

# Uplink

August 1996

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

## A pretty penny Uplink update

Here's some advice that's worth a pretty penny: Don't trust the bean counters.

Computer savvy business reporters use spreadsheets to double-check budget calculations, they use databases to follow trends such as Small Business Loans, and they build their own tables to better cover their beats.

In this issue of Uplink, NICAR on-the-road trainer Neil Reisner shares business story ideas and tells us where to find related sources on the Web. NICAR's Andy Lehren reveals how SBA data showed prosperous Philadelphia businesses getting a bigger piece of the pie than their needier counterparts. John Hill of the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* gives tips for using HMDA data to show disparities in home lending. And Mike Fabey tells how he tracked beer tariffs by building his own database for the *Journal of Commerce*.

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## Story ideas

# Getting down to business

By Neil Reisner  
NICAR staff

Most business stories involve numbers, and a large portion involve many, many numbers. More business writers than ever can't imagine even beginning such a story without first entering the numbers on a spreadsheet or using a database manager to look for trends.

"A business writer who believes he/she is getting everything from the companies is just plain wrong," says one veteran reporter. "It's like saying that sports reporters get all they need from the teams or political reporters get all they need from politicians."

It's too easy to say that no one knows the balance sheets better than management, and therefore we should let them do the analysis. Just substitute "Congress" or "the governor" or "the mayor" for "management" in the last sentence, and the point will be clear: Management knows the financials — but that doesn't mean they tell you everything that shareholders or the public or employees need to know.

Here are some ways business reporters can use computer-assisted reporting:

- Use the annual Home Mortgage Disclosure Act to examine whether banks give mortgages in all the neighborhoods they serve. HMDA summarizes how lenders responded to home-loan applications by Census tract and by applicants' race, sex, income and requested loan amount. In many cases, reporters find that banks disproportionately deny loans to minorities.

- Search the patents database, avail-

able in part on-line or from the Patent Trademark Office, for patents in your area and get totals from the U.S. Patent Office. What sorts of patents are most common? Quick hit: Write a spot profile of new patents in your area.

- Use a spreadsheet to build basic graphics that make it easier to see a company's sales/profits patterns. You can, for example, find out whether a

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## What SBA data shows

# The rich get richer

By Andy Lehren  
NICAR staff

In Philadelphia — a city recuperating from a severe budget crisis — officials talk a lot about economic development.

But the city's poorer neighborhoods complain that too much public aid goes to Center City businesses and other well-off areas, while struggling communities get little assistance.

Officials have admitted that certain programs, such as Urban Development Action Grants, were funneled downtown to ensure its economic health. But they countered that other government assistance, such as loans backed by the

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company's newspapers or television stations make a bigger contribution to earnings.

- Are your airlines on time? Check out the on-time flight database from the FAA and find out which cities are the best and worst routes for your location (in terms of getting there or coming back on time), and which airlines are the best and worst in your city.

- Track the health of your local banks. Take banking data (it comes out quarterly) and look at (Liabilities + Loans-on-the-Brink — those that may go bad in 90 days) / assets. The ratio is a quick way to look at the health of banks. *USA Today* was able to get a great jump on troubles at Chase Manhattan using this method.

- Use a spreadsheet to analyze tariffs. Mike Fabey did this to look at beer tariffs for the *Journal of Commerce* (See story on page five).

- Use mapping software to examine bank locations. Are banks and S&Ls where most people can conveniently reach them? You may find that most banks are located in upscale office parks or high-rent neighborhoods. Buy the necessary addresses from Sheshunoff, the bank research firm. Or scour the Yellow Pages and enter the data yourself. Once you have a map, and see just how large the unserved area is, go visit it and find out how people get banking services. You may find they depend on check-cashing "services" and rarely, if ever, can borrow money on reasonable terms.

- Are your businesses paying back the community? Check the SBA database for the promises businesses made about how many employees they'll add if they get a loan. Did they follow through?

- Writing about the Orange County bankruptcy, Ron Campbell of *The Register* used Excel to track the professional fees in the mammoth case — \$50 million and counting. He also used Excel to keep track of dozens of bond issues, each with its own interest rate, tax status, underwriter and financial adviser, and seemingly hundreds of recovery plans.

- Use data from the Bureau of the Census Web site to see how the age/race composition of your state or region will change over the next 25 years, and report on how that will affect state agencies, the economy, etc.

- How are your local or regional businesses doing on the Net? Find out whether this Web

thing is hype or whether people are really making money. What are their concerns?

- Companies usually report several years' results in their annual report or SEC Form 10-K. Put those numbers on a spreadsheet and do some charts. What sources of income have changed in the past few years? Is the company taking on more debt? What about its inventory? In many industries, inventory is a ticking time bomb. Many companies have adopted "just-in-time inventory." The reason for this strategy is purely financial: to keep from wasting valuable capital on storage for goods you might not be able to sell at a profit. Compile figures from a number of company annual reports or 10-Ks to take a look at an industry segment, using the same sort of calculations.

- Use the OSHA database to determine the most common accidents and causes for your area.

