January/February 1999

Uplink

A newsletter of the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

CREATING CONTRIBUTION DATABASES

Charting campaign cash

By Cindy Eberting
CFIC

Building a database to track campaign contributions is nothing new to computer-assisted reporting. But the best way to do it is in question.

Campaign finance consultants are popping up and pitching their service to newsrooms to design and maintain such a database. They say, an in-house project wastes money and ties up reporter time with tedious work, such as coding contributors for occupation. Many newspapers, however, still opt to create their own database.

There are advantages to both methods. And both tactics have resulted in more in-depth election coverage. Here are tips from consultants and reporters about how to approach tracking your local political cash flow.

The biggest hurdle, says consultant Tony Raymond of Public Disclosure, Inc., can be convincing editors that the time, effort and money needed to build a good campaign finance database are worthwhile. The key is to point to stories other newspapers have produced with such databases and the state laws that changed once the stories ran.

"The cost of it can be a deterrent," Raymond says. "But the benefit of a campaign finance database is that it can be used for more than campaign finance stories. Say someone in the metro area gets stopped for DUI. It's a good place to throw his name at the database and see if he is a player in the community."

David Poole, a reporter-turned-consultant who helped build campaign finance databases for statewide newspaper consortiums in New York and Virginia, says both his projects have changed state campaign finance practices.

"In Virginia, the newspapers have completely helped change the equation," Poole says. "There are more and more candidates that are beginning to file electronically. These projects are a way for the newspapers to have a positive effect on some positive change."

Once editors are convinced, the careful work of planning the database begins. It's important to think ahead about every angle from which the databases will be analyzed.

"We try to suggest a database format," Raymond says. "We know that once the database happens, and people see it inside the newsroom, then the next thing they say is: 'I'd like to see this or that.' If you don't set it up right the first time, you have to do the whole thing again."

Last fall, *The Washington Post* hired Public

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BLACK-LUNG PERSISTENCE

Defied laws, diseased labor

By Gardiner Harris
The Courier-Journal

Nearly three decades after Congress passed laws intended to end the disease, black lung still kills nearly 1,500 coal miners each year. *The Courier-Journal* (Louisville, Ky.) decided to determine why. After more than a year of work, we printed in April a series concluding that the deaths result because coal operators, aided by miners themselves, routinely defy federal laws designed to control mine dust levels.

We broadly accused much of the coal industry of gross criminal negligence. We specifically accused one of eastern Kentucky's largest mining operations of routinely breaking mine safety laws.

We were able to make these accusations because we interviewed hundreds of miners and analyzed more than 7 million computer records. Industry rep-

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Inside Uplink

The January/February 1999 issue is a grab bag of CAR surprises, with stories on campaign finance, crime and transportation.

Cindy Eberting of CFIC details the benefits and challenges of constructing a database of campaign contributions. An explanation of the streamlined CFIC Web site is also inside on page 18.

Bob Warner of the *Philadelphia Daily News* explains his analysis of the price of air travel on the busiest U.S. routes. Andy Lehren of Dateline NBC revisits a safety story involving the illegal selling of vans to schools and lax efforts to enforce the law. A compilation of conference handouts on the transportation beat begins on page 12.

Gardiner Harris of *The Courier-Journal* discusses a story on black-lung disease that concluded coal mine operators systematically defied federal dust-level laws specifically passed to end the disease.

Carol Napolitano of the *Omaha World-Herald* outlines lessons from her CAR-intensive "Omaha Crime" series and Web project. Naomi Aoki of *The Virginian-Pilot* provides tips on mapping crime.

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From page one:

Dusty evidence

resentatives have fiercely denied our charges but have not explained why so many tests in the dustiest areas of mines have impossibly small amounts of dust in them – proof that the tests aren't being conducted properly. Nor have they explained why one-third of all underground mines annually flunk at least one dust test or why two-thirds of all mines are cited each year for improper dust controls. All of these conclusions came from the computer work.

The computer and on-the-ground reporting set up a dialogue. As we learned something in the field, we'd figure out new questions to ask the data. The data would in turn focus our field research.

I suppose we could have written something without all of the computer analysis, but I don't know what it would have amounted to. The computer and on-the-ground reporting set up a dialogue. As we learned something in the field, we'd figure out new questions to ask the data. The data would in turn focus our field research.

I did most of my analysis on a PC-compatible Quantex, a monster when I bought it four years ago. I'd trade it now for a nice winter coat. My database program was Paradox, which I learned by reading the manuals. When I'd get stuck, I'd call Borland's help line – a 900 number that initially caused some concern when it appeared on the bureau's phone bill.

Helpful delays

Eastern Kentucky's mines are almost entirely non-union and small operations. Figuring out how to get in touch with hundreds of miners was my first challenge. The state has at least two lists of miners; in May 1996 I asked for both. I received the first database in December, and several months passed before the second arrived. Since I couldn't start the project until receiving at least one of these crucial databases, the delay drove me nuts.

Authorities offered every excuse imaginable for their repeated delays. A special session of the Kentucky legislature was called in November in which the governor successfully pushed for legislation that dramatically reduced miners' black-lung benefits. I got the data only after the legislation passed.

In retrospect, the delay might have helped. Had we acquired the miner databases immediately, we probably would have tried to publish before the special legislative session – which would have meant having only a few months to churn out a far weaker story. Then again, we might have affected that legislation. Now we must wait until the 2000 session before legislators put our findings into bills.

Slow-moving shoe leather

My first idea was to send surveys to miners throughout Kentucky asking them about dust in the mines and the accuracy of federally mandated dust tests. A survey expert at *The Courier-Journal*, however, convinced me the idea was a bad one because of literacy and confidentiality worries, so we ditched it. (The bureau won't need any more letterhead until, oh, 2050.)

I started calling miners. I visited anyone who agreed to talk, though not for long. Appalachia has famously poor roads, and many mining areas are remote. After a couple of weeks, I had spoken to less than a dozen miners. Since I had planned to talk to hundreds but had initially only been given five months to finish, something had to give. I decided to visit miners only when their tales were extraordinary. I interviewed the rest by phone.

Even this took too long. First, miners are difficult to reach. Most work long and odd hours. Second, most declined to talk when I told them that I was doing a story on coal dust. I'd guess that I had to call 10 to 15 miners before I reached one willing to talk.

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From page two:

Miner malaise

FOIA water torture

The next set of data that I requested – simply out of curiosity – was dust-test records from the federal government. Somewhere along the line, I learned that a study of these records from the early 1980s had shown that many mines had suspiciously low results. I didn't expect much from these records – "Who would be stupid enough to send obviously fraudulent records to the federal government?" I thought – so I asked only for a few years' worth. This was a mistake that I repeated again and again.

Nor have (industry representatives) explained why one-third of all underground mines annually flunk at least one dust test or why two-thirds of all mines are cited each year for improper dust controls.

After playing around with the most recent data, I realized that the graph looked very odd. Instead of a natural bell curve, it looked like a ski jump – all of the readings were bunched near zero, the lowest reading being the most common. And the percentage of low readings had increased in recent years. I talked to experts who said the shape must be the result of fraud.

I asked for a few more years of data. The trend continued. So I asked for more years. Then I asked for databases that would tell me which mines were sending in which records. I had initially limited my requests because I didn't want to overwhelm regulators – or myself, actually. But my water-torture FOIA method became a real annoyance to regulators, caused long delays and led me to miss early deadlines.

My editor also pressed for information about the fines imposed by federal regulators for excessive dust levels. I asked for the general numbers from the agency press officers and FOIAed specific citations for the mines that we planned to name.

I had avoided asking for the citation databases because I had been told that they were monstrous and would be enormously expensive. We finally swallowed hard and asked for them anyway. Our in-house data gurus transferred the information from mainframe tape to PC. Deadlines loomed – if I'd asked for the databases sooner, we could have gotten a lot more out of them.

I had to split up these last, large databases so searches wouldn't take 15 minutes. I parsed many fields or transformed them to relate to other aspects of the data – all of which took several 900-line calls to the data massage parlor.

Unlocking databases

In great contrast to the state data, the federal data were relatively clean, but the structure had undergone several changes over the years. Figuring out and relating these structures took a lot of time, as did figuring out the data subsets we would use to answer specific questions. As the months passed, we grew increasingly conservative in our choice of numbers. Since we wanted to show that these very low readings must be the result of fraud, we excluded tests taken in all but the dustiest areas of mines.

With more than a dozen kinds of databases, keeping track of the keys – the information that deciphers each field in each database – became one of the biggest headaches.

Industry attacks

All of this work paid off, however, when the coal industry began to attack our series. The Kentucky Coal Association hired a consultant to analyze a few years of dust-test records and to find flaws in our methods. None of his criticisms hit the mark. In fact, his analysis – since he had been far less generous than we were in excluding records from all but the dustiest areas – made the industry look even worse than we had portrayed it. Industry representatives no longer refer to the consultant's work when criticizing our series.

Gardiner Harris can be reached by e-mail at gharris@mis.net

Look for Peter Eisler's article on the "Drinking Water's Hidden Dangers" series published in *USA Today* in the March 1999 issue of *Uplink*.

Also check out the October 1998 issue of *Uplink* for other evidence of computer-assisted reporting on the environmental beat, with stories by Ken Ward of the *Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette*, Penny Loeb of *U.S. News & World Report*, Mike Lee of the *Tri-City Herald*, Katie Schallert of the *Commercial-News* in Danville, Ill., Mary Manning and Steve Kanigher of the *Las Vegas Sun*, Tom Henry of *The (Toledo) Blade*, and Russell Clemings of *The Fresno Bee*.

Also visit www.ire.org/store/books/ier.html for information on Mary Landers' handbook, Investigative Environmental Reporting.

You can view Omaha Crime at http://www.omaha.com/OWH/CrimeReport/. Obtain a hard copy, free of charge, by writing to: Omaha Crime Report, Newsroom, Omaha World-Herald, World-Herald Square, Omaha, NE 68102, or call (402) 444-1000 and ask for newsroom reception.

Simplifying incidents

By Carol Napolitano
Omaha World-Herald

When "Omaha Crime" rolled off the presses in November, I thought to myself, "Is this all there is?"

The 12-page section about reported crime from 1990 to 1997 looked pretty simple. Good stories and photos, decent maps (despite our old presses), lots of information.

