November 1994

Uplink

A newsletter for the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting

Uplink update

Although we are still recovering from the long days and nights at the CAR Trek conference in Silicon Valley, we wanted to share the high points with you before someone hits our delete button.

This issue includes an overview of the conference, advice from NICAR training director Jennifer LaFleur on what to do next and other items of interest from an event that drew an intense and enthusiastic crowd.

In addition to CAR Trek news, we also have our usual bits and bytes and an article on the Orange County Register's work in computer-assisted reporting.

Next month we'll have articles about our progress in making databases and tips available over the Internet. We'll also write about some new programs, including training for minority journalists, an advanced seminar and special sessions for editors who want to know how to manage CAR in the newsroom.

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Life after CAR Trek

Where do we go from here?

By Jennifer LaFleur
NICAR

They came, they saw, they computed.

Journalists from around the country (and the world) found their way to San Jose for CAR Trek '94 to learn about computer-assisted reporting. Some were beginners who came to take their first byte of this new discipline, while others came to brush up on or learn more advanced techniques.

More than 420 journalists received hands-on training in a wide range of skills, from the beginnings of DOS to advanced statistical analysis. The most popular of the hands-on classes was the Internet training in which more than 300 participants throughout the conference took a test flight through cyberspace. Demand was also high for advanced techniques such as mapping, building databases, building front-ends and downloading from 9-track tape.

Attendees learned how to build spreadsheets in Excel and Quattro Pro and database management in FoxPro and Paradox. In addition to the hundreds of participants in DOS and Windows classes, the Macintosh sessions were in higher demand than anticipated. As some newsrooms implement Macintosh systems, reporters want to learn how to use them for CAR.

None of the many sessions would have been possible without a dedicated team of coordinators, teachers and coaches who generously gave of their time and expertise to make sure every conference participant received hands-on training.

Where do we go from here?

If you were one of the attendees at CAR Trek '94, you might wonder what to do next. So you know how to make a subdirectory in DOS, you can analyze a city budget in a spreadsheet, and you've gotten a taste of your first database. Many of you have gone back to your news organizations to be crowned the CAR guru. You have been handed the tasks of immediately conducting a huge analysis project from which you will produce the series to end all series, building your entire data library and training everyone else in the newsroom. Just stop. Here's a quote for your editors: "Developing computer-assisted reporting skills takes practice and time. You should start with some small, short-range projects," says NICAR's Managing Director Brant Houston.

To start, the most important thing you can do is keep your hands on the keyboard. (Well, not *all* the time — that would make it very difficult to eat). But keep practicing. Get some real data and work with it and keep practicing. If you have questions, call

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Coming Events

January 8-13, 1995
NICAR Seminar
Columbia, Missouri

March 12-17, 1995
NICAR Seminar
Columbia, Missouri

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NICAR is a joint effort of Investigative Reporters and Editors and the University of Missouri School of Journalism with the mission of bringing the journalism industry into the 21st Century.

NICAR services include hands-on newsroom training seminars in computer-assisted reporting, special academic and advanced training at Missouri, data analysis and advice.

NICAR is supported by a grant from The Freedom Forum intended to help the institute deliver its services nationwide to news organizations and associations.

Hey, Boss!

Selling editors on CAR

By Rosemary Armao
Investigative Reporters and Editors

How do you talk the bosses into starting and building a CAR program? This topic has become a staple at IRE/NICAR conferences and newsroom presentations.

We've developed strategies for reporters to deal with the inevitable questions from the bean counters about cost and we've coined lines for reporters to feed to skeptical editors about CAR being the future of journalism. But at the Silicon Valley conference, we did something really radical. We invited in top editors to see for themselves.

It took two members of the local planning committee in California, Jonathan Krim, assistant managing editor at the San Jose Mercury News and Tom Honig, executive editor of the Santa Cruz Sentinel, to come up with a notion that ought to have been as plain as an "Abort, Fail, Retry" message. We need to talk with the men and women who make decisions and set policies in newsrooms. Publishers, executive editors and managing editors are the people to convert. As reporters, we've wasted too much time whining among ourselves about their frugality and lack of vision.

The editor's program

The half-day editors program, even with a demonstration of Mercury Center, an open pass to the panels and hands-on training at the Westin and a FREE LUNCH, was not entirely a smash. Top editors from many California papers, including some of the biggest, didn't come or canceled at the last minute pleading the press of business and meetings. Still, that is only a symptom of the problem and it was a great start.

