

# Uplink

March 1996

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

## Broadcast news

### Uplink update

Broadcast journalists may have been slow to adopt computer-assisted reporting, but these days, they are tuning in and turning on to CAR.

In this issue of Uplink, veteran print and television journalist Mike Wendland of WDIV-TV in Detroit tells us how more and more broadcasters are revving up their CAR skills. His story and our other features reveal how television and radio reporters are using on-line resources, database managers and spreadsheets to turn pretty sights and sounds into journalistic masterpieces.

Nora Paul of the Poynter Institute provides the addresses for some hot broadcast web sites — for example, where to find a national archive of network television news transcripts. And if you are new to computer-assisted reporting, check out CAR trips, articles by recent Bootcamp graduates about some of their first ventures.

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## Computer-assisted reporting turns on more TV journalists

### On the air raves

By Mike Wendland  
WDIV-TV Detroit

NICAR trainer Jennifer LaFleur just might have the defining anecdote about the problem of implementing computer-assisted reporting in broadcast newsrooms. It involves a telephone call she received a couple years ago from a West Coast television station.

"The news director said he had heard about this 'computer reporting thing' and thought it would be pretty 'promotable,'" said LaFleur, the database editor of the *San Jose Mercury News*. He wanted LaFleur to come and train his whole news staff. But the news director didn't want the full "bootcamp" of six days. He didn't want a two-day seminar. He wanted her to do it all in one day. And he had a condition.

"He expected me to come out there, teach his staff everything they needed to know to be CAR reporters in about five or six hours, and he expected them all to have found a major story that would air that very night," LaFleur said, shaking her head. She told him, sorry, that would be tough to do. He never called back.

LaFleur's story of the impatient and unrealistic news director has been all too typical. Although broadcasters are rushing like never before to get on the CAR bandwagon, electronic journalists still lag far behind their print counterparts in using these new skills.

News managers are cautious by nature, skeptical by experience and stingy out of necessity. They are so overwhelmed with the day-to-day responsibilities of producing two to three hours

of news that anything that isn't immediate, isn't practical. Besides, they've seen newspaper CAR projects and the rows of statistics, graphs and charts. Putting that kind of stuff on the air flies in the face of everything the consultants say about the need to make TV stories punchy and compelling.

Then there's their concern over train-

Continued on page two

## A look at old, decaying dams

### Frankly, my dear

By Stan Dorsey  
NICAR staff

Everyone hates a leaky faucet. And we all know the hassles involved with repairing a flooded basement. But have you ever wondered what would happen if a dam holding back thousands of tons of water decided to break — right into your own back yard?

A Dateline NBC report revealed this threat does exist for thousands of unsuspecting residents across the country.

In need of story ideas, Dateline producer Chris Scholl acted on a hunch that the nation's dams are old and decaying. A quick Nexis search found Congressional testimony by Brad Iarossi, a legislative

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## **Uplink**

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*From page one:*

# Broadcasters turned on

ing and time. Managers worry that the learning curve is so steep that it'll be long weeks before CAR stories start showing up on air.

Fortunately, thanks to the growing success of CAR projects at stations across the country, the managerial resistance is slowly giving way. For just as newspapers and broadcasters tell their regular stories in very different ways, using different techniques, so it is with CAR stories — which are not boring, don't require long away-from-work training and can quickly start showing up on the air.

## **Revving up CAR**

I just finished a five-part investigative series and a half-hour documentary on widespread abuse, neglect and fraud in the nursing-home industry that never would have been possible without having CAR skills. The only thing near to a graph or chart was a short Chyron roll of the 20 nursing homes we identified with the highest number of health and safety violations — a list that thousands of viewers downloaded from our World Wide Web page and even more wrote in and requested by mail.

The series and documentary had hidden video, powerful interviews with nursing home patients, relatives, past and present workers, and confrontations with balky state officials. It was a consultant's dream. It never would have happened without CAR because it would have taken two to three times longer to research and report.

CAR broadcast stories usually take less, rather than more, time to produce because CAR techniques are efficient and add depth to broadcast reporting and researching that most journalists simply are too busy to achieve.

Take the case of Mark Sauter, an investigative reporter with the nationally-syndicated news magazine "The American Journal." Last June, Sauter attended some CAR workshops at the annual IRE national conference in Miami. On his return to New York, he immediately started using CAR and helping teach his co-workers.

In just a few weeks, Sauter and his unit produced a blockbuster report that detailed how airlines routinely return planes to service after they've sustained serious damage, some-

times in fatal disasters. Sauter's team found 90 passenger airliners the National Transportation Safety Board said suffered "substantial" damage in accidents since 1985, 52 of which were put back in service.

FAA computer data, on-line research, and contacts, victims and experts found through the 'net led the team to the people they needed to interview and to video of some of the "rehabbed" passenger jets landing and taking off.

"CAR gave us a significant advantage. It made this story possible," Sauter said.

Not all stories have to be "big." Wes Williams, at KPNX-TV in Phoenix, found, wrote and edited a CAR story in 30 minutes.

