. To do this:

Formula: CPI New / CPI Old x Value Old

Example: Teachers made $28,000 in 1985. How much would that be in today's dollars? The Consumer Price Index was 107.6 then and stands at 157.3 (for year-end 1996):

(157.3 / 107.6) x 28,000 = About $41,000.

Compound changes over time

Again, you may never have to do this, but you should know about it.

If politicians promise that spending will rise only 3 percent a year, after inflation, it doesn't rise 3 x 10 or 30 percent over 10 years. It rises much more.

It's the same principle that makes your own nest egg grow.

To compound, convert the percentage back to a multiplier.

For 3 percent, it's 1.03, or (3/100) + 1.

Then take it to the 10th power: 1.0310 = about 1.35.

Now reverse the process, subtracting 1 and multiplying by 100 to get about 35 percent.

Going backwards just reverses the process and use 1 divided by the number of years as your exponent.

To get an annual rate for a 35 percent jump in spending over 10 years, use this formula: 1.35(1/10) = about 1.03, or 3 percent a year.

A look ahead

A far bigger problem that I see on the road, though, is the phobia many reporters have of numbers.

Those who aren't afraid learn the formulas above quite easily, if they don't already know them.

Those who are can get all the cheat sheets in the world, but they simply can't focus their attention on the process.

So getting over the fear is the first step toward actually understanding numbers, rather than memorizing formulas. We will discuss ways to overcome that fear by rounding off, developing a sense of scale, watching television and asking your best sources for help.

These tips will help reporters get over their math phopia and will help readers better understand their news and their world.

Sarah Cohen can be reached at
(301) 942-2199, or send e-mail to
sarah@nicar.org

This issue of Uplink does not include a Tech Tip. To ensure that we have Tech Tips for every issue of 1998, we are asking for your help. E-mail Brent Johnson with your own Tech Tips that you would like to share with other readers. E-mail him at brent@nicar.org

International Report

CAR down under

The IRE Resource Center has several handouts and tip sheets covering international issues and computer-assisted reporting. To get a list of handouts and tip sheets, call the Resource Center at (573) 882-3364.

By Stephen Quinn
Deakin University (Australia)

One way to improve the caliber of newspaper reportage would be to teach reporters better ways to obtain and analyze data. Computer-assisted reporting is becoming recognized as one way to do that in the United States.

What is happening in Australia? CAR has not evolved in Australia to the extent it has in America. In an article in Australian Studies in Journalism in 1994, journalism lecturer Kerry Green predicted that the Australian news media would eventually adopt CAR. The adoption would occur "probably sooner than later," he said.

Three years later, he was still optimistic but he accepted that CAR had not developed as quickly as he expected. Costs, management attitudes and time for training were the major reasons for the delay, he said. "Someone in control of the purse strings at a publication must support CAR developments."

Given these difficulties, have working journalists in Australia ventured their CAR onto the information highway? Key journalists at Melbourne's two dailies (the *Sun Herald* and *The Age*), the *Brisbane Courier Mail*, the *Sydney Morning Herald* and *The Australian* (based in Sydney) were interviewed.

Selection of newspapers was based on the theory that news organisations can be divided into "A" and "B" categories. "A" level organizations are willing to devote resources to reporting complex issues in the community, nation and the world. In Australia, the most likely candidates are the papers at the quality end of the spectrum among the major capital city dailies, and the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Starting CAR

In June and July, I conducted a national study of Australia's 49 dailies to discover journalists' use of the Internet for newsgathering. Two of the 27 questions covered the issue of deep CAR training, that is the use of databases and spreadsheets for investigative journalism. Only one paper, *The Age* in Melbourne, said it had offered any CAR training.

An inquiry to the CARR-L mailing list in August this year asking for the names of any Australian journalists actively involved in using CAR methods received no replies. An inquiry to the same list last year produced one reply, from Thom Cookes.