I realized that the simplicity itself was the great achievement of the project. We had produced a readable, balanced, fair and informative section about crime from nearly 13 million convoluted mainframe records.

To me, there was nothing extraordinary. We could not boast about doing complex statistical analyses or unearthing some government secret. There was no place where it could be seen plainly why this project took 17 months of my life. Then, I realized that the simplicity itself was the great achievement of the project. We had produced a readable, balanced, fair and informative section about crime from nearly 13 million convoluted mainframe records.

Many journalists can identify with the story of how "Omaha Crime" came into being. Most likely it isn't 13 million records you are after, but the number doesn't really matter. It's the process – the often confounding process of trying to obtain data from a reluctant government agency and, if you get it, the incredible amount of time it can take to clean that data and determine if it is reliable.

"Omaha Crime" is a poster child for computer-assisted reporting. During the life of the project, we used Excel, Access, Visual FoxPro, SPSS and ArcView. We also designed a poll to assess how safe residents felt in Omaha.

First steps

The journey began in January 1991 with written requests for electronic crime data from the police and sheriff. The newspaper, having limited CAR knowledge at that time, found itself unable to respond effectively to the government technobabble it got in response to those requests. So, the issue landed on the sidelines, arising only sporadically during the next five years.

In early 1996, with a more extensive understanding of CAR, we tried again. At our first negotiating session, we faced a roomful of lawyers and law enforcement officials who did not want the data in our hands.

Neither the police nor the sheriff had ever used the data they collected. They had an antiquated mainframe system that allowed for little more than counting incidents for the FBI's Uniform Crime Report. As one police crime analyst put it: "We come armed every month with a handful of pencils..."

The last thing government officials wanted was a newspaper analyzing what they should have been analyzing themselves. So, at our final negotiating session in August 1996, the police department demanded a "handling fee" of $1.00 per record in addition to other data costs.

They figured we'd go away. Instead, we sued.

Two months later, they agreed to give us the data – reported incidents, bookings, arrest warrants, criminal histories and full personal information on perpetrators and victims.

Reliability check

The first installment of data arrived in June 1997. That's when crime numbers first consumed my life. More data arrived throughout the year.

Here are some of the things we did to help make sure the data was as reliable as possible:

- We excluded from our study places that had their own security or police forces, such as universities.
- Incidents with "unfounded" status codes were removed.
- Violent incidents reported as having happened at police or sheriff offices, hospitals and extended-hour medical care centers, and

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Mapping crimes

By Naomi Aoki and Toni Whitt
The Virginian-Pilot

Like moths to a flame, people are drawn to news about crime. They want to know where, how and why it happened. But, most of all, they want to know if it could happen to them in their neighborhoods. There is no way to answer that question, but mapping crimes can help readers determine their risk.

Crime-rate maps are great for comparing the relative safety of different states, cities or neighborhoods. Maps plotting specific incidents are valuable for tracking crime in small towns, a burglary ring or a serial rapist operating in a certain area.

Crime maps fall into two categories: thematic maps showing crime rates or maps plotting specific incidents. Crime-rate maps are great for comparing the relative safety of different states, cities or neighborhoods. Maps plotting specific incidents are valuable for tracking crime in small towns, a burglary ring or a serial rapist operating in a certain area.

Regardless of how you decide to map crimes, the first step is to get the incident report data from police. You need to know where the crime happened. For a crime-rate map, the 'where' needs to be a census tract, planning district, neighborhood or any other area for which you have population data. To plot individual crimes, you need an exact address or, failing that, a block number and street name.

Depicting crime rates

At *The Virginian-Pilot*, we publish crime-rate maps showing the previous year's property and violent crime rates for four cities in our region. Depending on the city, the maps are broken down into census tracts, police zones or city planning districts.

Mapping the crime rates, rather than the individual incidents or number of crimes, allows readers to evaluate the safety of neighborhoods throughout the city. Readers like it! Prospective home owners often call asking for the maps; close to 15,000 people visit the online version each month.

Step-by-step

• Get police incident data in an electronic format, including the incident number (or other unique identifier), offense, date, time, address or block number, census tract or other area for which you have population data, and anything else you can get.

• Calculate crime rates for the census tract or designated areas, using a database manager like Access or FoxPro. (For a crime rate per 1,000 residents, divide the number of crimes in an area by the population and multiply that number by 1,000.)

• Create the necessary census tract or area files for your mapping program. Most programs come with census tract files, and most city planning departments can provide files for other district designations the cities use.

• Then, using the mapping program, map the crime rates you've calculated.

Plotting crimes

Plotting individual crimes can be a great tool for spotting patterns in crimes, but it is not a fair way of comparing crimes in different areas of the city. Areas that are densely populated and heavily trafficked are going to have more crimes.

But if you notice a rash of rapes occurring in one geographical area, mapping will help you see any patterns. For example, in Virginia Beach, the state's largest city and popular resort area, several women living near the ocean reported being raped by a man who had broken into their homes. They gave similar descriptions of the suspect.

Plotting those incidents on a map would have shown that the rapes all took place at the north end of the beach. That information alerted readers to be more cautious, to keep their windows and doors locked.

Maps plotting incidents can also be useful for readers in small towns with fewer crimes. In larger cities, the sheer number of crimes

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OTHER EXAMPLES OF WEB SITES DEVOTED TO CRIME STATISTICS AND MAPPING INCLUDE:

- THE CHARLOTTE OBSERVER AT *HTTP://WWW.CHARLOTTE.COM/CRIME*
- THE EVANSVILLE COURIER AT *HTTP://COURIER.EVANSVILLE.NET/CRIME*

FOR MORE ON MAPPING AND COMPUTER-ASSISTED REPORTING, SEE THE SEPTEMBER 1998 ISSUE OF *UPLINK*, WITH STORIES BY JENNIFER LAFLEUR OF THE *SAN JOSE MERCURY NEWS*, NEILL BOROWSKI OF *THE PHILADELPHIA INQUIRER*, JEFF PORTER OF THE *ARKANSAS DEMOCRAT-GAZETTE*, AND JAMES DERK OF THE *EVANSVILLE COURIER*.

THE WEB SITE FOR THE CAMPAIGN FINANCE INFORMATION CENTER (WWW.CAMPAIGNFINANCE.ORG) IS A VALUABLE RESOURCE FOR ANYONE INVESTIGATING STATE-LEVEL CAMPAIGN FINANCES. (SEE PAGES 18-19 FOR AN EXTENSIVE EXPLANATION.) THE SITE INCLUDES:

- DOWNLOADABLE DATABASES OF CONTRIBUTION DATA AND LINKS TO SEARCH ENGINES MAINTAINED BY NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS AND STATE BOARDS OF ELECTION
- STORIES FROM PRIOR ISSUES OF *TRACKER*
- STORIES EXPLORING CAMPAIGN FINANCE AT THE LOCAL, STATE AND FEDERAL LEVELS
- INFORMATION ON THE CFIC-L MAILING LIST
- TIPSHEETS ON COVERING CAMPAIGN FINANCE
- LINKS TO POTENTIAL SOURCES FOR CAMPAIGN FINANCE STORIES AND OTHER RELEVANT SITES

From page one:

Build-your-own tables

Disclosure, the company owned by Raymond and Kent Cooper, who both worked for the Federal Elections Commission and the Center for Responsive Politics. They built a database of contributions in Maryland races from 1994 to 1998.

Last summer, Tom Brown at *The Seattle Times* combined federal and state campaign contributions into one database to determine Washington's Top 50 political contributors. The project, which they did in-house, took about two months to complete.

"If you don't set it up right the first time, you have to do the whole thing again."
– Tony Raymond, Public Disclosure

In both cases, some of the data were already in electronic format, eliminating the time-consuming and often costly effort of data entry. Both databases also identified the occupations and employees of as many major donors as possible.

The most tedious tasks were standardizing contributor names and coding contributors for occupation and industry. (There is no effort by federal or state election commissions to address the problem of contributor names being listed several different ways, even though the money is coming from the same person.) In both projects, to complete the coding, both the reporter and the consultants were forced to call individual contributors to verify or determine their occupation.

Project proposals

When Raymond and Cooper first start talking with a newspaper about a project, they set up a division of labor from the beginning to define who will do what. Basic questions they initially want answered include:

- What level of donations do you want? Do you want donations to federal candidates as well as state legislators and county commissioners?
- Is the information available electronically? What's the average number of transactions for each level: federal, state or local?
- If the data are only available on paper, do you want to contract out with a data-entry firm to have it key-punched? Or does a state or local entity already key-punch the data into an in-house database, which you could request through the Freedom of Information Act?
- Do you want to code the contributions for occupation and employer by giving them an industry or sector classification?

Both of Poole's projects required data entry. Poole used Quality Data Systems, a nation-wide data entry firm. Reporters can also find numerous data entry services near state capitols where state agencies require their work.

When hiring a data entry firm, Poole suggests asking the firm's customers about the firm's accuracy rating. The contracts are usually based on a per-record basis. It's best to receive bids for the contract from two or three vendors, Poole says. Then ask a price for a specific number of records and an expected turnaround time.

When doing data entry, key in twice the contributor's name, donation amount and ZIP code (to help later with verification). Also add fields for the page number on which the contribution is listed and the schedule of the contribution form. These extra fields make it easier to spot poor data entry and to cross-verify summary contribution information. "I think it's overkill to fully verify (key in twice) every single field for cost and for time reasons," Poole says.

The newspaper needs to come up with clear rules for the data entry workers to follow, particularly when entering addresses. The database coordinator also needs to work closely with reporters who have covered campaign finance issues using paper records. In Poole's Virginia project, the summary contribution pages didn't have standardized date ranges. A query of the itemized data told the actual date range.

"On the summaries, it helps to know what they say and what they actually mean, which can often be two different things," Poole says.

Occupation coding

Occupation coding can be the most complicated, tedious and subjective process of build-

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From page six:

Coding questions

ing a database, but it's also the most enlightening.

"Some of the best stories that have been done are those where classification has been done," Raymond says. "You can see trends and patterns, such as how much gambling has influenced a particular area."

The *Post's* project tried to identify employer and occupation for every donor who gave $1,000 or more. To make the matches, they ran names against other databases, looked up names in newspaper archives, and phoned several people just to ask who they were and what they did for a living. Public Disclosure did most of the work, identifying 78 percent of major donors to the governor's race.