Last fall, he spotted a routine Associated Press roundup about state-by-state home sales from the National Association of Realtors. The wire piece simply recounted the raw numbers on how many homes were sold in each state for a three-month period. After accessing Bureau of the Census data, using a spreadsheet to compare the AP stats and his state's population figures, Williams found that Arizona had the highest number of home sales per capita in the nation. Fleshed out with interviews with Realtors and homebuyers, he literally plucked a story out of cyberspace.

## **'Exotic condoms'**

In Raleigh, N.C., reporter Dave Boliek, obtained a database of state government contracts and expenditures.

Most of it was very boring. But as he scrolled down the alphabetized listings, he noted something for "birth control devices." Under that, he found "condoms."

"I came across tens of thousands of dollars being spent for hundreds of thousands of condoms," he said. "I found contracts for colored condoms, ribbed condoms, rainbow-colored, ultra-sensitive condoms. Even a contract for mint-flavored condoms."

Total amount of state money spent for 2 million condoms given out by public health departments in North Carolina: \$150,000. It was a story made for TV, and the controversy over the "exotic condoms" continued for weeks.

In Minneapolis, Alan Cox of WCCO is one of maybe a half-dozen local TV reporters who spend most of their time as CAR specialists. Cox has

**Continued on page three**

Check out recent broadcast projects

## Need inspiration?

By Mary Flegas

Missouri School of Journalism

In "Dreams Destroyed," a November 1995 story by KSTP-TV in St. Paul, Minn., reporter Joel Grover exposed how state-licensed remodelers swindled thousands of Minnesotans by tearing apart their homes during harsh winters and then threatening to leave if they weren't paid more than promised.

This is among broadcast projects to air using CAR techniques. The following is a sampling of some of the most recent stories.

The KSPT-TV investigative team, for instance, also found unlicensed contractors working illegally and ripping off homeowners.

Minnesota law calls for punishing unlicensed contractors with 90 days in jail and with a \$700 fine. The investigative team looked at whether this law was effective — and found that it was seldom enforced. In only three of 63 cases in three years did the state push for criminal penalties. Instead, most received letters requesting them to stop their illegal contracting businesses.

The data: The state of Minnesota's Depart-

ment of Commerce maintains two large relational databases that are used to regulate a number of industries, including home remodeling. Unit 5 received the data in askii comma-delimited files, which were loaded into FoxPro and Excel. The investigative team also reviewed lawsuits from federal and district courts, state and city licensing and enforcement records, complaints filed with the state and city agencies, secretary of state filings and Dun and Bradstreet business reports. The team retrieved some of these documents through Compuserv, CDB Infotek and Westlaw on-line services.

• In "Big Burn," a May 1995 story by KSTP-TV in St. Paul, Minn., reporter Jay Kolls looked at whether the firefighters union was abusing its sick leave policy.

Union officers were drinking at bars when they were supposed to be either working or sick. One particular union officer for the firefighters association, Gerald Brown, was targeted for his wrongdoings. The analysis indicated that Brown was out of the office 78 percent of the time at the

Continued on page eight

Get computer training:

• **NICAR Bootcamps,**  
week-long intensive  
training seminars,  
May 19-24,

Columbia, Mo.

• **NICAR/Medill**  
Broadcast Seminar,  
March 23-24, Medill  
School of Journalism,  
Evanston, Ill.

• **North Carolina**  
Advanced Computer-  
Assisted Reporting  
Seminar, May 5-10,  
Chapel Hill, N.C.

• **National IRE**  
Conference,  
June 13-16,

Convention Center,  
Providence, R.I.

These dates are open  
to all journalists. For  
more information, call

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(573) 882-0684, or

send e-mail to [nicar@](mailto:nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu)  
[muccmail.missouri.edu](mailto:muccmail.missouri.edu).

From page two:

## CAR wins on-air raves

used his computers to track and map political spending, crime trends, and to expose a controversial government program that allows out-of-state criminals to be paroled to Minneapolis.

Cox said the training is not that hard. Before his CAR assignment, the only thing he had ever done on a computer was write a wedding invitation on a rented machine at an office supply shop.

"You can get the basic skills in a couple of days of hands-on training," he said. "After that, start using it. You just get better."

There are other encouraging signs about CAR taking root in broadcast journalism. At the Car Rock '95 computer-assisted reporting conference in Cleveland last fall, well over 50 broadcast journalists showed up. The year before, only a handful attended.

Management is also changing.

I spoke about CAR to news directors at the RTNDA convention in New Orleans last year. Organizers told me to expect 50, maybe 75.

More than 300 showed up, overfilling the room, lining up against the walls, spilling out into the hallways.

So, the broadcasting boom in CAR has finally begun. And it's probably a good bet that the unreasonable West Coast news director who called LaFleur either has been or soon will be replaced ... after getting beaten by CAR-trained competitors.

Mike Wendland is a veteran print and television journalist who heads the I-Team at WDIV-TV in Detroit.

He has just written a book, "The Electronic Journalist's Guide to the Internet," published by the Radio and Television News Director's Foundation. Wendland will be one of the instructors at the March NICAR broadcast seminar in Evanston, Ill.