- Use the Internet and other on-line services to research small or obscure companies. Rob Gebelof at *The Record* in Hackensack, N.J., did that when it researched a company owned by a scientist who had been murdered. Little was known about the company. But by punching it into Altavista, a Net search engine, a reporter found a reference to it on a page maintained by another company. A call to that firm yielded an interview with someone who knew both the victim and his company well.

- See how many workers in your area are filing for NAFTA-related benefits compared to the rest of the country.

- Use a spreadsheet to look at company balance sheets. Most companies do not provide information such as debt ratios, which are vital to understanding a business. *Crain's New York* set up a system so reporters can type in the basic numbers and get computations on key ratios. Andy Lehren of NICAR, a former Philadelphia business writer, did the same thing as a way to find publicly traded companies worth probing (See story on page one).

- Use spreadsheets to analyze Commerce data on the fly. By using stat-USA, you can get U.S. economic data as soon as it's released by Commerce. You can quickly get that information into spreadsheets and go beyond the press releases.

- Business reporters can turn around quick merger stories using desktop mapping. When one company says its going to swallow another, business reporters should type company locations

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Continued from page one:

# The rich get richer

U.S. Small Business Administration, did not work that way.

An October 1995 analysis by the *Philadelphia Daily News* showed that's not true. The two-part series showed how the agency did a poor job of getting money into the city — when it did, the support went more to neighborhoods that are already better-off.

The stories mined the SBA's national database for 7a loans. That is the SBA's key program for helping small businesses. The name refers to the section of law that created the program. The program is supposed to encourage bank lending to companies that would otherwise not qualify.

It is designed to work this way: A company is seeking a bank loan, but the bank is reluctant. Maybe the company owners have little credit history to help the bank make a decision. Perhaps the deal is a bit chancy.

But if the company qualifies, it could get the federal government to guarantee a big chunk of the loan. The bank is happy because it gets to do the deal with less risk. The company is pleased because it gets the cash. The SBA is content because it helps a small business.

There are rules. However, in the decentralized federal agency, a clear picture emerged: Some district offices and banks were better at churning out loans than others. Philadelphia was among those cities with a smaller piece of the pie.

## Key data

The data was a key part of the story. Obtained under the Freedom of Information Act, the nine-track tapes showed where the money was going. The database was a little dirty; developing look-up tables for cities and ZIP codes helped alleviate problems caused by sloppy data entry. After that, the numbers showed that, despite being the nation's fifth-largest city, it ranked 17th when it came to getting SBA aid.

In addition, when agency officials countered that they were improving, a year-by-year breakdown showed that, while Philadelphia's numbers were a bit higher as time went on, its relative position fell because other places were doing even better.

I spoke to those in places getting more

money. They described how they worked the system to do more deals. Those methods underscored the problems back in Philadelphia.

When it came to particular loans, the database was handy for seeking paper records. I submitted an FOIA request to the SBA district office, attaching a spreadsheet that listed the names, addresses and loan dates. The district office complied with documents that showed much more than what is in the database — including details like the equipment or land used as collateral. This was also a great way to check the data's integrity.

I linked the SBA data with U.S. Census Bureau poverty and population tables to see whether SBA officials were right that the money was evenly distributed among rich and poor neighborhoods. Using SPSS, I ran a series of independent t-tests and analysis of variance, and found a significant gap.

## Loosening tongues

All this led to much better interviews. "I'm not going to use or give you an excuse," said Clifton Toulson Jr., the SBA's district director. "We have not done our job as best we could have. We've got our work cut out for us."

One City Hall official pointed out that, adding insult to injury, Philadelphia was also the biggest city without its district office located within its borders. A check of SBA district offices, published on the agency's web site, showed that was true. I tracked down the Reagan administration official who moved the office out to the suburbs. He conceded that the long commute, among other reasons, caused him to pull out.

Other reporters have also successfully mined SBA records.

Steve Malanga, editor of *Crain's New York*, found the taxi-cab industry dominated lending because it found out how to work the system. In Hartford, Conn., using only paper records, NICAR Managing Director Brant Houston, then at the *Hartford Courant*, found questionable loans going to businesses outside Connecticut. A key was following deals backed by SBA district offices even though they were outside its jurisdiction.

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To determine the actual location of the domain in an e-mail or WWW address, you can go to Lycos Road Map by either visiting Lycos at <http://www.lycos.com> or by going straight to Road Map at <http://www.proximus.com/lycos>

If you plug in a domain, such as northcom.com, it'll print out a map of the city where the domain address is registered.

For an exhaustive list of Internet Service Providers with details on services offered, go to The List at <http://www.thelist.com>

You can get them sorted various ways, including by area code served.

# Like money in the bank

For a look at the "fattest of the Fat Cats," check out the Mother Jones 400, an interactive database. "They have meaty, and actually pretty amusing, profiles of the FCs, and simple explanations of bundling, soft money, etc.," says Kitty Bennett, a news researcher with the St. Petersburg Times. The url is [http://www.mojones.com/coinop\\_congress/mojo\\_400/mojo\\_400.html](http://www.mojones.com/coinop_congress/mojo_400/mojo_400.html)

By John Hill

Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Wiggling out of one problem can make you look worse. Just ask bankers in Sarasota, Fla.