But it's important to point out the caveats of occupation coding to editors and readers. Raymond uses the example of General Electric, which also owns a television network, makes commercial and defense jet engines, and constructs refrigerator parts.

"So what do you code GE as?" Raymond asks. "Is it a defense contractor, a home appliance company or jet crafter?"

When dealing with large companies, reporters need to be aware of the large players involved. When Raymond's company works with newspapers to code contributions, many coding decisions are left to the newspaper and reporters themselves, who are more familiar with area industries.

In the Seattle series, the reporters considered a couple as one entity when both were significant donors. They also included corporate contributions of companies known to be controlled by one individual. Brown warns that reporters looking at contributions over a long period must beware of contributors who have died. Four of their original Top 50 had died during the seven years of contributions the newspaper considered.

Structuring the database

Raymond suggests having a master table that lists details on all contributors. This serves as a look-up table for all the names. Raymond builds databases using Microsoft Access. Each contributor name is given a unique identifier. Then each office or race – such as the gubernatorial or state legislative races – becomes its own separate table.

"You're going to get information in the gubernatorial race that will be different than the legislature," he says. "But you want to keep all that information… The most flexible thing you have going is that master table. It's really the key to it."

With this structure, every time a media outlet wants to add another level of campaign contributions, they don't have to change the database structure – they just add a related table for that office and add the contributor names to the master table.

The database structures for the New York and Virginia projects differ. In the Virginia database, every contributor and candidate has a unique identifying number in a relational database with 10 tables that relate to the main contributions table. They also code contributors for occupations.

In New York, for competitive reasons within the consortium, the database only assigns a unique number to candidates. Each newspaper then decides whether they want to standardize names or code for occupation.

"The papers there have a much higher level of distrust," Poole says. "They were all happy to have the base data, and each of them just wanted to take it from there."

Verifying the data

Raymond reminds reporters that the database is only as good as the data you obtain. The reporter has to be able to verify the database information.

"The data you're going to get needs to be scrubbed up so it's garbage in and garbage out," Raymond says.

In Seattle, reporters ran an explanatory note with the tables pointing out potential problems with the data. The note mentioned data-entry error by public agencies and that paper records were examined selectively. The note also stated that the contribution totals reported were mostly like the minimum anyone actually gave.

Making the data available

After the database is built, it's important to get the information to key people in the newsroom and make sure they understand how to use it; otherwise you render the system worthless.

Raymond's company sets up the database on an Intranet in which reporters use their Web browser to query the database and sort the data

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Contact the IRE Resource Center at (573) 882-3364 or visit *www.ire.org/resourcecenter* for information on other handouts and tipsheets concerning campaign finance. Also search for tipsheets on the updated CFIC Web site at *www.campaignfinance.org/stories.html*.

Other handouts include:

- **"Vetting Donors" by Phil Kuntz of *The Wall Street Journal* (#710) – Tips and sources for figuring out who donors are (and whether you should care) when all you have is a name and possibly an address**
- **"Covering State and Local Campaign Finance" by David Poole (#795)**
- **"Tips for Creating Campaign Databases from Paper Records" by Diane Renzulli of the Center for Public Integrity (#813)**

Let the buyer know fares

By Bob Warner
Philadelphia Daily News

How do airline fares from your city stack up against airfares from other cities? In Philadelphia, a hub for US Airways, we've always had the sense that our fares were on the high side. Planning a trip to the West Coast or overseas, you can usually save serious money by traveling up to Newark, N.J., or down to Baltimore. We've long been irked that it costs more to fly from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, another US Airways hub, than to catch a flight all the way to Florida.

We've long been irked that it costs more to fly from Philadelphia to Pittsburgh, another US Airways hub, than to catch a flight all the way to Florida.

But how do you document the cost of air travel from Philadelphia or compare it to other cities? We never figured out a way until we noticed a brief item in *The New York Times* travel section, mentioning a Web site on airline fares, set up by the U.S. Transportation Department at *http://ostpxweb.dot.gov/aviation/domfares/domfares.htm*

With just a few hours' work after downloading several files and working them into Access and Excel, we calculated average fares per mile on the busiest air routes from Philadelphia and compared them to fare levels (known in the airline industry as "yields") on the busiest routes from other cities.

In our opinion, the results were newsworthy: average fares from Philadelphia in the period we looked at (the first quarter of 1998) were 24.2 cents a mile – third highest among the nation's 30 busiest air destinations, just behind Minneapolis (a Northwest Airlines hub, 25.5 cents a mile) and Dallas (an American Airlines hub, 24.8 cents a mile).

Preserving competition

The Transportation Department has assembled this data as part of a federal effort to deal with anti-competitive practices in the airline industry. The original source of the data is the airlines themselves, which are required to submit voluminous data every quarter that list the origin, destination, ticket price and more on 10 percent of all tickets they sell. The data is known inside the department as the "10 percent O & D" (for origin and destination).

What's posted on the Web is not the original data but tables derived from it, covering more than 1,100 of the busiest domestic air routes. For us, the most valuable table was the first one, which described each of 1,179 routes with the following information: origin and destination cities; the mileage between those cities; the average number of passengers each day; the average fare; the carrier with the largest market share and its average fare and market share; and the carrier offering the lowest average fare and its market share.

Other tables describe average fares from each city, changes in fare levels between 1997 and 1998, and more detailed information on specific airlines and market shares on specific routes.

Wobbly tables

The data goes back to the beginning of 1997 and is updated quarterly. There are several pitfalls.

First, the tables available on the Web do not differentiate between multiple airports in a single metropolitan area. For flights beginning or ending in Chicago, for example, there's no way to separate fares from O'Hare and Midway. For New York City, the problem is more difficult: flights using Newark Airport, where several low-cost carriers operate, are lumped together with flights from JFK and LaGuardia. Reporters in New York City would have to go to the original O & D data to deal with this problem.

Second, the federal data relies on calculations of an "average" fare for each city-to-city route. As airlines are quick to point out, in the real-life airline industry there's no such thing as an "average" fare. On most major routes, the airlines start with a three-tiered rate structure: first-class, short-notice "business" fares and lower-cost "leisure" fares requiring ticket pur-

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DAVID SMALLEN, PROJECT MANAGER FOR AVIATION COMPETITION AND ACCESS ISSUES IN THE DOT'S PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE, WAS HELPFUL EXPLAINING VARIOUS ASPECTS OF THE DATA AND THE DEVELOPING POLITICAL DEBATE OVER AIRLINE COMPETITION. HIS PHONE NUMBER IS (202) 366-5568.

From page eight: # Adjusting averages

chases weeks in advance. But on top of that structure, each major airline has developed ways to modify its fare offerings around the clock – to deal with competitive pressures from other airlines and to confront the real-earnings specter of large blocks of empty, unsold seats.

US Airways told us that the federal study is seriously flawed because it fails to account for variances between business travel and leisure travel from different airports. We quoted the airline to this effect, but they didn't convince us to drop the story. In Philadelphia, we do have a relatively high proportion of business travel. But there is sufficient anecdotal evidence to suggest that this proportion is an effect – not a cause – of high local fares. Many leisure travelers, those paying for their own tickets, are traveling to other airports to save money, raising the business-to-leisure travel ratio further.

The federal data relies on calculations of an "average" fare for each city-to-city route. As airlines are quick to point out, in the real-life airline industry there's no such thing as an "average" fare.

Third, working with the data, you have to be careful to avoid "averaging averages." If you're dealing with 40 different routes involving your local airport, you can't just add up the 40 "average" fares, add up the 40 distances, and divide to get an average fare per mile. You have to make adjustments based on how many passengers used each route. Fortunately, the posted federal data include the number of passengers traveling each route, enabling reporters to simply multiply to find figures for total passenger miles and total fares. (We made this mistake, though it's easy to avoid, in our first pass at the data.)

Bob Warner can be reached by phone at (215) 854-5885 or by e-mail at bwarner@philly.infi.net

Other papers that have worked with the data include the Charlotte Observer, Cincinnati Enquirer, Dayton Daily News, Greensboro News & Record, Memphis Commercial Appeal, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Rochester Democrat and Chronicle, and The Washington Post.

ORIGIN	DESTINATION	NON-STOP DISTANCE	AVG. DAILY PASSENGERS	AVG. ONEWAY FARE	LARGEST CARRIER (MKT. SHARE)	LARGEST CARRIER FEE	LOWEST FARE CARRIER (MKT. SHARE)	LOWEST FARE CARRIER FEE
Los Angeles	New York	2469	6111	$357	American (33.34)	$437	Tower Air (10.49)	$155
Boston	New York	185	5971	$132	Delta (42.59)	$126	Delta (42.59)	$126
Chicago	New York	726	5850	$255	United (38.47)	$282	Continental (12.45)	$185
Dallas	Houston	236	5631	$73	Southwest (67.82)	$74	American (18.65)	$66
Miami	New York	1093	5076	$164	American (48.62)	$184	Tower Air (13.13)	$98
New York	Washington	214	5076	$136	Delta (46.24)	$125	Delta (46.24)	$125
New York	Orlando	945	4989	$141	Delta (45.02)	$142	US Airways (11.54)	$137
New York	West Palm Beach	1024	4860	$154	Continental (30.36	$163	TWA (19.88)	$128
Atlanta	New York	755	4842	$188	Delta (54.11)	$223	AirTran Airways (10.23	$118
Ft. Lauderdale	New York	1074	4577	$156	Delta (31.13)	$151	US Airways (11.94	$144

Dealing wheels

THE NBC STORY IS AVAILABLE IN THE IRE RESOURCE CENTER, OR AT DATELINE NBC'S WEB SITE: WWW.MSNBC.COM/DATELINE. JUST GO TO ARCHIVES AND VIEW THE PIECE TITLED "SCHOOL VANS: ARE THEY AS SAFE AS BUSES?"

By Andy Lehren
Dateline NBC

Producer Shachar Bar-On came into my office wanting to know whether we could use computerized records to show a federal agency was not enforcing school bus safety laws. We could, and it's a story that could be done by many local and regional news organizations around the country.

A little-known federal law forbids car dealers from selling vans to schools. Schools save money by buying vans, which cost less to operate than traditional, small-sized yellow school buses. But experts say vans are far less safe for transporting students – mainly because of inferior structural protection and interior padding. Manufacturers do include warning letters in these vans that clearly state "not a school bus."