Cookes, a senior reporter at *The Age*, is one of a handful of reporters in the country who employ CAR methods. He has been producing stories based on deep CAR since February last year.

CAR was "mostly virgin territory in Australia," he said. It could easily be sold to news executives because it produced exclusives. "News executives love exclusives because by their very nature they are not on the news agenda, they come out of the blue. It's a major selling point for CAR."

Cookes said journalists must learn how to apply technology to the reporting process. "The organizations and people that we are reporting on are now more often than not keeping their records electronically. Sometimes there is no paper document to be FOI'd [obtained via Freedom of Information legislation] or leaked. Government is scrutinizing itself — and is being scrutinized by others — with the aid of computers and we should be learning how to do the same."

Beginning training

The Herald Sun, also in Melbourne, has begun some training of journalists, but at a basic level. As of the end of last year, 12 journalists had attended a one-day introduction to computers and a further two-hour session on the Internet.

Keith Moor, editor of the paper's investigative section, "Insight," said some of the paper's reporters were using basic CAR to arrange interviews via e-mail and conduct research via the Internet. "CAR is another tool for journalists, like the phone book."

The paper has one Internet connection but only a handful of journalists know how to use it. Moor maintains that journalism courses must introduce students to the online world. "It's a vital tool that journalism students need to know how to use."

Rodney Chester, computer and technology writer for the *Courier-Mail* in Brisbane, said his paper employs CAR methods. Since 1995, the *Courier-Mail* had taken examination results from schools around Brisbane, dropped them into Excel and analyzed them to produce stories. Chester

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CAR down under

said his paper had not provided CAR training but one staff member, who used spreadsheets prior to joining the paper, had conducted informal sessions.

Jon Casimir, editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald's* online edition, said journalists at the *Herald* were beginning to use the Internet for newsgathering. But no-one was doing any deep CAR work.

"I would argue that there isn't a media outlet in Australia committed to investigative journalism. They've all been stripped back too much. This is just my opinion, of course." No *Herald* journalists had ever been sent to any of the CAR training organizations in America, he said.

Malcolm Schmidtke, editor of *The Australian* until July this year, said his paper hoped to send one or two people to such a course in the next couple of years. Schmidtke said CAR would be adopted in Australia — but much more slowly than had been the case in the U.S.

"Sophisticated research-based journalism has not been part of the culture in Australia in the way it has in the United States. Editors have not had the resources — nor probably the inclination — to pursue long-term and complicated projects that may in the end produce very little.

"Apart from a brief flirt with [UK] *Sunday Times* style investigative journalism, Australian papers have tended to rely on the dump of documents or the whistleblower to provide the impetus for investigation. However, times are changing and editors — certainly this one — are becoming more aware of the rich pickings in databases."

A few television journalists use online journalism methods. Peter McEvoy, a former researcher with the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's flagship current affairs program Four Corners, said he had used the Internet "a bit" for research.

"It just seems sensible to have a look around on the Internet to see what groups are active in one particular story or issue. A lot of scientific information, for example, is now posted on the Internet."

A handful of enthusiasts on the nation's major dailies are using CAR in their work. Some newspaper owners are realising the opportunities that the Internet offers for newsgathering.

For example, all journalists at the Fairfax organization (one of the three main newspaper groups in Australia, and owners of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *Australian Financial Review* and *The Age*) will have e-mail and Internet access from their desks by the end of the year.

I plan to conduct a similar study next year to the inquiry I conducted this year. The results could be fascinating.

Stephen Quinn can be reached by e-mail at squinn@deakin.edu.au

The *Uplink* staff is currently planning for 1998.

If there are certain stories or themes you would like to see addressed, we would love to hear about it. Call (573) 882-0684 or send e-mail to brent@nicar.org

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CAR expansion

loed on a project using FoxPro to figure CEO salaries. Even some longtime reporters are seeing the trend and getting information off the Web faster than they could get it otherwise.