The editors who did come got a hard sell, starting with a welcome from Mercury News publisher Jay Harris, who saw the light about investigative reporting and computer-assisted reporting before a lot of the rest of us.

A slide version of IRE/NICAR's traditional 60-Ideas-in-60-Minutes offered proof of what CAR already has done, suggested story ideas and a sense that CAR is important right now and not some prediction for a distant future.

Speakers help with the message

Lisa P. Van Asch, news research and training coordinator for the Raleigh News & Observer, told the editors that computers are as vital a journalistic tool now as telephones, not some luxury to be bestowed by management on the privileged. She told them CAR can level the playing field in the newspaper industry, supplying smaller papers with the resources to take on much bigger competitors.

She also advised them to "arm everyone who can shoot," as CAR extraordinare Pat Stith has described the Raleigh program. Train anyone who shows an interest in CAR. That's the best way to safeguard a program against the loss of a star nerd. It also ensures that good stories will wind up in all sections.

Virginia Fielder, vice president for research for Knight-Ridder's newspaper division, issued another wake-up call. Check out your readers, she told the editors. Count how many have car phones. TVs. Cable. PCs. The technology that will change how most people communicate and get their news already has taken root and begun growing.

The overriding theme of the editors' program, like that of CAR Trek overall, was that it's time to get over the fear of computing and start doing it.

Continued from page one

someone you met at the conference or call NICAR. You don't even need to be doing data analyses to keep up your skills. Use a spreadsheet to do your expense report and transfer your Rolodex to a database — that will force you to use those new skills.

Once you're feeling more confident in your abilities, you might be ready to share your knowledge with others. However, suggest that those interested in learning CAR attend a training program because once you train them, you need to be available to help them as they get up to speed. You can either do computer-assisted reporting or teach it to everyone else. Doing both might kill you.

Reflections on Net Classes

Hooking into the Internet

By Dan Gillmor
San Jose Mercury News

In retrospect, it was fun. At the time . . . I doubt we could have pulled this off any where but Silicon Valley, where a lot of equipment and expertise coalesced. Still, putting together the Internet Room at CAR-Trek was a little too much like drawing two cards and hoping to fill an inside straight. We got the cards, but we were lucky.

Once we knew Apple Computer was lending us 25 Power Macintosh computers, each with built-in Ethernet networking connections, we got ambitious.

Gretchen Heinrich, who heads the Mercury News' computer support area, said she and her staff could put together a high-speed local-area network.

A local Internet access provider had already agreed to donate a T-1 connection — that's a very fast link — to its network and lend us some hardware that would connect the T-1 line to the computer that would handle the network. And Sun Microsystems, a Silicon Valley company that makes powerful computer workstations, donated a powerful Sparc20 computer for a server to run the network.

Mark Crosten and Andrew Zazzi put the local network together. Sun's Shane Sigler configured the Sparc workstation. We tested the local network on Wednesday, the day before the conference was to begin. All was well, we figured.

All was not well.

The T-1 connection to the outside didn't work. For the next 36 hours we witnessed a virtuoso demonstration of buck-passing. The Internet access provider said, "Not our fault." The telephone company said, "Not our fault." The hotel, which handled the wiring from the outside of the building into the Internet room, said, "Not our fault."

We canceled three classes Thursday, rescheduling them later in the weekend. That evening we tried holding a slimmed-down version of the Internet training, showing only e-mail and a local version of the Internet's World Wide Web. It was unsatisfying for everyone.

Also on Thursday, however, we got representatives of the phone company, Internet provider and hotel in the room together and asked them to work together to find the problem. They finally did, and by Friday morning we had the room up and running the way we'd hoped.

Now we had a room that matched our ambition. The classes were designed to take beginners into the Internet in a basic way at first, but by the end have them surfing like veterans.

We had folks log into the server, as if they were dialing by phone and modem to a local Internet provider that offered Unix shell access only. The point was to give people a taste of the low end of the Net food chain.

Using Unix mail software called Pine, we had each person send e-mail to someone else and then send a reply. Next we showed people some Usenet newsgroups. We couldn't get everyone logged onto the newsgroups at once. Even on our fast network that was causing electronic traffic jams.

The next step was to look at Gopher, an immensely useful Internet menu system. We used Gopher client software on the Macs to show people how they could tunnel around the world through various Gopher servers, and then search server menus using Veronica software.