The safety question is not hypothetical. In July 1994, a truck rammed into a school van in South Carolina, killing 6-year-old Jacob Strebler. Yet 18 months earlier, in an almost identical accident in the same part of town, a truck had slammed into a small-sized school bus – and none of the children was seriously hurt. Dateline found Strebler was one of at least a dozen children who died in vans they were never supposed to be in. According to experts, they most likely would have survived if they had been in school buses.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is supposed to check whether vans are being sold to schools. The law is a little unusual: it is illegal for dealers to sell the vans to schools but not illegal for schools to own them. Since the 1974 law took effect, NHTSA has taken 10 enforcement actions against dealers for selling vans to schools. NHTSA said it only has so much staff to handle all its duties.

But by using vehicle databases, Dateline showed how easily the agency could be checking on vans sold to schools for transporting students. We picked a state – Texas – and obtained its database for motor vehicles. We looked at vehicles owned by schools and then analyzed the data to find which schools owned vans for transporting students. We found hundreds. The point was not only to show that vans were being sold to schools but also to prove that it was not hard to enforce the law. It helped us question NHTSA about how it was not taking simple steps to prevent the deals from happening.

Record roadblocks

The school van safety story is one that many news organizations across the country could do for their own communities. Bar-On and Dateline correspondent Bob McKeown did terrific reporting. We encountered a few difficulties. For example, we examined hundreds of thousands of computerized accident reports in the U.S. Department of Transportation's Fatal Accident Reporting System. These records were not perfect. In a few instances, vans were incorrectly marked as being used by schools. More often, vans were not properly identified as being used by schools.

(The VIN) describes the vehicle, including any seating arrangement, and can be decoded... We separated vans for hauling maintenance equipment from those for transporting students.

To help determine which vans are used to transport children, we paid particular attention to vehicle identification numbers – an automobile's equivalent of a Social Security number. It is not a random set of numbers and letters. It describes the vehicle, including any seating arrangement, and can be decoded with easily obtainable reference books or databases. By doing this, we separated vans for hauling maintenance equipment from those for transporting students.

This is also an example of a story that may not be possible in certain states, depending on privacy laws and rules on electronic access to data. While many states provide access to vehicle ownership records, this is not true everywhere – another reminder that journalists need strong open-records laws to do their job.

Andy Lehren can be reached by e-mail at alehren@nbc.com

Neighborhood rap sheet

By Pete Basofin
The Sacramento Bee

The idea to examine crime patterns in Sacramento came from the city police Web site, where citizens can examine current neighborhood crime statistics. Initially, *Bee* reporter Nancy Weaver Teichert and I thought we would gather older data to support a story about neighborhood crime trends. We also wanted to rank neighborhoods in terms of crime patterns.

But it quickly became apparent that Sacramento neighborhoods could not be compared with any accuracy. Besides the great variation in size and population, the boundaries of the geographic areas employed in police crime reporting did not fit exactly with accepted neighborhood boundaries. While per capita comparisons might have worked, we did not have easy access to population figures for such segments of the city.

Fortunately, the reported crime data could be analyzed for a smaller, more uniform geographic parcel. The police subdistrict is an administrative unit less than a square mile in size. Although the population density does vary, we felt comparisons and sorting were valid for these 520 subdivisions. By ranking subdistricts, we could identify specific trouble spots in the city.

Terminology translation

Police provided the *Bee* with annual data (1991-1997) in seven files. To simplify the process of creating crime categories, we followed police practice in translating California penal code numbers into common terminology – homicide, kidnapping, auto theft, etc. For summary purposes, we then grouped these crime categories into broader crime types – property crime, violent crime and weapons/narcotics. We used the latter to rank police subdistricts and display historical data for each area.

Police estimated a 10 percent error in the reported crime statistics. Since the material originated from busy cops on the beat, errors did creep into the complex reporting form. Officers must make quick, complicated judgements about the exact nature of the crime and its assignment to a penal code number.

Close examination of the data revealed occasional inaccuracy in the identification of police subdistrict numbers. In general, it was important to discuss the accuracy of field information with the police. For example, we were told that the tagging of gang-related crimes should not be used because it was done so erratically.

Subdistrict statistics

The project published in the newspaper was inspired – but not dominated – by statistics. Reporters used the data to identify parts of the city that suffered from high crime or enjoyed low crime. Then they went into the community to speak with many sources, including police, crime victims, shopkeepers, homeowners, apartment residents, commuters, and neighborhood activists. These interviews breathed life into the series.

The series uncovered particular conditions fostering various types of crime. Neighborhood profiles identified specific problem spots, such as malls, bus stations, and convenience stories, which attract criminals. A commonly held belief about the relative high crime in one inner-city neighborhood was dispelled by the data presented.

Because of heavy emphasis on police subdistricts, the project featured large maps locating the regions of high property and violent crime. It was clear at the onset that we couldn't display locator maps and statistics for all 520 subdistricts. So we turned to the *Bee*'s Web site to create a permanent database with which readers can call up historical data on the area immediately surrounding their home or business.

The biggest challenge in displaying data on the Web was helping users find their police subdistricts. News artist Mitchell Brooks gave the *Bee*'s New Media department a highly detailed map showing the streets bordering each parcel. These were divided into twelve smaller maps, which the user navigates through a clever "zoom-in, zoom-out" feature. Once the subdistrict of interest is found, the user simply enters the four-digit code into a box to get total numbers of property, violent and weapons/narcotics crimes for the years 1991-97.

Pete Basofin can be reached by e-mail at pbasofin@sacbee.com.

UPCOMING BOOT CAMPS:

- ADVANCED STATISTICS WORKSHOP – MAY 10-13, 1999 CHAPEL HILL, NC – IRE AND NICAR AND THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA SCHOOL OF JOURNALISM WILL HOST AN ADVANCED SEMINAR ON USING STATISTICS IN COMPUTER-ASSISTED REPORTING. INSTRUCTORS WILL INCLUDE PHILIP MEYER AND SARAH COHEN. AN OPTIONAL SESSION ON THE BASICS OF THE STATISTICAL SOFTWARE SPSS WILL TAKE PLACE ON SUNDAY, MAY 9 (MOTHER'S DAY).
- EDITOR BOOT CAMP – MAY 13-15, 1999 COLUMBIA, MO
- BASIC BOOT CAMP – MAY 16-21, 1999 COLUMBIA, MO
- BASIC BOOT CAMP – JULY 18-23, 1999 COLUMBIA, MO
- BASIC BOOT CAMP – AUG. 8-13, 1999 COLUMBIA, MO

CALL (573) 882-2042 FOR MORE INFORMATION OR VISIT THE IRE WEB SITE AT *WWW.IRE.ORG/TRAINING*

Planes, trains...

The following excerpts from handouts concerning CAR on the transportation beat are all available in their entirety from the Resource Center. Request the number listed in parentheses. Call (573) 882-3364 for more information.

Crash course (#816)

By Justin Mayo
The Seattle Times

When things collide, one of the results is data. Generally, the destruction of property or human injury generates huge amounts of paperwork, which eventually ends up in a database. This grim reality is good news for CAR reporters because of the abundance of accidents – and therefore accident data. Additionally, transportation safety is an issue that will always be important to the audience and one that can clearly be enhanced through computer-assisted reporting.

A good strategy is to first request paper records and the record layout of the database. That way you can see what's collected at the scene of the accident and what information is available in the database.

Three things to keep in mind:

First, although many databases are constructed or disseminated at the federal level, remember that you can also tap local agencies – especially for automobile accidents.

Most of the time the state will be more current and complete. However, local agencies might be reluctant to give out the entire database without redacting some information. So be prepared to know what you really need to get out of the database and be ready to fight for it. A good strategy is to first request paper records and the record layout of the database. That way you can see what's collected at the scene of the accident and what information is available in the database. If you're going to write about individual accidents, always ask for the paper records.

Second, when trying to make comparisons, you'll need to normalize the data. Usually, raw numbers will not be enough. Normalizing data will depend on the nature of your story. For example, if you're looking at fatality rates for the elderly, you'll have to get statistics based on the number of miles driven by age of the driver. On the other hand, if you want to look at the type of vehicles involved in rollover accidents, the number of cars on the road by type would be necessary.

Third, beware of online data sources. Many of the federal accident databases are available online, particularly aviation data. These sites can be a great resource for deadline searches, but be warned that some are incomplete. It's best to get the entire dataset directly from the agency (or NICAR) if you plan to use a particular database on a regular basis.

NOTE: In the remainder of his handout, Mayo discusses available databases – organized under the topic headings of air, roads, rail and water – from agencies, the Web and/or NICAR.

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Must-have resource (#677)

By Heather Newman
Detroit Free Press

The Directory of Transportation Data Sources, published by the Bureau of Transportation Statistics (the Mecca of free transportation data), is the best collection of database descriptions anywhere. (And it's also free.) It includes a comprehensive listing of data collected by dozens of federal agencies and who to call for information. It also gives you that crucial what-is-this-darn-database-called edge when filing your FOIAs. Call BTS at (202) 366-DATA or order from the Web site at *http://www.bts.gov*.

Keep in mind that nearly everything collected federally comes from a local agency first – so updated and complete information might be just around the corner instead of in D.C. Cultivate your state police department for freeway accident data, your city police department for pedestrian hit-and-runs, your county transportation department for road

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TO SEARCH THE COLLECTION OF CONFERENCE HANDOUTS AVAILABLE FROM THE IRE RESOURCE CENTER, DIRECT YOUR WEB BROWSER TO *WWW.IRE.ORG/RESOURCECENTER/TIPSHEETS.HTML*

TO SEARCH THE LIBRARY OF MORE THAN 12,000 INVESTIGATIVE STORIES AVAILABLE, GO TO *WWW.IRE.ORG/RESOURCECENTER/STORYDB.HTML*

THE RESOURCE CENTER CAN BE REACHED AT (573) 882-3364 OR BY E-MAIL AT RESCNTR@IRE.ORG

ALSO INCLUDED ON THE RESOURCE CENTER'S WEB PAGES AT *WWW.IRE.ORG/RESOURCECENTER/* ARE LINKS TO RESOURCES FOR SPECIFIC BEATS AND INFORMATION ON BUYING AUDIO TAPES FROM CONFERENCE PANELS.

From page twelve: ◆◆◆

and automobiles

condition and traffic information, your state Department of Natural Resources for boating or snowmobile accidents.