As the year ends, that's at least a half-dozen projects finished or nearly so, and they've resulted in everyday reference tools for various beats.

The Dayton Daily News is fortunate to have good technical resources.

But the key to our progress was in people. We brought in a pro to teach, creating some enthusiasm and showing a commitment to CAR.

We have a point man to help reporters past sticky problems and point them to resources and ideas, and who has learned enough to train more reporters in the basics.

Most important, we gave people some time to learn and practice. It didn't keep them from working: No reporter took a whole day off.

But they got at least half-day blocks over a few days, time for them to develop and practice skills.

And as they begin to turn more routine stories into full-fledged quick projects, more of their colleagues are going to be looking to them for pointers, or maybe looking for a training session of their own.

Dave Gulliver can be reached by e-mail at Dave_Gulliver@coxohio.com

Handout of the Month

CAR training tips

To order a copy of any handout that has appeared in 1997 Uplinks, call the IRE Resource Center at (573) 882-3364.

By Anne Saul
Gannett Co. Inc.

Many newspapers and televisions rely on one byte head to do the operation's computer work. For CAR to survive and flourish, however, the knowledge must be shared and taught to others. The following handout offers some tips of how to train staffers.

Before you start

1) Master CAR yourself. You can't train others if you don't know how to do it. Make sure you feel comfortable with the programs.

2) Produce one good story using what you learned the first week. It needn't be a big project; it just needs to be something that proves the value of computer-assisted reporting.

3) Find a compatriot in the newsroom to work with you — possibly someone who attended a conference with you. Two people can accomplish much more than one, and if one of you is an editor he or she is in a better position to convince your newspaper's top editor what is needed in the way of resources and additional training.

4) Create a Buddy system. Initially, it might just be the two or three or four of you. But once you start getting converts, team them up with someone who has more expertise.

5) Don't worry about trying to get everyone in the newsroom involved. Many of them never will. Other folks will want a piece of the action when they see what you can do.

6) A word of warning — it will be slow going for a while. Be patient, focus on your own work and that of your buddy. Watch for new converts, show them how it's done and build from there.

Training others

First, look for resources in your building. You can't do it all alone and you might find help in places you never thought of.

In-house training:

1) The Human Resource Director. They don't know CAR, but they do know training. Talk to him or her about how to set up a training program or class. He or she may even be able to do a lot of the legwork for you.

2) Look for other in-house resources. They may be where you least expect to find them:

a) One newspaper columnist who writes about online services, teaches staffers how to access the Internet, Compuserve, etc.

b) Someone from the marketing department may know a lot about what data means since that department has to make sense of marketing data.

c) Systems editors — if you have one — can provide training in PCs and sometimes spreadsheet and database programs. If you don't have a systems editor, a systems technician can sometimes help — particularly with basic computer training. Just make sure he or she speaks English and not "technobabble."

d) The newsroom librarian. If you are fortunate to have a good librarian, enlist his or her help in finding data sources and in teaching a session on what's available and how to get it.

3) Set up a regular training schedule. Focus on those reporters and editors who have shown an interest in what you are doing and make the schedule realistic — say once every two weeks in the beginning.

4) Keep it small. Forget the 2 1/2-day seminars, in the beginning. Announce a brown-bag lunch. Post the topic in the in-house newsletter or on the front-end system. Don't worry if the turnout for the first few sessions is small. If you get only one or two people, you have potential converts and ambassadors.

5) Focus on story ideas – particularly those from the reporters' beats – and talk about how a spreadsheet or database program can enhance those stories.

6) Start with the basics. Participants will have a difficult time learning Paradox for Windows if they've never used Windows or a mouse. Encourage them to play Solitaire to enhance their mouse skills.

7) Divide up the expertise. Rather than forcing trainees to learn several different programs, have one person become the database expert, another the spreadsheet expert, and so on. When a story or project needs to be done, the experts can team up to take advantage of their expertise.