In July 1995, the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* was preparing a story that showed racial disparities in home lending. The story was based on Home Mortgage Disclosure Act data from 1993, the most recent available at the time.

Several bankers, in interviews before the story was published, insisted their performance in 1994 had improved. They credited themselves with offering a variety of innovative schemes that effectively loosened mortgage credit to blacks and to minority communities.

There was only one problem: It wasn't true.

After those early interviews, the *Herald-Tribune* decided to hold the story.

## Truth in numbers

When the 1994 numbers were available, an analysis showed that while blacks saw their approval rate inch up slightly — from 61 percent in 1993 to 62 percent the following year — those gains did not keep pace with other racial groups.

Moreover, while the denial rate for blacks dropped in 1994, these gains were offset by the large numbers of blacks who grew frustrated with the lending process and withdrew their applications, or who had their files closed by the banks for being "incomplete."

As a result, while these "new" and "aggressive" schemes lured more blacks to the door, the spike in loan activity only further concentrated housing credit into the hands of whites, doing little to redistribute mortgages along racial lines or to buttress housing values in mixed communities.

The result was a far stronger story, particu-

larly given the demographics of southwest Florida, where a standard analysis of HMDA data along racial lines is complicated by the small number of black and minority applicants.

HMDA numbers are problematic enough. Ask anyone who's based a story on them. You can't account for credit histories, or analyze in any quantifiable way the margins between debt and income by an applicant's race. (This is how lenders typically dismiss the charge of mortgage "redlining" or discrimination.)

Compounding this problem, particularly for newspapers in predominantly-white communities, is that the small number of black applicants makes it difficult to explain denial rates, even when adjusted for income. You're often left with a sample size that's far too small for a credible analysis.

Here are ways to work around problems with the data, which is available from NICAR:

- Analyze whether mortgage credit is flowing to minority communities. Some analysts are less concerned about the performance of individual banks than with the type of mortgage credit available in minority communities. Using Census data, we analyzed the approval rates, and amount loaned, to areas which were two and three times Sarasota's nonwhite average. As it turned out, large banks generally moved away from mixed neighborhoods, leaving higher-priced mortgage and finance companies to pick up the slack.

- Examine the amount of loans made to individual blacks, by income. Are loans to blacks going to those with exclusive incomes, thereby making any claim of racial equalization moot?

- Compare denials in your area with those from similarly composed counties or metropolitan areas in your state. The goal, as with any statistical analysis, is to account for aberrant factors.

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## Continued from page two: Story ideas for business

into a database and analyze the result with a mapping program. Dave Herzog at *The Morning Call* in Allentown, Pa., did that when CoreStates announced it was taking over Meridian Bank. The paper highlighted branches within a stone's throw of each other and speculated which might be shuttered, ending up close to the mark. The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*

used the same technique when one grocery store chain bought another.

Andy Lehen of NICAR, Heather Newman of *The Tennessean*, Ron Campbell of *The (Orange County) Register* and Wendell Cochran of American University contributed to this story.

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Roll out the barrel

# Checking a cartel rollback

By Mike Fabey

The Journal of Commerce

It's never easy to check a government agency's claim that it's saving money for its constituents. It gets even trickier when the agency's the Federal Maritime Commission, and it's talking about saving money on shipping contracts from exporters and importers all around the world, which vary according to the cargo, the ports and the carrier.

The commission, or FMC, was investigating the Trans-Atlantic Conference Agreement, the cartel of major ocean shipping lines that carry goods between North America and Europe.

Importers and exporters said the cartel was forcing the shippers to pay too much money for the service because the ocean liners knew the shippers had few alternatives.

The FMC agreed to drop its investigation when the cartel said it would roll back its rates to the previous year's prices. The agency and the lines said the rollback would save importers and exporters about \$65 million, a nice chunk of change.

*The Journal of Commerce*, a daily business newspaper in New York, likes nothing better than financial breakdowns. They make for nice graphics. I asked the agency and cartel for a breakdown of the \$65 million. They were unable or unwilling to do so. I asked both to quantify where the \$65 million would come from. The agency admitted it got its number from the cartel — verbally, with no written documentation to back it up. The cartel would only say that it had based its figures on numbers of containers moving across the Atlantic multiplied by \$100, which, it said, was the average increase for each container before the rollback.

The executives in the cartel probably figured no one would check. The shipping lines transport about 1.4 million containers across the Atlantic each year, carrying beer, furniture and just about anything anyone can think of. The lines file more than 400 contracts each year for all the different commodities, and each contract can have any number of different rates, depending on all kinds of shipping variables, such as whether the cargo needs to be refrigerated.

The contracts themselves are mostly written documents, with base rates, surcharges and other

costs scattered throughout. As most of the folks at NICAR told me, there was no way to write a program to capture all the relevant data easily to format it for a spreadsheet or database manager.