Heather Newman can be reached by e-mail at newman@freepress.com

Colliding databases (#816)

By Elizabeth Marchak
The Plain Dealer

Aviation reporting is complicated and time-consuming. The computer makes it even more so. A few notes of caution: Don't wait until deadline. Learn what offices the FAA, the NTSB and the IG have in your area. If they hang up, don't give up. The aviation community has a low opinion of reporters. You have to convince them you are serious.

Keep in mind that nearly everything collected federally comes from a local agency first – so updated and complete information might be just around the corner instead of in D.C.

Develop sources you never quote. People you can double-check your findings with are more valuable than anybody who can give you a pithy quote on deadline. Secret sources are your reality check.

Have a plane crash plan in place in your newsroom. Know how your community plans to respond. Develop contacts at the NTSB, which investigates plane crashes (not the FAA). Learn the schedule for the release of reports and opening of dockets.

Know how to search for accidents and incident data. Know how to search for a whole fleet using the four-digit OP code, or operator code. (Computer data for one plane is rarely sufficient and is unfair to the operator.) Know ATA or airplane system codes. Know how to search for N-numbers and serial numbers. (A tail number or an N-number may change, but a serial number shouldn't.) And learn the lingo, but keep it out of your stories.

Learn to put repairs and problems in context. A rash of reports of lavatory and exit lights problems are far less serious than air returns for lack of radar. Remember, it's what isn't reported that is often the real problem.

Don't use data on deadline you've never seen before. There's a really good reason Web pages have disclaimers about completeness – they really don't have everything. Many news organizations have ignored these warnings and shoved data into the paper or on the air, making huge mistakes, missing important angles or ruining their credibility with potential sources in the process.

File FOIAs on every single aviation entity in your area. This is the best way to find out who has been inspected and when, who has been "violated" (FAA slang for who has been investigated for violating regulations), and what action the FAA took. File for every single significant event, too. There are FOIA officers out there who love a well-written request on something nobody else is paying attention to, so let 'er rip.

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Using aviation safety documents (#677)

By Byron Acohido
The Seattle Times

Know the landscape. Determining the probable cause of an aviation disaster is the responsibility of the NTSB, a small, quirky federal agency whose investigators pride themselves on objectivity and scientific certainty. Yet the NTSB openly solicits technical expertise from aircraft manufacturers, airlines, pilots and mechanics. You can bet each group possesses a strong self-protection bias.

The NTSB's crash-site "go-team" usually includes engineers from the aircraft and engine manufacturers, who invariably take the lead in identifying and retrieving wreckage material. The manufacturers then use their own labs and technicians to analyze and test suspect parts. Pilots, mechanics and airline representatives are assigned to check mainte-

Continued on page fourteen

OTHER HANDOUTS ON TRANSPORTATION TOPICS INCLUDE:

- "HELL ON WHEELS: A FEW IDEAS FOR COVERING TRAFFIC SAFETY ISSUES USING STATE AND LOCAL DATA AVAILABLE IN MOST JURISDICTIONS" BY BOB WARNER, PHILADELPHIA DAILY NEWS (#776)
- "COLLIDING DATABASES: COVERING DISASTERS AND ACCIDENTS," AN EXHAUSTIVE LISTING OF WEB SITES COMPILED BY DAVID MILLIRON, THE ATLANTA JOURNAL-CONSTITUTION (#816)
- "AVIATION SITES ONLINE" AND "HOW I INVESTIGATED THE STORY: VALUJET AND THE FAA" BY ELIZABETH MARCHAK, THE (CLEVELAND) PLAIN DEALER (#816)
- "BEYOND THE 'COLLISION COURSE'" BY RICK LINSK, ASBURY PARK PRESS (#776)

THE FOLLOWING TRANSPORTATION DATABASES ARE AVAILABLE FROM NICAR'S DATABASE LIBRARY. SEE WWW.IRE.ORG/DATALIBRARY OR CALL (573) 882-0684 FOR MORE DETAILED INFORMATION.

AIR

- FAA ENFORCEMENTS, 1967 - 1998
- FAA SERVICE DIFFICULTY REPORTS, 1974 - 1998
- FAA ACCIDENTS AND INCIDENTS, 1971 - 1998
- AIRMEN DIRECTORY AND AIRCRAFT REGISTRY
- NASA AIR SAFETY REPORTING SYSTEM, 1988 - 1997
- NTSB INVESTIGATIONS OF AIRCRAFT ACCIDENTS, 1985 - 1997

From page thirteen:

Collisions with CAR

nance records and research what role, if any, ground and flight crew missteps may have played in the accident.

Commercial jets crash, on average, less than two times for every 1 million flights. Assuming the overall accident rate remains low for the foreseeable future, air travel should continue to expand about 5 percent annually. That means the total number of crashes will continue to climb year to year. Factor in aging aircraft issues and increasing competition among airlines, and a disturbing trend isn't hard to predict. In fact, many experts think the trend toward messy air disasters occurring weekly is already well under way.

Find the "discretionary" funds, who controls them, and what they're used for. Get the records on how the money has been spent (ask if they're in a computer database) and then compare them to the department's priorities. It's a sure bet the two lists won't match up.

The present approach of dealing with accidents by permitting the potentially culpable parties to sift through wreckage, negotiate a probable cause and then methodically take steps to make sure it doesn't happen again is under strain. It gives manufacturers and airlines, who are driven by economic concerns, the benefit of the doubt; and it skews against preventative measures taken in a timely fashion. Too often a long trail of problem flights, dead-end investigations and incremental upgrades – precursors of a disaster in the making – is ignored until a crash or crashes occur. Meanwhile, the public is by and large left out of the loop.

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Transportation scams and bungling – some tips (#847)

By Bill Krueger

The News & Observer

Figure out who's getting access to the roads. Find the traffic engineers who are responsible for considering requests for curb cuts on major roads – requests from developers and business owners – ask them if their recommendations have ever been overturned or ignored.

Look for right-of-way scams. Most deals aren't worth spending your time on, but check with the Federal Highway Administration on any right-of-way settlements they refused to sign. Chances are, there's something funny about the deal if the Feds won't sign off. Ask to see the appraisals prepared for the department and compare those amounts to the amount actually paid. In fact, ask to see the entire project file.

Find the slush funds. Talk to veteran transportation officials, politicians, and advocacy groups to find the "discretionary" funds, who controls them, and what they're used for. Get the records on how the money has been spent (ask if they're in a computer database) and then compare them to the department's priorities. It's a sure bet the two lists won't match up.

Take the bite out of the watchdog. When you find the slush funds, see if a lot of money is going to members of legislative oversight committees or other legislators with power over the transportation department. Ask for any correspondence or records of phone calls from those legislators.

Are your roads being maintained? Most states have goals, or standards, for resurfacing their roads. Find out what those goals are; then find out how many miles the state is resurfacing each year; then do the math. Is your state meeting its own goals? If not, why not? Talk to the maintenance engineers out in the field – they can tell you where the problems are.

Could that accident have been prevented? State transportation agencies spend a lot of money analyzing intersections and other potential danger spots on roads. If there is a bad accident on a road near you, check with the state's traffic safety engineers to see if

Continued on page fifteen

From page fourteen: **Headlights on slush**

they've studied that intersection. If they already knew it was dangerous, why didn't they fix it? Had they spent the money on a project that was a lower priority but had more political muscle behind it? Again, ask to see the project file.

"If it's good for bizness..." Find out if your state has a fund for industrial access roads. Such roads often amount to little more then private driveways for companies – paid for by taxpayers. Check the files to find out who weighed in on the company's behalf and whether the department followed its own rules for paying for such roads.

The present approach of dealing with accidents by permitting the potentially culpable parties to sift through wreckage, negotiate a probable cause and then methodically take steps to make sure it doesn't happen again is under strain.

Bill Krueger can be reached by e-mail at bkrueger@nando.com

Hidden hazards (#618)

By Penny Loeb

U.S. News & World Report

TRAINS:

Nearly once every hour, somewhere in the country, a train falls of the track, collides with another train or has some other sort of mishap. Often the accident is miles from nowhere. Only occasionally does a fiery and fatal crash in a metropolitan area draw national attention.

Fortunately, there are lots of data to help reporters find out where accidents are occurring and which railroads have the worst records. The Federal Railroad Administration has downloadable data files for the past six years on its Web site. These cover accidents by every railroad, employee injuries, and accidents at railroad crossings. The site also has text and tables from the annual report on safety.

Caution: One accident can have multiple records – one for each railroad involved and one for the track owner. You must group by accident ID, date, time and the track owner when counting accidents. Double-check your results against the annual report.

A rail-crossing accident is the most frequent cause of deaths. You can easily find how many accidents occurred in your area in the federal data. Then check out the safety features of the crossings. Many crossings are without gates. Watch drivers when they cross; sometimes they will ignore warning signals just to save a couple of seconds.

Old and rickety track is the leading cause of train accidents. Find out which railroad has the most accidents caused by bad track and then figure out why. As railroads cut back workers, there just aren't enough to repair the broken track. Railroads, too, haul ore and other loads too heavy for some kinds of track.

To increase profits, railroads are sending out cars with serious defects. These include broken wheels, inoperative brakes, and bad shock-absorbing mechanisms. Ask for FRA inspections of the railroad you are covering. Talk to the workers who fix the trains.

SUBWAYS:

Want to know how many people were injured in your subway or metro? How many were robbed, and how that compares to big cities? Or how much it costs to run the system?

The answers can all be found in great detail in data on the Web site of the Federal Transit Administration. There are data on accidents, crime, and costs. The data are in Lotus spreadsheets and cover 1993-96. The data also contain the miles traveled for each system. You can establish a rate of accidents per mile traveled to equalize results between systems of different sizes.

Penny Loeb can be reached by e-mail at ploeb@usnews.com

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NICAR TRANSPORTATION DATABASES, CONTINUED:

RAIL

- RAILROAD ACCIDENTS, 1991 - 1996

ROADS

- TRUCK ACCIDENT DATABASE
- DOT FATAL ACCIDENTS, 1975 - 1997
- NHTSA VEHICLE RECALLS AND COMPLAINTS, 1966 - 1997

WATERWAYS

- BOATING ACCIDENTS, 1969 - 1996

UNITED STATES

- BOAT REGISTRATION

GENERAL

- HAZARDOUS MATERIALS, 1971 - 1997

From page fifteen:

Transportation sites

The following Web sites were mentioned in various handouts discussing CAR and the transportation beat.