8) Dump a city budget or other data from one of those beats into a PC and show the other staffers what can be done with the information. (Avoid using the examples that come with the program's tutorials; they aren't relevant to report-

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Getting your training

ing.)

9) Remember to start with the story idea, not the computer. (Yes, I said that before, but it bears repeating.) Reporters and editors have to see the relevance of what you're doing. Budgets, by the way, are an excellent way to start. Almost every beat reporter has to deal with them at one time or another.

10) Assign "homework" to make sure participants use the skills they have learned. Give the participants a list of questions that can be answered only if they use the program. (What was the percentage increase in the police department's budget over the previous year, for example, if you used a city budget in the spreadsheet class.) Let them use any resource they like (manuals, etc.) to figure out the answer — except asking a fellow staffer for the answer.

Regional training

1) Solicit participation from neighboring (non-competitive) newspapers and pool the expenses to bring in a trainer for a group session. You may be able to get an expert from another newspaper simply by paying his or her expenses. CAR reporters and editors are always willing to share their expertise and spread the gospel.

2) APME and state AP bureaus conduct regional CAR training utilizing AP and NICAR trainers. These have been held in several cities in the past year. The per-person cost is minimal (often less than $50). Contact your state AP bureau to inquire about a session in your area. It helps if you've already solicited interest from other newspapers in your state or region.

Local colleges

Check out local colleges and universities for computer training — classes in Lotus or Paradox or computer basics if they don't offer anything specially in computer-assisted reporting. You might even find someone with CAR experience. *The Free Press* in Burlington, Vt., for example, found a former reporter-turned-student instructor who used to be president of IRE.

(A word of caution: Be careful of training by non-journalists — such as at local business schools or training institutes.

The trainer may know Lotus, but tracking widget profits is hardly applicable to newspapers. If you do use an outside source, see if you can talk to the instructor before hand about what you do, bring a sample — such as the city budget.)

Training tools

1) Don't worry if your only available PC is a 386 with not much memory and an old version of Lotus. It can handle the small projects you'll want to start with. And once you produce some stories, it will be easier to convince your editor that a faster machine and more up-to-date software are warranted.

2) By all means steal and copy everything you received — except the licensed software, of course.

Don't duplicate everything in the beginning though; it will be too overwhelming. It's better to copy only the handouts that are pertinent to your particular training session.

3) Manuals/Cheat sheets: Put the handouts, cheat sheets and other documents in a loose-leaf binder for participants. That way, they'll have the beginning of a CAR manual to which they can add later.

Include lists of information/databases available local and at the state and federal level, how to access DMV on-line, etc.

If possible, keep the handout files in a computer so that you can update them easily. (Long lists kept in the CAR computer also make searching for data easier.) Encourage users to add to the lists as they discover new sources of information.

4) Form a public records committee and have the members find out what local and state public records are available in computer-format. Keep others informed as to what's available; start a database of databases. (The librarian should be on the committee.)

5) Create a data center — even it it's a single PC and a bookshelf in a corner of the newsroom. Keep manuals and public record information. Create a catalog listing what's in the center. Don't segregate it in a locked room that doesn't invite people to use it.

This is an excerpt from the CAR Rock National Conference. To get a copy of the full handout, call the IRE Resource Center at (573) 882-3364.

One great way to find story ideas is by reading IRE's "100 Compter-Assisted Stories," which includes ideas for both features and hard-hitting investigations. To order, call (573) 882-0684.

Seminars, boot camps, conferences

Get your training

Check out the NICAR Web site at www.nicar.org to find out times and dates for upcoming on-the-road training and boot camps.

Workshops

IRE and NICAR can also bring road-tested workshops to sites around the country. We match regional public records experts and experienced reporters with our own trainers for unique seminars ranging from one-day demonstrations and panels on regional public records laws to three-day hands-on sessions on computer-assisted reporting or advanced techniques for data-intensive beats.