Far and away the most popular and entertaining part of the class was the Mosaic playtime, in which folks surfed the Internet's World Wide Web using a Mosaic browser on each Mac. Because we were attached to the outside on a T-1 line, Mosaic ran fast enough to allow reasonably quick loading of images.

The system worked wonderfully all day Friday and Saturday morning. There were no Internet classes Saturday afternoon. That evening, the Mosaic software had stopped connecting to the outside world, as had the Gopher software loaded on the Macs. I still have no idea what went wrong.

Although we were somewhat constrained by losing the Mac-based Gopher and Mosaic, we still were able to offer some solid Net instruction. We used the telnet capabilities of the server to log onto other computers in other cities, where we could run the Unix Gopher softare on those remote systems. That alone demonstrated a vital feature of the Internet. For World Wide Web surfing we used a remote machine that ran a character-based Web browser called Lynx. It wasn't nearly as much fun as Mosaic, but it did work.

On Sunday night we all rested.

Lessons from San Jose

1) If you're setting up a newsroom Internet server, don't try to do it overnight. This stuff still isn't easy. Make sure you have a Unix guru in-house.

2) Expect problems. One of Murphy's laws is that Murphy attends all live demonstrations, something we proved at CAR-Trek.

3) Look at new systems from Internet-savvy vendors such as Sun Microsystems — Sun's Netra, in particular — if you're planning to bring the Internet into your building. Netra is billed as a server that makes it easy to connect PC and Mac clients.

—Dan Gillmor is Computing Editor for the San Jose Mercury News. He can be reached via e-mail at dgillmor@sjmercury.com.

Electronic access not a sure thing —

Feds against releasing data

By David H. Morrissey
Colorado State University

By the year 2000, as much as 75 percent of the federal government's business will be conducted electronically.

That's exciting news for computer-equipped reporters. Washington is the world's largest publisher. Reporters find it increasingly difficult to cover any beat without in some way relying on federal data.

But several recent surveys of federal agencies reveal many treat electronic information as a special class of data — outside the range of the Freedom of Information Act and often off limits to the public.

The Justice Department says it may rely on these agency views when crafting FOIA policy — unless Congress acts first.

In 1993 and again in 1994 I surveyed 70 federal agencies on their FOIA policies toward electronic records. Key questions asked agencies were:

- Must agencies create or modify computer programs to search for and retrieve electronic records?

- Must agencies create or modify computer programs to segregate the releasable portion of a record?

- Do requesters have the right to specify the format in which information is released?

More than 75 percent of the agencies answered the first question "no;" about half answered the second two questions "no." Most agencies not answering "no," said that they hadn't yet dealt with the questions and had no opinion. Fewer than 5 percent answered any question "yes."

The responses are significant for three reasons. First, they reveal strong opposition to increased FOIA access to computerized federal files. The implication of questions 1 and 2 is that information retrievable only through creation or modification of computer programs is not covered by the FOIA. Maybe the agency will release it; maybe not. Question 3 implies that an agency can release information in an undesired format — say, a 1,000-page printout instead of floppy disks.

The answers are also important because the Justice Department asked the same questions of agencies in a 1989 survey (receiving essentially the same answers.) The Justice Department says it may rely on these agency views when crafting FOIA policy — unless Congress acts first.

Finally, the answers are important because they haven't changed. I resurveyed the same 70 agencies in 1994 — *seven months after President Clinton announced a new FOIA policy, encouraging electronic disclosure.* Clinton's policy was the first by a president specifically mentioning electronic information. It was also the first to emphasize the public has a right to information stored in computers. "Each agency has a responsibility ... *to enhance public access through the use of electronic information systems,*" Clinton said.

Despite this emphasis, agency responses in 1994 remained virtually unchanged from 1989 and 1993, revealing a persistent bureaucratic hostility to FOIA requesters seeking electronic records. Not one agency surveyed in 1994, *after* the Clinton policy was announced, had drafted a new electronic record FOIA policy. Many said they were already practicing maximum disclosure, and thus no new policy was needed.

The surveys reveal agencies eager to retain control over "their" electronic records, using the ambiguity created by a new technology to limit public access. For instance:

- Some agencies refuse to perform even simple computer programming to retrieve information. But if information exists only in an electronic form, retrievable only through programming, then an electronic black hole is created, containing information the public can't obtain.

- While agencies must conduct reasonable searches for information specified in FOIA requests, some agencies say they won't use computers for these searches, although this might make searches quicker and more accurate.