Air

Airsafe Financial – *http://airsafe.com*

This site lists airline safety information for the airline passenger and contains various aircraft accident data.

Daily Airline Filings – *http://airlineinfo.com*

This site offers the full text of regulatory filings by airlines.

Federal Aviation Administration Office of System Safety – *http://nasdac.faa.gov*

The site will allow you to access aircraft accident data and a myriad of other databases, including the NTSB Aviation Accident/Incident Database, the Aviation Safety Reporting System, the Near Midair Collisions System (NMACS) Database, NTSB Safety Recommendations to the FAA with FAA Responses, the International Safety Recommendations Database, and the Aviation Safety Statistical Handbook.

Landings.com – *www.landings.com*

This privately maintained site has the blessing of the FAA and the private blessings of dozens of reporters. Among the databases you'll find sophisticated searches of FAA regulations, Canadian regulations, AIM, the Pilot Controller Glossary, Service Difficulty Reports, Airworthiness Alerts, NTSB Briefs, N-Numbers and the FAA Airmen knowledge test information.

Rail

Federal Railroad Administration – *www.fra.dot.gov*

The FRA site is your one-stop shop for railroad accident data. Who hit what and when and how, and sometimes even why. Not on its Web site, however, are the "PC Accident Prediction System" and rail crossing inventory databases. The "Accident Prediction System" is a searchable database that assigns an accident prediction to all public rail crossings nationwide. (The prediction system is available on CD-ROM.) The rail-crossing inventory is a database with specific information on all public rail grade crossings nationwide.

Road

Fatality Analysis Reporting System – *www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/ncsa/fars.html*

The FARS is a database that theoretically contains detailed information about every fatal accident on the nation's roads. Because it relies upon local police departments, FARS is actually not that complete, but it's the best national picture of what's killing us on the highways. Some fields are the result of interpretation by traffic analysts, so be careful making judgments.

Federal Highway Administration – *www.fhwa.dot.gov*

Insurance Institute for Highway Safety – *www.hwysafety.org*

A good source of studies on urban crashes, red-light cameras and insurance-related issues. Offers other links to road-related sites.

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration – *www.nhtsa.dot.gov*

Look for the Crashworthiness Data System for in-depth crash investigations. See the Crash Outcome Data Evaluation System, a relatively obscure NHTSA database that tracks the outcome of accidents, medical bills, etc. This information is usually hard to get because it's only collected by insurance companies, which are not public entities. Under the "CARS" link, see the downloadable collection of databases on consumer complaints, recalls, and Technical Service Bulletins (minor fix-it-for-free notices by car companies). The records detail whether injuries, deaths or property damage resulted from the problem that prompted the complaint.

Other

Bureau of Transportation Statistics – *www.bts.gov*

The granddaddy of all free transportation database collections. Get information on waterways, rail, roads, accidents, travel, you name it – and everything is free. See the National Personal Transportation Survey at *www.bts.gov/nida/npts* for measures of travel by American households. BTS is developing less esoteric measures of transportation and exploring new ways to visualize data. The Bureau is also undertaking a variety of training initiatives to improve understanding of both data products and analytical methods.

OTHER SITES TO CONSIDER:

DATELINE NBC'S "DANGEROUS ROADS" INTERACTIVE DATABASE – *WWW.MSNBC.COM/ONAIR/NBC/DATELINE/ROADS/DB.ASP*

HOW SAFE ARE THE ROADS YOU DRIVE EVERY DAY? ENTER YOUR ZIP CODE ON DATELINE'S WEB SITE TO FIND OUT. THE DATA COMES DIRECTLY FROM THE FARS DATABASE.

THE DOT WEB-SERVER QUICK LOCATOR – *WWW.DOT.GOV/HELP/WEBMAP.HTML*

A COMPLETE LISTING OF DOT SITES. A GOOD PLACE TO GO FISHING WHEN YOU'RE TROLLING FOR PARTICULAR INFORMATION.

GAO REPORTS – *WWW.GAO.GOV*

NOT A DATABASE, BUT IMPOSSIBLE TO OVERLOOK. THE GAO HAS DONE MORE STUDIES ON MORE TYPES OF TRANSPORTATION PROBLEMS THAN YOU CAN SHAKE A STICK AT.

From page four: # CAR poster child

jails and juvenile detention centers were removed. Non-violent incidents at police or sheriff facilities and jails and juvenile centers also were removed.

• Incidents reported at shopping malls were excluded from per capita calculations so they would not skew rates in surrounding neighborhoods.

• We mapped where the incident happened, not where it was reported. If you are going to group your locations into larger areas like census tracts or block groups, be careful when mapping intersections. Determine on which corner the incident happened. If that is not feasible, randomly assign intersection incidents to the converging geographic areas.

• If looking at incidents over a number of years, get population figures or estimates for as many years during that period as possible, then average them for your per capita rate. Using just one year may not be accurate if population is growing or declining substantially

• Because our data arrived in installments, the incident reports did not all end at the same time. We had homicides through July 9, 1997, drug offenses and robberies through July 22, arson cases through August 25, etc. So we weighted our crime rates for each offense.

Carol Napolitano can be reached by e-mail at carolnap@owh.com

From page five: # Tools for readers

makes plotting each incident impractical. But in areas with few crimes where it is possible to plot each incident, it gives readers a greater degree of specificity.

More step-by-step

• As with the crime-rate map, get all the incident data in an electronic format. The only difference is that you do not need census tract information for this map.

• Again, using a database manager, create a table of crimes you want to analyze. The table must include the exact address or block number and street name.

• Make sure the mapping program includes street level information for your city. Street level information is available (at a cost) with most mapping programs. You may also be able to find a friendly person in your city planning department who can help provide that information.

• Then, again, using your mapping program, plot the table of crimes.

Happy mapping!

Naomi Aoki can be reached by e-mail at aoki@pilotonline.com

From page seven: # Measuring cash flow

in various ways. An Intranet also gives data access to a reporter working from home or on the road.

Maintaining the database

The campaign finance database increases in value when it's maintained and contribution data is continuously collected as candidates file their reports.

"Campaign finance databases are living and breathing things," Raymond says. "They don't end at the end of an election cycle. Right after the election you have a whole other set. What happens in a newsroom is that they look at these things like a project with a beginning and end date."

Raymond's company offers to maintain databases for newspapers and suggests, though from an obviously biased point of view, contracting out that duty to an outside party.

"It's almost inviting a waste of money if you try to do it in-house," Raymond says. "That's when they set it up as a project as a one-time shot. Then the next election comes and it's going to be: 'We've got to pitch it to somebody again. Dig it out and start from ground zero.'"

Cindy Eberting can be reached by e-mail at cindy@nicar.org

CONFERENCE AUDIO TAPES:

AUDIO TAPES FROM SESSIONS AT THE MARCH 1998 NICAR NATIONAL CONFERENCE AND THE JUNE 1998 IRE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ARE NOW AVAILABLE FOR ORDERING. FOR MORE INFORMATION OR A DOWNLOADABLE ORDER FORM, POINT YOUR BROWSER TO *WWW.IRE.ORG/TRAINING/AUDIO.HTML*

NICAR's Database Library can convert data from all types of government systems. The staff can take nine-track tapes, 4mm DAT tapes, 3480/3490E cartridges, print image files or TR1/TR2 tapes, and put them onto CD-ROM in the database format of your choice. The NICAR staff cleans and converts the data, and performs integrity checks. Prices are based on the size of your news organization. Call the Database Library at (573) 882-0684 for more information.

Searching for influence

By Matt Jacob
CFIC

With the 2000 elections quickly approaching, we at the Campaign Finance Information Center are giving our all to help journalists make the most of election stories. Wondering how much money the local insurance salesman running for state representative received? Interested in how much money a candidate received from out-of-state contributors?

Following the campaign money trail in its entirety is one way journalists can provide more in-depth coverage of candidates. CFIC helps by collecting state campaign finance data from across the nation, making the data available to journalists, teaching reporters how to work with the data and offering story ideas.

The CFIC Web site – *www.campaignfinance.org* – is our central resource for journalists. A recent overhaul of the site provides what we think is a more user-friendly environment. Listed here are the site's features, about which we welcome your comments via e-mail at cfic-comments@ire.org.

Individual state pages

Having collected information on every state, we have built a page for each. State pages offer the source and range of our information, and when available, a breakdown of top contributors, state contribution limits, contribution reporting forms and links to state-specific search engines and to state election Web sites.

Power search

Out of our compiled data we've built a comprehensive search engine that allows journalists to track contribution cash flow across state lines for both federal and state races. The search provides who gives what to which candidates (contributions) as well as how the candidates spend their donations (expenditures). In some cases, it includes money flow to and from political action committees (PACs), candidate committees and party committees.

Stories and tips: Covering campaign finance

The CFIC collects stories that use campaign finance data to show how private money influences public policy. Journalists can search stories by publication, state, date and headline keyword. We also offer a list of sources specializing in campaign finance and tip sheets written by reporters that cover campaign finance issues.

Training

Using the resources and excellent training programs of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the National Institute of Computer-Assisted Reporting, the CFIC plans to offer seminars specific to covering campaign finance. Journalists will learn the skills they need to dig through data and come out with a story. The CFIC Web site will offer details on these seminars as they become available. There will also be sessions on covering campaign finance at both the IRE and NICAR national conferences.

Networking

The CFIC has compiled the names, phone numbers and e-mail addresses of reporters covering campaign finance into a searchable database. Journalists can search by name, affiliation, city or state. The center also maintains a mailing list for journalists to exchange ideas and tips. To subscribe to CFIC-L, send an e-mail to majordomo@campaignfinance.org. In the body of the message, type: subscribe cfic-l your e-mail address. The archives of the listserv can be searched online at *http://notes.reporter.org:8080/cfic-l.nsf*

Tracker

Tracker is the CFIC's newsletter dedicated to campaign finance coverage. Published quarterly, it is also available for viewing on our Web site. Each issue contains stories written by reporters working with campaign finance records. They share tips and tactics for tackling these often complex investigations. Past issues are also posted.

Helpful links

We've pulled together a detailed list of other Web sites especially useful to journalists who are following the campaign money trail. These sites can help journalists put their data in some context with candidate profiles and candidate voting records. We also give other sources for campaign finance data.