So, I opted for a small piece of the pie. I figured I'd pinpoint the largest shippers in the trade and find out the rollback those companies got. They controlled most of the cargo, and their prices would serve as a good barometer for the rest of the bunch.

I use an Epson ActionNote 650 laptop for most of my computer work. To find the biggest shippers in the trade, I used my Epson and my Motorola Lifestyle 14.4 Data/Fax modem to hook into a special database offered by Port Import/Export Reporting Service, or PIERS, which tracks these kinds of things. PIERS provides FOCUS software to search its data.

## Tapping the beer trade

Beer is the biggest commodity shipped in the trade. Heineken is the biggest shipper, followed by Becks and Guinness.

Now came the hard part. I had to get the shipping contracts for these beer barons. Shipping line cartels have to file their contracts with the FMC, but the deals don't name the shippers. You have to look for things like port of origin to look for specific companies. For example, Heineken comes from Holland, so Rotterdam would be the biggest close port.

In times B.C. — before computers — reporters would have to check through the thousands of contracts at the FMC in Washington by hand. I never left my office in the New York World Trade Center.

I used ProComm Plus for Windows to dial into another commercial database provider called Transax Systems. The database includes all shipping contracts filed with the FMC. You can search them by line, by type of cargo, by port, by date and other parameters. I retrieved the beer contracts and saved them.

Then, using ClarisWorks for windows, I put together a spreadsheet that compared the rates for the two years. Heineken's rollback was about \$12 a container — a little lower than the \$100 per container the cartel said had been saved.

The cartel complained that the Heineken accounts did not truly represent the amounts and savings of the contracts on the Atlantic. Of

Continued on page nine

American University  
in Washington, D.C.,

has launched an  
interactive experts  
guide that enables  
media in the global  
marketplace to  
identify and request  
help from AU  
experts fluent in  
various languages.  
Find the site on the  
AU Media Relations  
homepage at

<http://www.media.american.edu>

Among other things,  
the site features:

- An interactive database of faculty expertise, allowing users to search for experts by key words, a topic index or a faculty member's name. In addition to the professors' areas of specialization, the database will reference foreign languages spoken and biographical information.
- An on-line request form, providing a fast and effective method of requesting interviews or information.

# Power lunches

By David M. Poole

The Roanoke Times/Virginian Pilot

*David Poole is a state capitol reporter in the Landmark Communications bureau in Richmond, Va., which serves The Virginian-Pilot and The Roanoke Times. He attended bootcamp in May.*

For the Virginia state capitol press corps, lobbyists' expense reports are a one-day story. The day the forms are released, reporters thumb through a summary provided by the Secretary of the Commonwealth to tally up the biggest spenders during the most recent General Assembly session.

The results are predictable: Corporate interests that spend the most generally get their way with the state legislature.

*The Roanoke Times/Virginian Pilot* decided to delve deeper into the reports, looking for specific ways in which lobbyists influence the legislative process.

## Feed me

The story, which ran July 12, began with a hunch: One sure way to a legislator's heart is through his or her stomach.

The result was a front page news feature that showed how corporate lobbyists wined and dined lawmakers at critical junctures in the legislative process.

The story's biggest finding, however, was that lawmakers had written a loophole into the law so they could freeload their way through a series of receptions, parties and private dinners — all without fear of disclosure.

To get the story, I built a database using FoxPro. The Virginia disclosure law requires lobbyists to report certain details of any meal or entertainment costing \$100 or more. The lobbyist must indicate the number of lawmakers present, but need not name names.

I created six fields: Name of company, name of individual lobbyist, date of expense, location of meal, number of legislators present, amount spent.

The database contained 149 records, representing 42 companies.

The next step was to look for any correlation between the dates a company took lawmakers to dinner and the dates when lawmakers voted on bills affecting the company.

My colleague Robert Little and I drew upon a recollection of the 1996 General Assembly to make a list of bills that were pushed/opposed by the 42 companies. We logged onto the Legislative Information System, the state's on-line subscriber service, to confirm the dates each vote reached a key committee or floor vote.

The data revealed some interesting patterns.

Virginia Power Co. entertained five lawmakers at the exclusive Commonwealth Club on Feb. 22, a day when the electric utility's centerpiece bill was unexpectedly stalled on the floor of the House of Delegates.

Was Virginia Power wooing key holdouts? Were company officials talking strategy with key House leaders?

"I can understand why you might be very suspicious," Eva Teig, a Virginia Power lobbyist told the newspaper.

Teig insisted the meeting was nothing more than a scheduled gathering with members of the House Corporations, Insurance and Banking Committee. But she refused to name names, saying it was a matter of privacy for lawmakers.

## Mum's the word

The lack of lawmakers' names made it virtually impossible to establish a connection between lobbyists' generosity and lawmakers' votes. The loophole shifted the focus of the story to an all-too-common fact in Virginia politics: Disclosure laws that lead to less-than-meaningful disclosure.

Asked if lawmakers wrote the loophole into the law to avoid disclosure of their night life in Richmond, Senate Pro Tem Stanley Walker admitted, "I think that's a likelihood."