You can reach him at (313)222-0532, or send e-mail to [mikew@wdiv.com](mailto:mikew@wdiv.com)

# Dateline finds faulty dams

From page one:

## Facts and findings

### from "National Inventory of Dams"

- Almost half of the people killed in the 1994 Georgia floods lived downstream from failed dams or dams that failed to operate properly.
- Nearly 20 percent of the nation's dams are over 50 years old.
- More than 2,000 of the country's dams have gone more than five years without inspection.
- One-third of the nation's most dangerous dams have no emergency action plan in place.
- Thirty-two percent of the dams in the inventory have a high or significant hazard potential.
- Only 35 percent of all dams rated as high-hazard have emergency action plans.
- Ninety-nine percent of the dams in the inventory are owned by municipal or private owners.

affairs representative from the Association of State Dam Safety Officials. Iarossi lamented not only the condition of many dams but also the lack of funding and immense workload many state inspectors face.

Scholl knew he was onto something and asked Dateline reporter David Hinchman to look deeper into the numbers. Hinchman's findings formed the foundation of a June 27, 1995, piece titled "Swept Away."

## Looking deeper

Hinchman knew he had to find the data to support his producer's suspicions and to make the story hit home with viewers. His first move was to contact the Federal Emergency Management Agency and obtain its free National Inventory of Dams CD-ROM database.

With information on more than 75,000 dams, the database compiled by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers contains various facts about the location, stability and inspection history of dams. Hinchman, focused on six fields to get the hard-hitting facts he needed.

- Dam age: Hinchman looked in the "Year Completed" field and focused specifically on dams that were more than 50 years old, assuming that these dams were more likely than newer dams to be in poor shape. He was forced to rely on inferences of this sort because the database contains no field that specifically identifies the quality or condition of a dam. Believe it or not, there are more than 20 active dams erected as long ago as the 18th century.

- Dam location: One major concern of Hinchman and Scholl's was how many dams pose a direct threat to human life simply by their proximity to communities. The "Distance Nearest City" and "Nearest City" fields helped them determine this by indicating, in miles, how close the nearest city is to a dam.

- Hazard rating: Another field that helps determine whether human life may be in jeopardy is the "Downstream Hazard" field. It rates exactly how dangerous a dam is to those living near it if the dam fails. Dams are coded H (high), S (significant) or L (low) based on the potential threat they pose.

Hinchman said this field is much like the "Sufficiency Rating" field found in the National Bridge Inventory database.

- Emergency action plan: This was one of

the most telling fields for Hinchman when it came to determining the culpability of local dam officials. While some smaller, more remote dams are not required to have an emergency plan, more than 80 percent of the dams rated as high hazard had no plan in place.

- Inspection date: A final clue in helping to identify dam neglect and workload of state dam officials was the "Last Inspection Date" field.

## Hitting the Road

Inspecting the database and finding specific information made the Dateline team's job of "cruising around the country looking for dams with problems or that were literally crumbling" much easier, Hinchman said.

It also allowed the team to focus on making some human connections for the story. Hinchman emphatically noted that when doing broadcast CAR stories this step is crucial.

"You have to have a human face with the story," he said. "Strictly survey stories tend not to work well for broadcast. In print, for example, you could go to the courtroom and get quotes from court records. In broadcast, you must find the person then fly or drive to photograph them."

## Use local resources

Of particular help to Hinchman in finding the sources for the story were the engineers employed by the Association of State Dam Safety Officials. Not only were they extremely helpful in locating victims for Dateline to interview, but in many cases, they were "angry because they didn't have enough money to go inspect all the dams they needed to," Hinchman said.

And, as Hinchman and Dateline found out, such grudges can lead to good information.

All told, the project took about four months to complete and produced some impressive results. Some of the most shocking, however, were completely unexpected. In the weeks following the story, several major dams failed, including one at the Folsom Lake Dam above Sacramento, Calif.

The Association of State Dam Safety Officials decided to use the piece to lobby Congress for increased federal funding of dam inspection programs nationwide. The association presented Dateline with a public awareness award for the investigation.

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Making numbers work on air

# Radio tunes into CAR

By Glaston Ford  
NICAR staff

Computer-driven stories and the numbers they produce challenge radio reporters.

"You can't just box or graph a bunch of numbers," said Andrew Caffrey, managing editor at WBUR radio in Boston. "You have to translate it into English as if you were telling a story."

National Public Radio's Peter Overby agreed. He said it is hard to work numbers into a radio piece. To make matters worse, there usually is not time for in-depth stories.

Yet Caffrey and Overby have found CAR to be a valuable skill for radio reporters.

"I mostly use it for quick and dirty type of stuff, like the percent of campaign contributions that came from PACs," said Overby, who is on NPR's money, power and influence beat.

When Phil Gramm announced his candidacy for president, Overby looked at who had supported Gramm over the years.

He gathered information on the senator's fund raising between 1989 and 1995 and organized it in a spreadsheet. Only the grand total, \$133.9 million was used on the radio.

"What I usually do," Overby said, "is analyze the numbers and talk about the trends. Most of what I do is working with Excel on my spreadsheets."

In other instances, he used spreadsheets to:

- Track the big swing in PAC money from House Democrats to House Republicans in early 1995.