Don't wait for someone else to organize a computer-assisted reporting workshop in your area. IRE and NICAR depend on members, news organizations, journalism schools and other journalism organizations to help us bring our seminars to you.

Contact Sarah Cohen at (301) 942-2199 or e-mail her at sarah@nicar.org

January 23-25, 1998 — St. Louis, Mo.
Risky Behavior Workshop on health care databases and issues

Boot Camps

Boot Camps are week-long, intensive training sessions offered at NICAR's headquarters at the Missouri School of Journalism in Columbia, Mo.

As with on-the-road training, you will learn to transfer data from government files into newsroom PCs, build spreadsheets for stories on the beat, comprehend documents with database managers, and navigate the 'Net and online databases — but you'll be drilled all day, every day for a full week. Tuition ranges from $500-$1,000 depending on circulation or market size.

For information, call Katy Fanning at (573) 882-0684.

January 4-9, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.
NICAR Regular Boot Camp

January 9-11, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.
NICAR Advanced Boot Camp

May 10-15, 1998 — Chapel Hill, NC
NICAR Advanced Boot Camp

May 17-22, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.
NICAR Regular Boot Camp

July 12-17, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.
NICAR Regular Boot Camp

August 9-14, 1998 — Columbia, Mo.
NICAR Regular Boot Camp

Conferences

NICAR will offer training at the following professional conferences, including the IRE and NICAR national conferences. These conferences feature practical tips and story ideas shared by prize-winning journalists in quick-hit sessions. Keep up with our conference schedule through our Web site, at www.ire.org. Costs vary.

For more information or to register, call Lisa Barnes at (573) 882-8969.

January 31-February 1, 1998 — Washington, D.C.
IRE Regional Conference

March 5-8, 1998 — Indianapolis, Ind.
NICAR National Conference

March 27-29, 1998 — New York, N.Y.
IRE Regional Conference

June 4-7, 1998 — New Orleans, La.
IRE National Conference

Journalism Conference Tour

IRE and NICAR will be appearing at serveral upcoming conferences of other journalism organzations. IRE and NICAR will participate in panels and provides hands-on computer-assisted reporting training. For more information on these conferences, contact the organziation sponsoring or check out the www.reporter.org Web site.

July 24-27, 1998 — Miami, Fla.
On-the-road training for the National Association of Hispanic Journalists Convention '98

July 29-August 3, 1998 — Washington, D.C.
On-the-road training for the National Association of Black Journalists Convention '98

August 5-8, 1998 — Chicago, Ill.
On-the-road training for the Asian American Journalists Association Convention '98

Growing collection of federal databases

From the NICAR library

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

NEW • National Endowment for the Arts, 1987-1996, includes information on individual or organization receiving money.

NEW • Immigration and Naturalization Service legal residency, 1980-1995, includes information on the characteristics of aliens who were admitted as immigrants.

NEW • National Highway Traffic Safety Administration vehicle recalls and complaints, 1966-1997, includes information about vehicles that have been recalled by certain manufacturers.

• U.S. Food and Drug Administration's Medical Devices Reports, detailing complaints about drugs, pacemakers and other medical products, 1978-1996.

• U.S. Centers For Disease Control's AIDS database, providing case-by-case demographic information about those with the HIV virus, 1995-96.

• U.S. Census Bureau's Consolidated Federal Funds Reports, showing which communities get how much under various federal programs, 1983-1995.

• Federal Aviation Administration's accidents and incidents, including major plane crashes since 1974.

• NASA's air safety reporting system, including anonymous complaints by pilots and air traffic controllers. Useful for finding near misses and problems at local airports, 1988-1997.

• Federal Election Commission campaign contributions by individuals and political action committees, 1990-1997.

• The Health Care Financing Administration's 1995 database of all Medicare-funded in-patient work in U.S. hospitals.

• Federal Railroad Administration data for accidents, casualties, and highway crossings, 1991-1996.