Lawmakers interviewed for the story said it made sense to change the law so that lobbyists have to name names. But no one volunteered to be the killjoy who would introduce the bill to the 1997 General Assembly.

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Take a look at:  
"Business Analysis  
with Excel" by Conrad

Carlberg, who  
explores numerous  
financial and other  
business uses for  
spreadsheets. The  
book, published by  
Que, should be  
available at most  
bookstores and is  
recommended for  
reporters with  
knowledge of basic  
Excel and some  
background in  
business.

# Managing CAR reporting

**By Brant Houston**  
NICAR executive director

Over the past year, many newsroom managers have been struggling with how to set up and oversee computer-assisted reporting.

In response, NICAR is collecting the different models that news organizations have used for CAR. So far, the models have ranged from a couple of reporters trying to produce occasional stories to a highly-structured approach guided by editors and newsroom librarians working together.

We plan to use the information to develop written materials and a curriculum for seminars in the coming months and for panels at our national conference in Nashville March 6-9. If you have recommendations for managing CAR, please send them to us.

## NashCAR

The working name of national conference is NashCAR. It will offer the widest range of panels and hands-on training yet. Building on the previous conferences in Santa Clara, Calif., (CAR Trek) and Cleveland, Ohio, (CAR Rock), NashCAR will have sessions for beginner, intermediate and advanced users. We'll have tracks for beat reporters, editors, newsrooms managers, broadcasters, researchers and librarians, and trainers both in newsrooms and universities.

The conference will make use of computer labs at local universities and will have a demonstration room that will display state-of-the-art equipment and software. We'll also have vendors and numerous opportunities for journalists to find jobs and jobs to find journalists.

## Mexico institute hires training director

Pedro Enrique Armendaras has joined Periodistas de Investigacion — Investigative Reporters and Editors in Mexico — as training director, effective Sept. 1.

Through the project, made possible by a \$540,000 grant from the McCormick Tribune Foundation, IRE and NICAR hope to offer low-cost or free training in newsrooms and at seminars across Mexico.

Armendaras' duties will include developing training programs in computer-assisted and in-

In addition, we expect to explore the effect of the World Wide Web on journalism and how journalists are using the Web for their stories.

Once again, if you have any suggestions, please send them.

## Minority fellows, seminars

With the help of the Knight Foundation and Freedom Forum, NICAR has dramatically increased the opportunities for minority journalists. By January, more than 20 minority journalists will have gone through NICAR's rigorous week-long bootcamp seminars, and we will have held three regional seminars in Richmond, Va.; Dallas, Texas.; and San Francisco, Calif.

## On-the-road training

NICAR's on the road trainer, Neil Reisner, has done a stellar job this year, traveling around the country hitting state after state, including California, New York, North Carolina, Rhode Island, South Dakota, Michigan, Illinois, Florida, Arkansas, Alabama, Montana, Oregon, Washington, Maryland and Missouri. He has taught at TV stations, newspapers, and universities.

In January, Reisner plans to go off the road to handle on-line training and database work. Thus, we'll hire a new on-the-road trainer. If you are interested in the job, please call Brant Houston at (573) 882-0684 or e-mail [brant@nicar.org](mailto:brant@nicar.org)

Also, phone or e-mail us if you are interested in helping us on the road, either by setting up seminars or coaching.

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vestigative reporting.

Armendaras, 40, attended NICAR bootcamp in August. He has worked since 1989 as an investigative/special projects reporter at *La Jornada*, a major Mexico daily. He will join Lise Olsen, managing director of Periodistas de Investigacion, in the Mexico City office.

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Send e-mail to Lise Olsen at [lise@periodistas.ire.org](mailto:lise@periodistas.ire.org).

**IRE, NICAR and The Richmond Times-Dispatch will offer the Computer-Assisted Reporting Workshop for Minority Journalists in Richmond, Va., Nov. 15-17.**

**The hands-on training will include navigating the Internet, spreadsheets, database managers, negotiating for data and more.**

**Forty slots are available. For more information, call (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to Wendy Charron at [wendy@nicar.org](mailto:wendy@nicar.org).**

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**Check out the IRE-L and NICAR-L mailing list archives on our websites at <http://www.ire.org> and <http://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.**

# Switching from FoxPro to Access

By Richard Mullins

University of Missouri/NICAR

Some journalists love FoxPro; others just use it. But no one believes it's pretty or the easiest to learn. And when some former FoxPro users discover Microsoft's Access, they begin harboring thoughts of revenge against those who told them FoxPro was the way to go.

It's the nature of computer-industry progress that we eventually have to switch, grudgingly, from our favorite, trusted, work-horse software to something newer. The reasons and timing vary. In FoxPro and Access, one contributing factor is that version FoxPro 2.6 is no longer being sold. Its successor, Visual FoxPro 3, has taken great steps in the Access direction.

If you're making the switch, or better yet, starting to use Access for much of your work, but still using FoxPro for larger tasks, here's a guide to the conversion. I'll deal with important differences, syntax and SQL differences, and features to take advantage of. When I use the name FoxPro, I'm referring to version 2.6, or all versions up to that one. For Access, I'm talking about version 2.0.