- Tally the fund raising by the two parties and by Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich after he and President Clinton agreed to establish a blue ribbon commission on campaign finance reform.

- Do a deadline count of donations to Senator Bob Packwood's campaign and legal defense fund by one PAC.

## Story anchors

Caffrey, who uses spreadsheets more than database managers, said CAR helps him track and look at numbers. "I use spreadsheets like a large calculator," he said.

When he was a reporter at WBUR, Caffrey did several CAR projects. He used spreadsheets to look at the 351 towns in Massachusetts. Caffrey said it is hard to compare towns, but

with a spreadsheet, it was easy to analyze tax bases and water rates. His station has also analyzed lottery sales and revenue.

"Good computer work gives you an anchor for your story," Caffrey said. "It finds things you wouldn't ordinarily see. It sharpened my critical thinking."

He said CAR allowed him to go after stories he couldn't go after before. He repeatedly asked himself, "What more could I do with these numbers?"

It doesn't have to be difficult or time-consuming.

## Making connections

While looking at lobbyist's contributions to state representatives, Caffrey noticed that one lobbyist, Tom Joyce, had made several large contributions. Caffrey sorted them by date and found they were all on June 7.

"What's so important about this day?" he asked himself.

Caffrey looked at the legislative activity on that day and a few days before and after.

What he found made for a strong lead into his story:

"Last June, on the eve of a landmark vote to reform the role of money in politics, a select group of Massachusetts lawmakers got a tantalizing last taste of what they were about to give up.

"On June 7, lobbyist Tom Joyce donated \$13,300 to 21 legislators.

"And the very next day, those lawmakers joined their colleagues in passing the nation's most restrictive campaign finance law," Caffrey wrote.

Joyce gave more money in one day than the new law allowed him to give in an entire year.

"It was an easy little thing," Caffrey said of the analysis. "It gave the story a nice pop."

Caffrey uses Excel 5.0 and FoxPro 2.6 on an 486 PC with a couple hundred meg hard drive. His PC is run off a server. He downloads some of his data from state government bulletin boards and has even resorted to typing it in himself in the past.

Overby runs Excel on an IBM PC with a 75 mhz Pentium processor. He gets much of his data from his FEC on-line account.

Glaston Ford can be reached at (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to [glaston@nicar.org](mailto:glaston@nicar.org)

The Center for Responsive Politics has released a new analysis of soft money contributions made to the national parties in 1995. The release and three-page report are available on disk or as a printout from the center by calling (202) 857-0044. Or, if you have questions, send e-mail to Research Director Josh Goldstein at [jgoldstein@crp.org](mailto:jgoldstein@crp.org).

# Excel paints picture for KPNX

**DBT ONLINE**  
(formerly known as  
**Database**  
**Technologies**) in  
Pompano Beach, Fla.,  
an on-line public  
records provider, just  
added vehicle  
information from 35  
states to its "Faces of  
the Nation" section.  
Add to this its  
"Drivers of the  
Nation" section, which  
allows you to search  
driver's license data.  
The service costs  
between \$1-\$1.50 per  
minute with no  
minimum or setup  
fees, includes free  
software, and hosts  
other state and  
national databases.  
To check out a free  
demo of DBT  
ONLINE, call Leigh  
McMorrow at (800)  
279-7710.

**By Wes Williams**

KPNX-TV/12 News, Arizona

*The federal government banned lead paint in 1978 because of the health threat it posed to children in particular, but KPNX wanted to show Phoenix residents where the threat is today. Wes Williams, who attended the NICAR Bootcamp in January, tells how the series, which was begun in January, unfolded.*

We tested playground equipment and city parks and schools across the area and found many contained chipping lead paint. Our I-team reporter, Lonni Leavitt, gave me a list from the state showing the number of homes built in each decade for every Census tract in our county. We wanted to be able to tell people whether they lived in an area full of mostly older homes (built before 1978), which therefore might contain lead paint.

## First problem

Our problem was that no one knows in which Census tract they live, so we decided to convert this to ZIP codes. I found a table on the Internet to convert them through one of the groups that works with the Census bureaus, but I found there was a problem with some Census tracts covering more than one ZIP code, and vice versa.

Fortunately, there proved to be an easier solution. I went to the Census Bureau home page (<http://www.Census.gov>) and found the Summary Tape File 3B search tool under the Data Access Tools/Lookup section. The STF3B classifies the 1990 Census data by ZIP code. I found a list of ZIP codes for our area at the U.S. Postal Service home page (<http://www.usps.gov>) and plugged them into the STF3B search tool.

The STF3B gives an extended list of categories. One of them happened to be "year dwelling built." I also had it give me the total number of homes for each ZIP code. I ended up with a text file of the total numbers of homes built in each decade by ZIP code.

It was easy to save this, parse it into Excel, and start crunching numbers. I figured out

which ZIP codes had the highest percentage of older homes, and we did a story on where those "danger zones" are (areas where at least 80 percent of the homes in each ZIP code were built before 1990).

Of course, so far, this sounds like a newspaper story, not one for broadcast. But we checked out homes and schools in those areas, found higher lead in both, and used the "danger zones" for a graphic in the story. We then included the full table with other lead paint information in a brochure we printed for our viewers.