• Coast Guard boating accidents, 1969-1996.

• Federal Aviation Administration data, including airplane maintenance work documented in the service difficulty report, pilot licenses and grades, and aircraft registration, 1974-1997.

• Home Mortgage Disclosure Act records, for tracking who gets loans and who gets turned down, and finding redlining patterns, 1992-1996.

• Federal procurement data, 1992-1996, includes breakdowns by agency.

• Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms gun dealer records, 1993-1996.

• National Bridge Inventory System data, includes inspection grades, 1994-1996.

• FBI Uniform Crime Reports, a detailed compilation of crime data that includes statistical breakdowns of individual murders. This includes the 1995 final report.

• 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, 1974-1996.

• U.S. Department of Transportation truck accident and census data. It includes accidents by company and road.

• U.S. Small Business Administration loan guarantees, 1980-1997. This includes the name of the business, address, amount covered by the SBA, and status, including whether the loan went bad.

• U.S. Small Business Administration disaster loan guarantees, 1989-1995. This includes individuals and businesses, the amount covered by the SBA, and the status, including whether the loan went bad.

• U.S. Small Business Administration's list of minority companies certified for SBA assistance in seeking federal contracts. It includes the name of the company, its address, the owner, type of business and phone number.

• The National Inventory of Dams, 1991-1995.

• U.S. Department of Transportation hazardous materials accidents database, a collection of roadway, rail, air and waterway accidents from 1971-1996.

• U.S. Department of Transportation fatal accident reporting system. It includes all roadway accidents from 1975-1995.

• U.S. Coast Guard directory of U.S. merchant vessels. It includes the name of the ship, the managing owner, home port and various descriptive information.

For up-to-date prices and more information, call (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to info@nicar.org

Handouts describing how to use these databases and others are available online at www.ire.org. Also, check out the job postings recently put on this page.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

Campaign Finance

The Campaign Finance Information Center is in full swing. Data, tips, links and stories are on the center's Web site, www.campaignfinance.org

Also, coming soon to a mailbox near you will be the Campaign Finance Information Center's newsletter. Stories from the Fall '97 newsletter include reports about states with electronic filing systems, a look at how states are going to inform the public of the connection between money and politics and an explanation of in-kind contributions.

Conferences and Seminars

NICAR is forging ahead with new seminars and new approaches to conferences and workshops. The annual conference, March 5-8 in Indianapolis, will not only include the usual panels and hands-on classes for beginners to the advanced, but also a set of special half-day sessions that will take in depth looks at how to use electronic information for particular beats.

We also are expanding our seminars for the intermediate range. Earlier this year we did a seminar on education and statistics. In the coming months, we plan to hold seminars on database design and data cleaning, use of SQL servers for the newsroom, mapping software, and business reporting. Watch our Web site at www.nicar.org for dates and times. For more information on seminars and boot camps, call (573) 882-0684.

NICAR Net

Recent topics on the IRE and NICAR listserv have included campaign finance data, troubles with traffic accident data, ethics, medical investigations and Access tips.

To subscribe to IRE-L or NICAR-L, send e-mail to listproc@lists.missouri.edu

In the body of the message, type:

subscribe NICAR-L<your name>

subscribe IRE-L<your name>

Also, check out the IRE-L and NICAR-L mailing list archives on our Web site at www.ire.org and www.nicar.org. You can see posts to both lists organized by thread, author and date. The list archives are available in html or in plain text format.

Changing of the editor

This is the final issue for Uplink's current managing editor, Jody Sowell. Taking over for next year will be Brent Johnson. Johnson is looking for new ideas and new themes for the new year.

Are there certain columns that you would like to add? Are there certain topics you would like covered? Have you done a story that you think should be featured in an upcoming issue? Do you have something you would like to contribute? A column about a CAR story you reported?

Send comments, critiques and suggestions to Johnson at brent@nicar.org

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