## Important differences

- **Terms: Databases, Tables and Objects:** In FoxPro, the words **table** and **database** are used interchangeably. Access conforms to the relational terminology: A **database** is a collection of **related tables**. Actually, it goes further than that: An Access database is a collection of related **objects**.

Not knowing this can create some confusion when you start creating or importing tables in Access. In FoxPro, every table, every query, every index is a separate file on the computer hard disk. Access, on the other hand, uses one Database file (\*.mdb) to hold things it calls objects: tables, queries, forms, reports, macros, modules. It presents these objects to the user with a file cabinet metaphor.

For a database called **housing**, your directory listing shows a file called **housing.mdb**. On the inside, when Access opens this database file, there may be five tables, 12 stored queries and three data entry forms.

- **Character field length storage:** The width of a text or character field in Access only defines the limit of what it will hold; long field lengths do not waste space in Access. This is the opposite of FoxPro, which consumes the same amount of disk space for an empty 50-character field as for a full one.

- **MDB file sizes:** The file size of an Access database increases as you add to it, but does not contract if you delete tables and rows. Use the **Compact Database...** command, under the File menu when no database is open to reclaim disk space after making substantial deletions.

- **Making Queries:** The best part is that you can type SQL to build queries and put line breaks wherever you want, with none of the hassles of trying to type and edit queries with those semicolons FoxPro insists on to indicate that the command continues to the next line. And instead of a command window containing every command you've typed (or mistyped), Access lets you create and save a separate query object in your database file cabinet for every question you want to retain.

I think the Access Query Design Grid is much easier to use, and faster, than the FoxPro RQBE screen. The cool feature is that changes you make in the SQL view update the Design Grid view and vice versa. There are still several kinds of things that you can only do by an SQL statement and not by the Query Design Grid.

- **Query results:** In Access, most query results are updatable. In FoxPro, query results are read-only.

## Syntax and SQL differences

- **Dates:** Dates are quoted, or delimited, with the pound sign: (FoxPro uses French braces).

Access: #03/22/54#

FoxPro: {03/22/54}

- **Wildcard characters:** For matching part of a character string (e.g., WHERE NAME LIKE "ROBERT\*"), are the same as the DOS wildcard characters: \* (asterisk) to match one or more characters, and ? (question mark) for a single character. FoxPro uses the SQL standard of % and \_ (percent and underscore)

- **DistinctRow keyword:** This is an Access extension to Standard SQL.

**Continued on page nine**

IRE and NICAR will hold a regional/student conference Nov. 9 and 10 at Syracuse University. The conference will have sessions on paper and on-line records; interviewing, FOI, writing, and investigations on a budget for both print and broadcast. Cost is \$10 for members, \$50

for non-members, which includes a year membership worth \$40. The student cost is \$35, which also includes a year's membership worth

\$25. Student

members can also attend for \$10.

Panels will take place on Saturday. Hands-on computer training will be available on Sunday for an extra \$25.

Stay tuned for more program details, or send e-mail to Rose

Ciotta at

ciotta@buffnews.com

or to Rosemary

Armao at

armao@ire.org



Continued from page eight: ... **Here's how**

- Case in criteria: Access defaults to being case-insensitive for criteria (the WHERE clause in SQL).

- Column Number abbreviation: Access doesn't support the Column Number abbreviation in the **Group By** and **Order By** clauses. In the query below, you have to use order by ZIP. You cannot use order by 1

```
select zip, amount
from donors
order by zip
```

### Features to take advantage of

- Attached tables: Importing FoxPro .dbf files is easy. You tell Access two things: the data source type and where to find the file. But you can use Access to query FoxPro files in their native format. Instead of importing the table, which duplicates it on your computer (An Access copy and a FoxPro copy) you can use **File/Attach Table...** instead. You'll have one version of the data, but two applications that can read it.

- Long names: You can use long names, with spaces and some punctuation, to name tables, queries, etc. FoxPro limits you to eight charac-

ters for table names and 10 for column names. You can name a table: "All Missouri Donors" in Access and can name a column "Amount This Person Donated."

- Joining tables: Table joins in the Query Design Grid are represented in a perfectly visual way — you just drag the key field from one table and drop it on top of the corresponding key in the other. The SQL representation of this, however, is probably not what you used to see for table joins. Instead of the WHERE clause syntax of where **a.key = b.key** you'll see something like **from TableA inner join TableB on TableA.key = TableB.key**

These keywords are from the SQL-92 standard, which isn't universally implemented. The WHERE syntax works, too.

- Description field in table design: Fill in the description field column in the Table Design View. When the cursor is anywhere in a column, the contents of the description field are displayed in the bottom left part of the screen. You could put in short explanations, code lists, etc., for the field.

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**For an in-depth look at problems with databases, check out "Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide" by Brant Houston. It can be ordered from NICAR or Investigative Reporters & Editors for \$26 plus shipping. Call (573) 882-2042.**

Continued from page five:

## Tracking the cartel

course, they said, the biggest shipper would have the best deal, the lowest increase, and thus the lowest rollback, especially an importer whose goods, beer, was one of the cheapest goods to ship. To sketch a fairer picture of the contracts and rollbacks, they said, I would have to compare contracts for goods that cost more to ship, which would have a greater rollback.