We were surprised by some of the results. We expected the downtown areas to show up at the top of our list, but we didn't think about Sun City, where almost all of the homes were built back when lead paint was in use, and the two local Air Force bases, one of which has been turned over for civilian use. We included since people still work in those same buildings.

## Troubleshooting

- I should have looked for another source of the data by ZIP code first rather than trying to convert it from the Census tract list the state gave us.

- Because the Census data worked by decades, I could only determine how many homes were built before 1980, not before 1978, when lead paint was banned.

- Three of our current ZIP codes did not appear in the Census data because they didn't exist in 1990. They're in newly-developed areas, but we had to catch that they were missing to put them on our list. We listed them as 0 percent.

- Some ZIP codes I got from the Postal Service home page belonged to just mail boxes, so they did not show up in the Census data. We didn't include those in any of our work.

- It wasn't really a problem, but I didn't start my "lab notebook" detailing every step of work until my next project. I realize now just how much that might help me in the future. Take the time to jot a quick note. It will save you a lot of time later. It's already saved me a couple of times in the past month.

Wes Williams can be reached at (602) 261-6152, or send e-mail [news@indirect.com](mailto:news@indirect.com)

# Search and seize our abstracts

**By Brant Houston**

NICAR managing director

Services at NICAR and IRE's web site continue to expand with the addition of new ways to search through our on-line resources while we also work to upgrade the design of the site and the information we offer.

You can now search through the IRE Resource Center (which contains abstracts of thousands of investigative stories) using a free relational database manager called Postgres95. By typing a few key words, you can find citations of articles on organized crime, environment, medical malpractice or just about any subject.

Once you identify the articles you want, call IRE at (573) 882-3364 to order the full-text or video of the articles. Charges are an inexpensive 10 cents a page and video dubs are \$10 per tape, plus postage and handling.

The address for the resource center is <http://www.ire.org/resource/morgue.html>

You also can now search abstracts of Uplink to find tips and resources on how to do computer-assisted reporting. Check it out at <http://www.nicar.org/uplink/abstracts.html>

You will soon be able to search our database library, too.

Meanwhile, we are helping other nonprofit journalism groups develop their pages at our site. Among them are the National Association for Black Journalists, the Asian American Journalists Association, and the Education Writers Association.

We also are publishing pages on our recent Campaign Coverage workshop in Washington, D.C., and on the June IRE-NICAR national conference in Providence, R.I.

You might also view one of our sites for international journalists that contains resources for U.S. and Russian journalists reporting on Russia. That address is <http://www.reporter.org/hillman/russian>

The hillman in the address refers to one of our more generous donors, Greg Hillman, who, with the Freedom Forum, has made this web site possible.

In the coming months, we will add pages on Mexican issues and resources as NICAR and IRE crank up the Mexico project, which is an effort to help Mexican journalists set up an organization similar to IRE.

If you have any suggestions, please contact our web master Wallace Winfrey at (573) 884-7321, or send e-mail to [wally@nicar.org](mailto:wally@nicar.org)

**"Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical**

**Guide" by Brant**

**Houston — specifically**

**written for the**

**beginner — is a**

**concise handbook**

**providing students**

**with an accessible**

**guide to the essentials**

**of computer-assisted**

**reporting.**

**The book provides**

**numerous practical**

**examples and step-by-**

**step procedures on**

**the basics of**

**computer-assisted**

**reporting. It is**

**accompanied by a**

**data diskette.**

**Houston is managing**

**director of the**

**National Institute for**

**Computer-Assisted**

**Reporting at the**

**University of Missouri.**

**The book is available**

**for \$24 from IRE and**

**St. Martin's Press Inc.,**

**New York.**

## Postgres95 lets multiple users in

**By Wallace Winfrey**

NICAR staff

A lot of exciting things have happened on NICAR's web site in the last few months. But probably the most exciting thing isn't a web page we've put up, although there have been plenty of those. The most exciting thing to hit our web site has been the addition of a free relational database manager called Postgres95 to serve as a backend SQL server.

What's the difference between Postgres95 and FoxPro or Access? While there are many similarities — such as the ability to import and export data, store datasets in tables and run SQL queries to ask questions of the data — there are also some big differences.

Access and FoxPro are geared more toward the PC database user, while Postgres95 is more for a multi-user environment such as the UNIX operating system. Relational Database Man-

agement Systems such as Postgres95 (or its commercial cousins Oracle, SyBase and Informix) allow several hundred (or even several thousand) users to work with and manipulate the same datasets at the same time.

This distinction has some real advantages over single-user systems such as FoxPro, particularly when it comes to interfacing databases to a WWW front-end. The multi-user functionality of an RDBMS is ideal for a busy web site, where several users may need to access the data at once.

If you'd like to see the power of Postgres95 at work on our web site, check out such things as the IRE Morgue Online, located at <http://www.ire.org/resource/morgue.html>.

We'll be back next month with more news about the latest developments on our web site.