- Agencies are slow to tell the public what information they maintain electronically, although a database list could save time and money.

- Other agencies say they will provide information in an electronic form, but only if requesters pay fees not required for paper documents.

These unclear and inconsistent policies appear to violate the spirit of the FOIA and perhaps the letter of the law. Worse, they have quietly shifted the burden of proof for disclosing information. Instead of the law's requirement that federal agencies prove *why* informa-

tion should be withheld, a process forcing agencies to cite specific exemptions to overcome a presumption of openness, requesters seeking *computerized* data now increasingly find they must prove why information should be released in that electronic form.

The mandate of the FOIA — stating information is presumed to be releasable unless an agency can prove otherwise — appears in question. The new *form* in which information is kept allows agencies, by bureaucratic fiat, to overturn one of the more important reforms achieved by passage of the FOIA.

There is clearly a need for Congress to enact a detailed policy for federal electronic records. The Leahy-Brown Bill, which passed the Senate this year but died in the House, would have been a modest first step. Something on this order — or more comprehensive — should be considered next year.

As Congress considers legislation to bring the FOIA into the computer age, it can expect substantial agency opposition to changing the status quo. Four factors, however, can help Congress place that opposition in its proper perspective:

- The federal government's use of computers continues to increase. At the same time, the federal government's reliance on paper records continues to decrease.

- The power of personal computers continues to improve. This has given reporters and others requesting computerized records a greater ability to access, analyze, and use federal electronic records, *when agencies allow this access.*

- The demand for federal computerized records continues to increase. Journalists, academics, lobbyists and lawyers have joined the list of those wanting electronic access. Requesters know computerized information is easier to use, and thus more valuable, than the same information printed on paper.

- A significant number of organizations, from the American Bar Association to the Office of Technology Assessment, have studied the issues raised by electronic federal records and the FOIA and concluded that — despite agency protestations — increased access to these records is both legal and logical. Most also conclude that allowing this access is necessary if the intent and letter of the law are not to be violated.

— Professor David H. Morrissey teaches in the Department of Technical Journalism at Colorado State University, in Fort Collins, Colo.

HISTORY: Federal Computer Use

1946

Congress passes Administrative Procedure Act — forerunner to FOIA. First computer (ENIAC) goes into operation.

1955

Congress begins hearings on what will become the FOIA. Federal government owns 45 computers, all first-generation mainframes.

1966

Congress passes Freedom of Information Act. Law doesn't mention computers because they didn't seem important enough to include. Federal government owned about 3,000 computers (roughly one computer for every 1,000 federal workers.)

1974

Congress strengthens the FOIA, "gives it teeth." Law still doesn't mention computers. Computers mentioned, as an aside, in the Senate report on the law. Federal government owns about 15,000 computers.

1981

IBM introduces the PC. Federal government owns 17,723 computers. Mostly mainframes; some minicomputers.

1990

Federal government purchases *1 millionth* computer. Purchases of mainframes and mini computers decline dramatically; PC purchases increase.

1993

Federal government purchases *2 millionth* personal computer. Total still increasing rapidly. Federal government will spend $25 billion this year alone for computer hardware, software, equipment, etc.

(Statistics compiled by Prof. David H. Morrissey, Department of Technical Journalism, Colorado State University, Fort Collins, Colo. Sources from various federal agencies, including: U.S. Bureau of Standards; U.S. Bureau of the Census; General Services Administration, and the Office of Technology Assessment.)

The CAR Lot:

Second-generation databases

By Ronald Campbell
The Orange County Register

The Register launched its computer-assisted reporting program in January 1991. We're on our second computer and second generation of software.

Personnel: Me. I'm supposed to spend 80 percent of my time on CAR, and occasionally I really do. Efforts to train others have been sporadic and short-lived.

Hardware: A Dell 466-T (486 computer, 66 megahertz top speed) with 16 megabytes of RAM and a gigabyte hard drive. I also have a Qualstar tape drive, a leftover from the bad old days, as well as a CD-ROM reader and a tape backup system.

The Register slowly is replacing its ancient Atex terminals with Gateway 200-mb personal computers. As the PCs spread throughout the newsroom, I hope to find converts to CAR.

The Register slowly is replacing its ancient Atex terminals with Gateway 200-mb personal computers. As the PCs spread throughout the newsroom, I hope to find converts to CAR.

Operating system: DOS and Windows 3.1. The Register is shifting to OS/2.