Using PIERS data, I picked three of the top commodities being shipped in the trade — all the beer contracts and those for other alcoholic beverages and chemicals. Some contracts included rates for all three in the same deal.

I used ProComm Plus to retrieve the contracts. But, because of the limitations of my equipment, I had to copy the information from the contracts by hand. I filled two notebooks with the columns. But I needed time to transfer the information into a spreadsheet, time my

daily beat did not allow me.

Until, that is, the paper sent me on a cargo ship to Brazil. The three weeks on the ship gave me enough time to put together an Excel spreadsheet of more than 400 contract variations. There was little else to do at night aboard a ship off the coast of South America.

When I finished the spreadsheet, I made a copy and saved it into a dbf file, which I opened with FoxPro. I queried the database on the average rollback costs for the commodities.

I found that the average rollback was about \$50 for each box. More than what was offered in the Heineken deal. But still only half of what the cartel said was the average rollback discount. I wrote a column about how the \$65 million discount just didn't add up.

Mike Fabey can be reached by sent e-mail to [MJF625775@aol.com](mailto:MJF625775@aol.com)

**"100 Computer-Assisted Stories" is published by IRE and NICAR. Newspaper and television reporters recount how they got the story. The price is \$20.**

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# Doing business on the Web

Don't forget that the Advanced Bootcamp offered by NICAR and Philip Meyer, author of "The New Precision Journalism" and journalism professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, will be coming up May 4-9, 1997. The seminar, which is held in Chapel Hill, will concentrate on stats and maps. For registration information, send e-mail to Wendy Charron at [wendy@nicar.org](mailto:wendy@nicar.org), or call NICAR at (573) 882-0684.

By Neil Reisner  
NICAR staff

The World Wide Web and other on-line resources can provide fertile ground for business reporters to mine.

Here's a list of Web sites that might prove useful, divided roughly by topic.

## General business, investment

- American Stock Exchange, <http://www.amex.com>
- Bizweb, <http://www.bizweb.com> Links to companies on the Web, organized by industry.
- Business Web 100, [http://fox.nstn.ca/~at\\_info/w100\\_intro.html](http://fox.nstn.ca/~at_info/w100_intro.html) The 100 largest corporations on the Web.
- Heather's Biz-J Home Page, <http://edge.edge.net/~hnewman/index.htm> Compiled by Heather Newman, business reporter at the Nashville Tennessean.
- Hoovers, <http://www.hoovers.com> On-line companion to famed book of information on public and private companies.
- Sites from the Stock Club, <http://stockclub.com/links.html> A collection of business links.
- Investor's Online, <http://www.payment.com/ssnhome.html> Basic Information on 15,000 public companies, links to international stock market indices.
- Investor Web, <http://www.investorweb.com/company.htm> Links to companies online, ranked by the amount of data they provide on their web sites.
- Investor's Reference, <http://gnn.com/wic/wics/persfin.ref.html> Sites from the Global Network Navigator, a service of America Online.
- New York Stock Exchange, <http://www.nyse.com>
- NICAR Business Sites, <http://www.nicar.org/biz.html> Compiled by Andy Lehren of NICAR.
- PR Newswire, <http://www.prnewswire.com/> The Web presence of the PR Newswire.
- Securites Data, <http://www.secddata.com> Stats on corporate IPOs, mergers, municipal finance, etc.
- Securities Exchange Commission/EDGAR, <http://www.sec.gov> The SEC and EDGAR, its searchable database of company filings.

• Wall Street Research, <http://www.wsrn.com>  
This service has daily stock information as well as links to economic and press sites.

## Calculators

- Calculators On-Line, <http://www-sci.lib.uci.edu/HSG/RefCalculators.html> Calculators to translate anything into anything else.
- Cool Calculators, <http://www.poynter.org/poynter/calcs.html> Cool Calculators from the Poynter Institute
- Relocation Salary Calculator, <http://www.homefair.com/homefair/cmr/salcalc.html> Calculates the salary you would need to make in a new city, based on cost-of-living differences. Good for business relocation stories...and personal planning.
- Government Resources, Census Bureau, U.S. Bureau, <http://www.census.gov> The Census compiles gigabytes of demographic and economic information.
- CIA World Factbook, <http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/95fact/index.html> Home of the CIA World Fact Book, containing basic information on every country in the world.
- U.S. Department of Commerce, <http://www.doc.gov/>
- Bureau of Economic Research, <http://www.bea.doc.gov> An agency of the Department of Commerce, BEA is the Nation's accountant, integrating and interpreting a tremendous volume of data to draw a picture of the U.S. economy.
- General Accounting Office, <http://www.gao.gov/> The GAO is the investigative arm of Congress, issuing various reports and investigations.
- GPO Access, <http://thorplus.lib.purdue.edu/gpo/Links> to federal depository libraries. Searchable full text of Federal Register, Congressional Record, bills, laws, GAO reports, and more.
- IGNet, [gopher://www.sbaonline.sba.gov:7011/ignet](http://www.sbaonline.sba.gov:7011/ignet) Audits, investigations and reports from Inspectors Generals in many federal agencies.
- Internet Law Library, <http://www.pls.com:8001/> Includes U.S. Code and Code of Federal Regulations, plus links to state, federal and international laws, treaties, regulations, and other stuff.
- U.S. Department of Justice, <http://www.doj.gov>

Continued on page eleven

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** • A monthly CD subscription for all 1995-96 Federal Election Commission campaign contributions by individuals and political action committees, plus all presidential matching fund requests.