Wallace Winfrey can be reached at (573) 884-7321, or send e-mail to [wally@nicar.org](mailto:wally@nicar.org)



# Inspirational projects

From page three:

For 10 cents a pages, the IRE Resource Center will provide full transcripts of broadcast stories and reprints of newspaper stories. The reference numbers for some of the reports summarized here are: "Dreams Destroyed," 12866; "Big Burn," 12871; "Cyberspace Casinos," 12537; Unsanitary restaurants, 12788; and Criminal teachers, 10672. A copy of each video is available for \$10 plus postage and handling. To order, call (573) 882-3364.

taxpayers' expense and had used all of his available sick leave.

KSTP also uncovered that a trust fund set up by a retired firefighter for a new firefighters' museum had been mismanaged, with \$20,000 of the fund being spent on other items. Brown was a trustee to the fund. Reconciling the matter cost the fund another \$18,000.

Also, donations for the Welfare Association for Firefighters were skimmed. The Charities Review Council said the group must donate 70 percent of its money, but it had only donated 34 percent.

As a result of the report, the attorney general's office and the mayor investigated. A building was found for the new museum.

The data: The investigative team looked at 16 months of the city's union records, focusing on sick leave, vacation time and union time. The team compiled personnel records and time sheets from several fire stations into Excel and checked it against Minneapolis payroll records. The payroll records had to be converted from the original COBOL to FoxPro.

## Other projects

- In "Cyberspace Casinos," a November 1995 story by WLS-TV News in Chicago, Ill., reporter Chuck Goudie looked into numerous gambling sites on the Internet and backtracked various Internet addresses to determine who was behind the gambling product.

The multimillion-dollar gambling providers said they were getting around U.S. laws by setting up shop on Caribbean Islands, but WLS uncovered evidence that the top gambling service was putting people on-line through equipment in the United States.

The data: The Internet was used to trace computer addresses, along with Lexis-Nexis. Cumulative reports from Attorney General's Offices in various states were examined to investigate the legality of such activities.

- In a February 1995 story by WJXT-TV in Jacksonville, Fla., reporter Paul Van Osdol revealed that nearly 400 Jacksonville area restaurants were considered unsanitary by state standards. Problems included roaches in kitchens and rats in storage rooms.

The investigative team also found that inspectors rarely fined restaurants for health and safety violations, even after repeated citations.

The data: WJXT obtained the restaurant inspection database for \$65 from the state of Florida.

- In a February 1994 story by WCCO-TV in Minneapolis, Minn., reporter Kevyn Burger studied milk and juice in Minnesota schools. The station tested more than 1,000 containers and found companies shorting schools on their contracts, in one case by as much as 12 percent. State inspectors went into schools and confirmed underfilled cartons.

As a result of the investigation, the dairies purchased new equipment, enforced stricter quality control and pledged to put the correct amount milk in the cartons. One company reimbursed the schools and donated 100,000 underfilled containers of juice to charity. State officials now say school beverages will be tested regularly.

The data: The investigative team used the test procedures outlined in the National Bureau of Standards Handbook 133 (Third Edition) and NIST Handbook 133 (Supplement 4). These are the standards for testing procedures in the world of weights and measures. Federal weights and measures officials helped write the standards. The team used computers to organize the data and track the milk and juice lots to determine patterns.

- In a March 1994 story by WJXT-TV in Jacksonville, Fla., reporter Paul Van Osdol looked at whether school teachers in the public school system at Duval County had criminal records. Of the system's 6,000 educators, nearly 200 had a record. In many of these cases, the charges were significant — there were teachers who had been involved in shootings, stabbings and theft. In many of the cases, the Duval County School System knowingly allowed the offenders to keep teaching. Among the offenders who were still teaching was a driver's education teacher who had several DUI convictions, an elementary teacher who had been judged criminally insane, and a counselor who had several convictions for indecent exposure. Some teachers had lied about their occupation when they were arrested.

The data: A search of records from the Duval County courthouse. The original plan was to build a database of these records to cross-check teachers' names with criminal records, but the city charged \$3,000 for its criminal database. The records were checked manually. The electronic records did not match occasionally with the paper records, so the reporter had to build a paper trail for every teacher with a criminal record.



# How to get a date

By Andrew Lehren  
NICAR Staff

This is for those whose lives have gotten to the point where they want to get a date out of a database.

A lot of databases include information that looks like a date, but instead is a character. Variations on this theme include separate columns for the month, day and year. Or single fields with 19940131. Or 103195. Or 9931231.

But database managers don't know these are dates unless we help them. Here is how to help FoxPro without writing contorted queries every time. Once this is done, reporters can run calculations using FoxPro's calendar brain.

## Make a date column

The first step is to create a new column in your table. Go to Database on the menu bar. Pick Setup.... Then Modify.... Insert a new column where you want it. Under Name, let's call it Newdate. And, under Type, choose Date. FoxPro automatically picks the width. Click OK. Then agree to make the changes permanent. Close out of the Setup box. Congratulations, you've created the target date column, filled with blank spaces and / / marks, waiting to be filled with things like 11/12/94 and 01/10/60.

## Fill the dates

Now, we will fill Newdate with what we want. For the sake of unoriginality, let's call the old column with the faux character dates Olddate. Get the command window, and get ready to write. The first step is REPLACE ALL NEWDATE WITH. This is pretty clear. We are getting ready to put stuff into Newdate.