Continued on page nineteen

From page eighteen: # CFIC revamped

State sites

New York State Campaign Finance Consortium (*http://www.timesunion.com/capitol/contributions*)

Newsday, The New York Times, Associated Press and the *Albany Times Union* joined together to build a statewide database. The *Albany Times Union* has put the data in a searchable database on this site.

Virginia Public Access Project (*http://www.crp.org/vpap*)

The VPAP is a non-partisan, non-profit group that demonstrates how information technology can improve public awareness of money's role in Virginia politics. The Center for Responsive Politics helped make the data searchable.

Wisconsin Democracy Campaign (*http://wisdc.org*)

From this site journalists can search gubernatorial contributions and expenditures and view legislative candidate contributions and expenditures to senate and house candidates.

Florida Division of Elections Campaign Finance Database (*http://election.dos.state.fl.us/campfin/contrib.htm*)

Campaign finance contribution data is searchable online and downloadable in a file of tab-separated columns suitable for importing into most spreadsheets or databases.

Federal sites

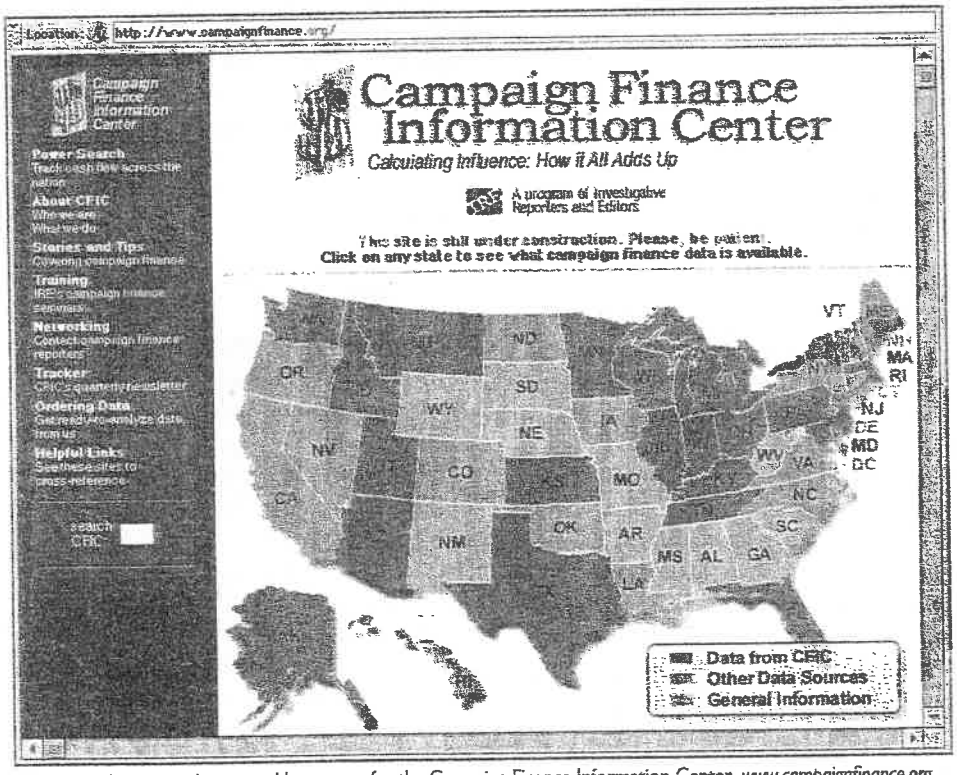
Center for Responsive Politics (*http://www.crp.org*)

Reports describing candidates' sources of funds broken down by industry, metro area and ZIP code. This site also provides in-state and out-of-state comparisons. The CRP site also hosts a number of online engines for searching individual state campaign finance data.

FEC Info (*http://www.tray.com/fecinfo*)

Up-to-date FEC filings are searchable from this site, an excellent alternative for most users to downloading FEC files.

Matt Jacob can be reached by e-mail at matt@nicar.org



Check out the new and improved homepage for the Campaign Finance Information Center, *www.campaignfinance.org*.

POWER BOOST:

THE DATABASE LIBRARY RECENTLY PURCHASED A 3480/3490/3490E TAPE DRIVE. IN THE LIBRARY'S EXPERIENCE PROCESSING LOCAL AND FEDERAL DATA SETS, IT APPEARS THAT MANY AGENCIES ARE MOVING TOWARD THE 3490E FORMAT, WHICH IS WRITTEN AT 36-TRACK. IF YOU RECEIVE DATA IN THIS FORMAT, NICAR CAN NOW PROCESS IT.

Can't get a date?

By Richard Mullins
NICAR/Missouri School of Journalism

Before we started using databases and spreadsheets, we probably never thought about data types – the difference between text and numbers and dates and all that.

A few bewildering sort results and a couple of type-mismatch errors later (plus the one about the ZIP codes with the missing zero in the front), and we're all the wiser.

Knowing your software is not just technical trivia or the mastering of minutiae to impress people at work ... Eventually, doing your journalistic duty to know exactly how and why you got a certain answer will require you to look behind the curtain.

We learned the rules for queries: Use quotes for text but not for numbers. Use a special sign to quote dates: {4/1/98} in FoxPro, or #4/1/98# in Access.

In Access, you get full-time data-type help along these lines in the query design window. Use a wildcard for a field criteria, and the program will automatically quote the criteria and add the keyword LIKE. Use a date for a criteria, and it will automatically put the pound signs around it. Of course, you are on your own if you type the query text yourself in the SQL window.

Now to the point. The column this month comes from a question we got at NICAR recently. There is a short answer to make the query work. The long answer involves understanding how Access does things so you'll understand why things work the way they do. Knowing your software is not just technical trivia or the mastering of minutiae to impress people at work, although you can get by for quite some time without the ordeal of reading the fine print in the manual – or a long-winded tech tip. Eventually, doing your journalistic duty to know exactly how and why you got a certain answer will require you to look behind the curtain.

It is possible to type a query in Access, using a date criteria, which Access decides is just peachy, syntax-wise, and you'll get an answer back that will make you think: "My query didn't work" or "This can't be right."

Let's say you are working with a dataset in Access that has a date field called InspDate. The table could be dams or rental property. You decide you want to see all the dams that were inspected in 1995. You could, for any number of reasons, type a query like this:

```
SELECT *
FROM Dams
WHERE InspDate = 1995
```

Or, if you are using Design view, you typed 1995 in the criteria grid under the InspDate column.

Because it has no syntax errors, the query would run. Most likely, however, your result would have zero rows, which you would think couldn't be right because you know you saw some 1995 dates when browsing the data. If you happened to be seeking inspections after 1995, so that the criteria was > 1995, you most likely would get a result that included every row in the table. Again, you'd think, this can't be right.

You get what you ask for

Here's the real problem. Access gave you just what you asked for; you just didn't know why or how.

At this point, a FoxPro user might point out that the problem is a data-type mismatch. You didn't use a date in the criteria, they'd say. You used a number that represents only the year portion of a complete calendar date. It's a good answer, but it still doesn't help. How come you didn't get a type-mismatch error when you compared a number to a date? How come, if you used the design view, Access didn't put the pound signs around the criteria like it usually does? How come = 1995 got no rows and > 1995 got all the rows?

Continued on page twenty-one

IF YOU HAVE A PARTICULAR PROBLEM YOU WOULD LIKE TO SEE ADDRESSED IN A FUTURE TECH TIP, SEND AN E-MAIL TO BRENT JOHNSON AT BJOHNSON@NICAR.ORG

SUBSCRIBE ONLINE: YOU CAN NOW SUBSCRIBE TO UPLINK ONLINE. DIRECT YOUR WEB BROWSER TO WWW.IRE.ORG/STORE/PERIODICALS.HTML

From page twenty:

Storage schematic

The answer to all these questions is that Access stores date/time information as a number. For dates in 1999, for example, the number is 36161 or higher. Specific times of day are stored internally as a fraction of the whole number for that day. So for the date we know on the calendar as January 11, 1999, Access stores this internally as 36171. For noon on that date, the number is 36171.5. For 11:33 that night, the number is 36171.98125. This is all internal. You can display the calendar equivalent of the date in your table and in queries in many different ways, from short (`1/11/99`) to long (`January 11, 1999`).

The number is based on the number of days elapsed since a certain base date. In Access 97, the base date, or Day Number One, is December 31, 1899. Dates before that base date are stored as negative numbers. Part of the explanation here is that Access is being flexible, allowing you to refer to date values by the conventional calendar representations or the underlying number.

This explains the answers to queries like `InspDate = 1995` or `InspDate > 1995`. Like all software, Access doesn't know what you meant to ask, only what you actually asked. And it didn't give an error message because you tried to use a number as a criteria for a date column. It interpreted your criteria of 1995 not as the year 1995 but as the 1995th day since December 31, 1899, or June 17, 1905. If your data are apartment inspections, then probably none of them have a recorded inspection date that old, so your query would return zero rows. But most of them probably have a date later than 1905, so your query would return all the rows that have some date recorded. Both results were not what you expected, hence this long attempt to explain how to reconcile what you got with what you expected to get.

Unleashing built-in functions

According to a calendar I checked, the vernal equinox this year occurs March 20, 1999 at 8:46 PM, Eastern Standard Time. That's 36239.8652777778 in the Access date-storage scheme.

If you want to see more of how this works, try a query like this on a table that has a date column in it.

```
SELECT InspDate, CDbl(InspDate)
FROM Dams
```

The Access function, `CDbl()` converts whatever is inside the parentheses to a double-precision number.

Here are two solutions for what to do when you meant to ask for all the dams inspected some time in 1995. The first one involves remembering to use full dates – not just the year – in the criteria.

```
SELECT *
FROM Dams
WHERE InspDate between #1/1/1995# and #12/
31/1995#
```

The other solution involves taking advantage of built-in functions in Access (and FoxPro) that let you pluck out certain parts of a calendar date.

```
SELECT *
FROM Dams
WHERE year(InspDate) = 1995
```

To find all the dams inspected in March:

```
SELECT *
FROM Dams
WHERE month (InspDate) = 3
```

To find all the dams inspected on the 5th of the month:

```
SELECT *
FROM Dams
WHERE day (InspDate) = 5
```

To find all the dams inspected on Monday:

```
SELECT *
FROM Dams
WHERE DayOfWeek (InspDate) = 2
```

All of these functions look at the date and return a number that describes the component of the date you asked for: the number of the year; the number of the month (between 1 and 12); the number of the day (between 1 and 31); or the number of the day of the week (between 1 and 7). For day of the week, Sunday is 1 by default. This can be changed.