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

- Federal Railroad Administration data for accidents, casualties, and highway crossings. 1991-1995.

- Coast Guard boating accidents, 1969-1994.

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

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

- Federal procurement data, 1992-1995, includes breakdowns by agency.

- Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms gun dealer records. 1993, 1995.

**NEW** • National Bridge Inventory System data, includes inspection grades.

- FBI Uniform Crime Reports, a detailed compilation of crime data that includes statistical breakdowns of individual murders. This includes the new 1994 data.

- Social Security death records, by name and social security number, going back to 1937.

- Occupational Safety and Health Adminis-

tration violation data includes worker accidents and exposures to hazardous chemicals by companies.

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

- U.S. Small Business Administration loan guarantees, 1989-1995. 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, 1989-1994. 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.

**NEW** • U.S. Department of Transportation hazardous materials accidents database, a collection of roadway, rail, air and waterway accidents from 1971 to 1995.

- U.S. Department of Transportation fatal accident reporting system. It includes all roadway accidents from 1988 to 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

[nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu](mailto:nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu).

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## Continued from page ten: On the Internet

- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, <http://stats.bls.gov/dolbls.htm> Data on wage and prices, inflation, the labor market, etc., by region and nationally.

- Patent & Trademark Office, <http://www.uspto.gov> Search the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office database.

- State Home Pages, <http://www.globalcomputing.com/states.html> Links to every state with its own home page.

- Thomas: Congress On-line, <http://thomas.loc.gov/> Thomas is the online gateway to Capitol Hill and Congress. Named for Thomas Jefferson.

- U.S. Department of Transportation, <http://www.dot.gov/> DOT compiles reams of data on transportation infrastructure, economics, and safety.

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# Bits, Bytes and Barks

## ProfNet response

Reporters who have used ProfNet, a valuable on-line research tool for locating academic experts on numerous subjects, have been concerned about ProfNet's recent sale to PR Newswire. That commercial outfit sells ProfNet queries to other paying clients, compromising the confidentiality of reporters' queries and sometimes resulting in a deluge of unwanted commercial appeals mixed in with sought after academic responses. PR Newswire has little incentive to keep queries quiet because the greater their distribution, the more money the company makes.

Here's what ProfNet sysop Dan Forbush has had to say about the issue:

"Two recent developments at ProfNet are relevant.

"First, we'll soon be able to give reporters the ability to segment queries by type of institution. The more narrowly we can pinpoint the delivery of queries, the smaller the opportunity for off-target responses.

"By the end of this month, you'll be able send a query to the entire list or to any combination of the following:

- academe
- nonprofit organizations
- government
- corporations
- PR agencies

"For example, if you want leads only on experts who can discuss the educational and First Amendment implications of filtering Internet content in the schools, we'll suggest you direct your query only to our academic list.

"If, on the other hand, your story is focused on the latest filtering products, we'll recommend a distribution

that goes only to corporate and agency members. The larger and more diverse the ProfNet membership, the more powerful the resource. Segmentation is key, though, which is why we've spent the last six months developing this new distribution system.

"The second piece of relevant news is that we've created an on-line database providing bios and contact information for 2,000 leading experts across all disciplines — a utility that is proving particularly helpful to reporters either who are in immediate need of experts or who, for whatever reason, prefer not to conduct a sweep via ProfNet Search. Capable of full-text searches and 'relevance-ranking' of sources, ProfNet's Experts Database is up and running at [www.vyne.com/profnet/ped](http://www.vyne.com/profnet/ped)"

Despite Forbush's reassurances, some reporters remain concerned about the changes in ProfNet, and wonder whether widely broadcasted queries could tip off competitors or subjects of investigations, or even whether they could be used in libel suits.

To raise these issues with ProfNet, call (800) PROFNET, or send e-mail to [profnet@vyne.com](mailto:profnet@vyne.com)

## New IRE-L and NICAR-L addresses

IRE-L and NICAR-L have changed addresses. They are located on [lists.missouri.edu](mailto:lists.missouri.edu), a dedicated Unix system designed to service discussion groups run out of the University of Missouri. All posts to the lists should now be sent to: [ire-l@lists.missouri.edu](mailto:ire-l@lists.missouri.edu) or to [nicar-l@lists.missouri.edu](mailto:nicar-l@lists.missouri.edu)

All commands for subscription changes should be sent to: [listproc@lists.missouri.edu](mailto:listproc@lists.missouri.edu)

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