The next phrase is CTOD( . This is FoxPro's function for changing characters to dates. The parenthesis is open at this point because there is more to come. We will close it at the end. For the sake of clarity, add a ; and go the next line, where we will stuff the CTOD( ) function.

This part depends on how the Olddate character dates appear. We are about to pull out the month, then the day, then the year. That's how dates appear among the slashes for Americans. This trips up European journalists who are used to the day/month/year syntax.

Let's say Olddate contains 9931023 and 9960914 and such. The month is in the middle, starting in the fourth spot, and filling two places.

For this, we will use the SUBSTR( ) function. To pluck them out, type this: SUBSTR(Olddate,4,2) Now, for the first slash, type + "/" + For the day, beginning in the sixth spot, we will use the same function: SUBSTR(Olddate, 6,2) Add another slash with + "/" + And finish with the year, which starts on the second space: SUBSTR(Olddate, 2, 2). To keep things clear, don't forget you can break the line at any time with a ;. Don't forget to close all this with a ).

Remember: The first digit indicates the starting position of the substring of numbers you want to pluck out, and the second digit indicates how many places you want to pluck out.

Put this all together and you get:

```
Replace all Olddate with ctod( ;
substr(Olddate, 4,2) + "/" + ;
substr(Olddate, 6,2) + "/" + ;
substr(Olddate, 2,2) ;
)
```

Hit enter, and FoxPro will do all the work.

There are variations. For the three separate month, day, year columns, you would supplant the middle three lines of this command with:

```
oldmonth + "/" + ;
oldday + "/" + ;
oldyear ;
```

If you face a year in the first two spaces, you could save a couple key strokes with the LEFT ( ) function, which knows to start pulling things from the left. You just have to tell it how far. For 071496, use this for the middle three lines:

```
left(Olddate,2) + "/" + ;
substr(Olddate, 4, 2) + "/" + ;
substr(Olddate, 6, 2) ;
```

You may also see another variation in your data travels, where you get the month and the year in separate columns, but not the day. You can still coax FoxPro to help with calendar calculations. Just punch in a fake date, like 01 or 15. As with so many data problems, there are several solutions. Just remember that, in this case, you really don't know the day. The middle three lines in this example are:

```
oldmonth + "/" + ;
"15" + "/" + ;
oldyear ;
```

Now, you're set to start getting dates out of FoxPro.

Andrew Lehren can be reached at (573) 882-0684, or send e-mail to [andy@nicar.org](mailto:andy@nicar.org)

Miss something?

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, which is useful for downloading a particular month. If you have any comments on how we can make these archives more useful, send e-mail to [wally@nicar.org](mailto:wally@nicar.org).

Growing collection of federal databases

## From the NICAR library

The FEC has made available free of charge campaign finance data via the Internet. Data posted by the FEC includes: information about candidates, parties and other committees; downloadable databases containing data about candidates, parties and other committees; and summary files for past election cycles. The 1995-1996 cycle data will be updated monthly henceforth and posted on-line the first of each month. The data can be accessed via the World Wide Web at <http://www.fec.gov> or via anonymous ftp (file transfer protocol) at <ftp.fec.gov>.

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

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

**NEW** • Coast Guard boating accidents, 1969-1994.

• Federal Election Commission contributions data, including donations by individuals and political action committees.

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

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

• Federal procurement data, 1992-1994, includes breakdowns by agency.

• Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms gun dealer records.

• National Bridge Inventory System data, includes inspection grades.

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

• 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.

• 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.

• 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 1994.

• 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.

• National Endowment for the Arts, grants, 1989-1993.

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).

## IRE seeks training director

Investigative Reporters and Editors is searching for a training director for the new Instituto Mexicano de Investigacion Periodistica, a not-for-profit educational organization for Mexican journalists funded with a three-year grant from the McCormick Tribune Foundation.

The training director will report to the Instituto Coordinator with the goal of assuming that top position within two years and will help

develop and carry out professional training programs for journalists. Applicants should be Mexican journalists who are fluent in English with an interest in investigative reporting and computer-assisted reporting. Send a letter, resume and references to IRE Executive Director Rosemary Armao, 138 Neff Hall Annex, University of Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, Mo., 65211. The deadline is May 1.

# E-TV: Stations on-line

By **Nora Paul**  
Poynter Institute

Television stations have been considered late-bloomers in the use of computers both for reporting and research, as well as in the area of delivering alternative news products. But they are catching up quickly in both areas.

When television stations first came to the 'net, it was primarily as a public relations tool. There was information about the news anchors and some of the programs.

Now, many television stations are developing rich and unique deposits of information, reports and graphics, which supplement their nightly newscasts. In increasing areas of the country, researchers interested in how local news organizations have covered certain stories can check not just the print organizations, but the broadcast offerings as well.

## Finding E-TV

The best site for locating both national and international television sites on the Internet is TV Net (<http://tvnet.com/TVnet.html>). There are links to U.S. and World TV Home Pages.

A national archive of network television news transcripts can be found at Vanderbilt University (<http://tvnews.vanderbilt.edu/>). Searchable abstracts and summaries of the daily network news programs.