Richard Mullins can be reached by e-mail at richard@nicar.org

To steer your CAR projects in the right direction, order the second edition of "Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide" by Brant Houston. It provides a gateway to the field for both beginning and experienced journalists who need to learn essential skills and get up to speed in the computer age. A PC disk with data exercises is included.

For a list of other titles available from IRE and NICAR, or for information on ordering online, visit the IRE Bookstore at www.ire.org/store/books/

The National Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference March 11-14, 1999

PRELIMINARY SCHEDULE

WEDNESDAY, MARCH 10TH

6:00 P.M. TO 9:00 P.M.
Pre-registration

THURSDAY, MARCH 11TH

9:00 A.M.
Opening Remarks

10:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Tackling the school report card – evaluating your school system's performance

Panel 2 – Everyone's CAR: A quick look at beat and project stories from the past year

Panel 3 – Running an Intranet the right way: Performance and maintenance issues to problem solving and user warnings

11:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Beginning computer-assisted reporting: The tools of the tracie

Panel 2 – From portable classrooms to new buildings: Covering your school system's capital budget

Panel 3 – Building a data warehouse: What to update and how often without creating a monster

1:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Online quick-start: Getting the most out of Internet search engines and alert services

Panel 2 – Covering welfare reform, urban housing and other social issues

Panel 3 – Putting it on the Web: Make it easy to share your hard-fought databases with the newsroom and readers with PERL and VBA

Demo room – 10 Great Tips using the standard newsroom tools: Excel, Access and FoxPro

2:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Online quick-start, part 2: Getting what you pay for online – the strengths and weaknesses of pay services

Panel 2 – Editing the story: How to ask questions when you don't know the data

Panel 3 – Satellite imagery on your desktop – Practical projects for journalists

3:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Investigative reporting in an online world – Pitfalls & opportunities

Panel 2 – Library leadership: How researchers can take a more active role in CAR

Panel 3 – Cool tools to get you done with the drudge work and back to your story

FRIDAY, MARCH 12TH

9:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Local Reporting In-Depth, Part 1: Adding depth with budgets and salaries

Panel 2 – Back to the future: Using computer-assisted reporting to organize your shoe-leather reporting

Panel 3 – The latest investigative projects from broadcast

Demo room – Understanding how significance testing can lead your reporting

10:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Local Reporting In-Depth, Part 2: Covering the election, from campaign finance to election night

Panel 2 – Dead voters to deadly workplaces: Five classic CAR stories, and what you need to do them yourself

Panel 3 – Training models that work: Tactics for spreading computer-assisted reporting through the newsroom

Demo room – Sampling in the newsroom: Testing court records, on-time performance and other independent studies

11:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Local Reporting In-Depth, Part 3: Following the dollar in public spending: Vendors, grants and contracts

Panel 2 – Covering the university: Sports, crime and enrollment

Panel 3 – Training by doing: First stories to get reporters' juices flowing and skills growing while building a data library for deadline

Demo room – Making the leap from linear to logistic regression

1:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Census In-Depth, Part 1: Data sets to profile your community – from the Census and its cousins

Panel 2 – Giving at home: How state campaign finance stories shook up the '98 elections

Panel 3 – CAR Quick Hits: Setting your sights on enterprise dailies and short weekenders

2:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Census In-Depth, Part 2: Census 2000 nuts and bolts: Details you need to get ready and stories you can do now

Panel 2 – Federal campaign finance: Before and after the elections

Panel 3 – CAR on deadline: What you can do in an hour – if you're prepared

3:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Census In-Depth, Part 3: Gini, diversity, dissimilarity and other tools to profile your community

Panel 2 – CAR on a shoestring: Getting the story when you're on your own without a budget

Panel 3 – CAR around the world: Updates from Scandanavia, Latin America and the U. K.

5:00 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Intranet models from around the country

Panel 2 – CAR after 10 Years: A look at where it has been and where it's going

SATURDAY, MARCH 13TH

9:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Crime In-Depth, Part 1: Incident reports from start to finish

Panel 2 – Marrying science and CAR on the environment beat

Panel 3 – Computer-assisted reporting without public data: Getting the story from observations, compilations and other sources

Demo room – Check it out: How to verify a database's details

10:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Crime In-Depth, Part 2: Policing your police

Panel 2 – Three nursing home stories that made a difference

Panel 3 – Writing the story: Getting people in and numbers out while building the CAR narrative

Demo room – Documenting your databases and keeping them organized

11:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Crime In-Depth, Part 3: Corrections records and how they can help you cover stories from prison and beyond

Panel 2 – News and Numbers: A primer on responsible use of numbers in the newsroom

Panel 3 – Understanding health care databases, from birth and sickness to death

Demo room – Data integrity check-up: Tips and tricks for keeping your data clean and your confidence high

1:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Public records supersession, Part 1: Negotiating for data with reluctant local officials

Panel 2 – From collisions to congestion: Covering the transportation beat with CAR

Panel 3 – Taxes, sprawl and land scams: Using CAR to report on property

2:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Public records supersession, Part 2: Privacy and privatization, the latest threats to public access

Panel 2 – From newsroom to classroom: Translating what you've learned for the next generation

Panel 3 – If it flies it crashes: Big or little, getting ready for the plane crash in your area

3:30 P.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Public records supersession, Part 3: What you can do to preserve public records or open them when they're closed

Panel 2 – Shepherding CAR in the newsroom: Thinking critically while selling the stories

Panel 3 – Tips for building your own database when you can't beg or borrow one that someone else made

SUNDAY, MARCH 14TH

10:00 A.M. PANELS
Panel 1 – Taking it all back home: Tricks for making the conference stick when you get back to the newsroom

Panel 2 – Wrap-up for database editors and computer-assisted reporting coordinators: The best of the conference to spread to your newsroom

11:00 A.M. PANEL
Swap meet – One last chance to swap great materials from your newsroom, your classroom or the conference

1999 National CAR Conference in Boston

Learn to find facts on the Internet, do database reporting on deadline, map crime, analyze budgets, perform statistical analysis and more.

For more information, call us at 573-882-0684 or see the IRE Web page at www.ire.org

HOTEL REGISTRATION

National CAR Conference
March 11 - 14, 1999

The Fairmont Copley Plaza
138 St James Avenue, Boston, MA 02116
Reservations: 800-527-4727
Dial Direct: 617-267-5300
Room Rate: $159 single/double occupancy

Reservations must be made by February 19, 1999 to receive discounted rate. Reservation requests received after the cut-off date will be accepted on a space- and rate-available basis.

Need a roommate? Call IRE at (573) 882-2042 or visit the IRE Web site at www.ire.org to join the roommate list.

Investigative Reporters and Editors, the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting and The Boston Globe

present

The National Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference

March 11 - 14, 1999

Conference Site: The Fairmont Copley Plaza

Register early to ensure you get your first choices for hands-on training classes. To register, make sure you fill out this form and the hands-on training form included in this preliminary program. Check our Web site for the latest changes and details.

REGISTRATION FORM

Please write carefully! This information will be used to make your name-tag.

Name: _____

Affiliation: _____

Address: _____

_____

City, State: _____

Zip Code: _____-_____ E-mail: _____

Phone: _____ Fax: _____

To attend this conference, you must be a current IRE member through 4/1/99.

_____($150) I am an IRE professional member and would like to attend the main conference days, March 11-14.

_____($100) I am an IRE student member and would like to attend the main conference days, March 11-14.

_____($190) I would like to attend the main conference days March 11-14 and need to join or renew U.S. membership.

_____($205) I would like to attend the main conference days March 11-14 and need to join or renew international membership.

_____($125) I would like to attend the main conference days March 11-14 and need to join or renew student membership.

_____Total – Add ($25) Late fee for registrations postmarked after February 26, 1999

To register, mail this form and a check to NICAR, 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO, 65211. To register by credit card, you must have a Visa or Mastercard. We cannot accept American Express. You may fax your registration to (573)882-5431 or register on-line at www.ire.org.

Visa or Mastercard #: _____ Exp. Date: _____

Card Holder: _____ Card Holder Signature: _____

Bits, Bytes and Barks

IRE Web site overhaul

Investigative Reporters and Editors has launched a revamped Web site aimed at better serving current members and drawing future members.

The new site, while containing many of the features of the former site, is easier to navigate, offers more options for doing business with IRE staff and debuts some new features.

There are more online registration forms and order forms. The IRE Store offers books, tapes and other IRE goods for easy purchase. Along with the popular job posting board, a fellowship/grant posting board is now available.

The site will soon make use of members-only areas allowing members to access the latest issue of *The IRE Journal*, reporter tipsheets, archived listservs, a personal information update area and more. Members will receive passwords in the mail before any members-only gates go up.

Work on the site will continue. Educators especially will be sought out to contribute to the IRE Journalism Educators Center.

Suggestions are welcome. Contributions are urged. E-mail should be sent directly to Deputy Director Len Bruzzese at len@ire.org.

Moving on

Sarah Cohen, formerly the trainer for IRE and NICAR, has joined *The Washington Post*. If you have recently switched locales, let us hear from you. Send an e-mail to Brent Johnson at bjohnson@nicar.org.

New On-the-Road Trainer joins IRE and NICAR

Tom McGinty, a reporter with *The Times of Trenton*, has joined Investigative Reporters and Editors as its new on-the-road trainer.

McGinty will primarily teach computer-assisted reporting techniques at regional and newsroom workshops for NICAR.

McGinty, who coordinated the CAR efforts of *The Times*, served in beats ranging from cops and courts to local and state government and general assignment.

"Reporters and editors will identify with his front-line experience," said Brant Houston, IRE's executive director. "Tom knows how to translate the training into terms news people will understand."

McGinty earned a journalism degree from Utica College of Syracuse University.

IRE National Conference

The Investigative Reporters and Editors National Conference, co-sponsored by *The Kansas City Star* and KCTV, will be held June 3-6, 1999 in Kansas City. You may also register online or download an early registration form at *www.ire.org/resources/conferences/kansascity/index2.html*.

Information on other IRE and NICAR national and regional conferences is available at *www.ire.org/training/conferences.html*.

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