## What TV offers on-line

- Scripts of news programs: Didn't catch the name of the doctor mentioned in the package on a new cancer treatment? Get the text from the TelePrompTers and find it:

WISC-TV NEWS, Madison, Wis.

<http://www.wisctv.com/news.htm>

News scripts from the 6 p.m. news program for the past week.

KLAS-TV, Las Vegas, Nev.

<http://www.infi.net/vegas/KLAS-TV/news.html>

Scripts from all the various daily newscasts for the past week and a very informative guide on how to read TV scripts.

- Investigative Packages: The text and, sometimes, frames from the video from large inves-

tigative stories are being posted on some E-TV sites.

WDIV-TV, Detroit, Mich.

<http://www.wdiv.com/special.html>

Investigative reporter Mike Wendland is providing the text of the stories he's investigated and the background data used in reporting the story. The explanations of how the data were found and analyzed are great lessons in computer-assisted reporting. Wendland has just completed a book on Internet research for broadcast journalists.

- Editorials:

KCBS-TV, Los Angeles, Calif.

<http://www.kcbs2.com/>

Weekly editorials are posted (with a box for sending comments attached at the end) and there is an archive of the editorials for the past eight months.

- Photos: Some sites are making interesting use of photos:

WHNT-TV, Huntsville, Ala.

<http://www.whnt19.com/weather/towercam.html>

Hourly photos of the weather in the hill country of Huntsville from the Tower Cam (and it will show radar system images in severe weather). There is also a nice link of other sites with camera shots available.

- Archives of news stories:

KPIX-TV, San Francisco, Calif.

<http://www.kpix.com:80/news-archives/>

News databases, accessible by sophisticated search engines, are new developments for most television stations. This one lets you search the text of news stories.

*This column is taken from "Computer Assisted Research: A guide to tapping on-line information," third edition. If you would like a copy of the guide, contact the Poynter Institute for Media Studies: 801 3rd St. S., St. Petersburg, Fla. 33701, or call (813) 821-9494. There is a paper version: \$5 for the pages, \$10 for the pages and a three ring binder, and there is hypertext version on disc for \$5 (indicate Mac or PC).*

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

Check out the following urls for newspapers that have made databases available to the public on a web site:  
<http://bors.nando.net/schoolstreets/lookupSchools9495.html>  
<http://data.pilotonline.com/>  
<http://www.phillynews.com/cgi-bin/njschools>  
If you know of others, send them via e-mail, to Russell Clemings at [clemings@CRIS.COM](mailto:clemings@CRIS.COM)

# Bits, Bytes and Barks

## CAR training lands investigative job

Paul Adrian has been hired as a full-time investigative reporter at WBNS-TV in Columbus, Ohio, a CBS affiliate. He starts April 1.

"I think my computer skills caught their attention," Adrian said.

The station is investing \$10,000 in computer equipment for the investigative team, Adrian said. He will be working with a full-time investigative producer on longer term projects.

Adrian, who has a bachelor's degree in journalism from the University of Texas at Austin, leaves WAVE-TV in Louisville, Ky., where he was a general assignment reporter for three years.

## Writers discussion group

Writer-L, a listserv tailored for the discussion of feature writing, explanatory journalism, and literary journalism, has found a new electronic home at nicar.org. Topics include writing techniques, markets, jobs, privacy law, criticisms of stories and media, and other related issues. The list is moderated by Jon Franklin, coordinator of the University of Oregon's creative nonfiction program.

Subscribers are required to submit short professional bios that are made available to the membership. The purpose of the bio is not to exclude anybody but to know who the subscribers are.

To subscribe, send the following information to jonfrank@nicar.org. Follow the format carefully, including the X's and skipping the lines between paragraphs. Limit the bio to five, 65-character lines. Your completed subscription message will look something like:

subscribe WRITER-L joeblow@pdq.com

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XXXReporter/free-lancer for 30 years. 4 books, most recent WHO AM I AND WHY DO I CARE? Credits in NYT mag, Vogue. Specialize in weird stuff. BA Syracuse; MA Podunk U.XXX

Franklin asks for a voluntary donation of \$5 for students and \$20 for others. Make checks payable to Jon Franklin and send to: P.O. Box 929, Philomath, Ore., 97370.

## Check out IRE conference on the Web

Planning is underway for the June 13-16 IRE/NICAR National Conference in Providence. Check out the *Providence Journal's* National Conference Homepage at: <http://www.projo.com/ire/>. You'll find dates, prices, hotel numbers, information on the shape of the program so far and fun things to do in New England.

## Keep up with NICAR on-line

Subscribe to our listserv and join in as reporters talk about how to do the job better. E-mail to [LISTSERV@MIZZOU1.MISSOURI.EDU](mailto:LISTSERV@MIZZOU1.MISSOURI.EDU). In the message, on the first line, write: subscribe NICAR-L your name. To join IRE on the Internet, the instructions are the same except, on first line, write: subscribe ire-l your name.

IRE/NICAR is also accessible through CompuServe's Journalism Forum. Go to the JForum, Section 19. Also look into the IRE/NICAR files in Library 19.

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