Database: FoxPro 2.6 for Windows. I switched to FoxPro from XDB a couple of years ago and have never regretted the change. FoxPro is incredibly fast, easy to use, and flexible (also brave, clean, and reverent, but that's another story).

Spreadsheet: Excel 4.0.

Mapping: MapInfo 2.0 for Windows. MapInfo easily handles FoxPro tables. But for more than a year, we couldn't make publication-quality maps. We solved that problem by buying MapInfo for the Macintosh (the graphic artists' computer of choice). Now I create a map on my PC, transfer the map and accompanying workspace and tables to a diskette, and walk them across the hall to Graphics; the artist loads the diskette to the Macintosh version, dresses up the map, and transfers it to Aldus FreeHand for final touchups. Not a very elegant solution, but it works.

Word processing: None, unless Windows Write counts. I'm getting Xywrite for Windows soon.

Communications: Crosstalk software operating on a U.S. Robotics Sportster 14,400-baud modem. I recently began exploring the Internet through the Register's "node."

Utilities: PC Tools.

Other: Nine-Track Express. This is essential for CAR and likely will remain so as long as government agencies resist the trend toward compact discs. Nine-Track is easy to use, though the documentation isn't much help when something goes wrong. (Hint: If you're saddled with a Qualstar, check that first when problems arise.)

Notable stories: I've sliced and diced political campaign donations dozens of ways, establishing among other things the surprising role that female professionals played in the election of California's two U.S. Senators. I've also written about discrimination in home-lending by banks, toxics, and the census.

Wish list: Statistical software, such as SPSS or SAS. A decent tape-drive.

Ronald Campbell can be reached by telephone at (714) 664-5030 or by e-mail at rcampbell@ocr1.freedom.com.

Bits, Bytes and Barks

FBI crime stats due out soon

The FBI publishes its 1993 crime statistics in late November, and NICAR plans to be first in line for the new data.

The statistics are broken down into five databases: the Supplementary Homicide Report, Return A, Supplement to Return A, Police Data and Arson Data.

Each of the first three databases explores a different aspect of crime. Return A, for example, gives the numbers of crimes in a variety of categories such as murder, rape, robbery and so on. Supplement to Return A presents a more detailed breakdown of the property crimes and gives the value of stolen and recovered property. SHR gives information about homicide victims and offenders and their relationship to one another.

According to the FBI, another database called Age, Sex and Race will be included in the SHR database. ASR gives demographic information about the offenders involved in a variety of crimes.

All of the above data and the police and arson databases (these describe crimes against police officers and arson reports) are broken down by region, state, city, metropolitan statistical area, and the police agency that produced the report.

For more information, including prices and release dates, call NICAR at (314) 882-0684.

—Gwen Carleton

Audio tapes available

CAR Trek highlights

By Brant Houston
NICAR

More than 500 journalists gathered in Santa Clara in early October for CAR Trek '94, the most ambitious computer-assisted reporting conference ever.

The four-day conference included 60 panels, 75 hands-on training classes and a constantly buzzing demonstration room where conference-goers got one-on-one tutorials.

Attracted by the wide array of offerings and the presence of the best in the business, journalists came from more than 30 states and from several foreign countries, including Brazil, Australia, Sweden, Norway, the Netherlands and Costa Rica.

Although nearly half the attendees were from California, some made a good showing from other states: 21 from Minnesota, 18 from Washington, D.C., 18 from Florida, 16 from New York and 13 from Virginia.

While the conference built upon the success of last year's event in Raleigh, N.C., it quickly took on its own character.

Among the highlights:

_ Instructors found advanced classes that they wanted to take, whether it was in mapping software, building friendly frontends, building databases, or statistics.

_ The Internet classroom stayed filled for the conference. Initially, the classroom threatened to become a netmare when it refused to come online, but a phone cable problem was solved by Thursday night and the 25 networked Power PCs kept the room warm and toasty until Sunday.

_ A demonstration room that exhibited the latest technology such as magneto optical drives, CD-ROMS, Internet tutorials, tape drives and a variety of software.

_ A high-energy ethics supersession led by Michael Josephson, a lively speaker who continually kept several panelists on their toes.

_ More than 130 classroom computers, including 50 Power PCs, 50 Acers, and 30 IBM miscellaneous compatible personal computers. All were set up and loaded within two days.

_ A track for more than a dozen top editors brave enough to face a high-tech future.

_ A keynote speech by John Batelle, managing editor of the hot new magazine *Wired*.

_ A first-ever panel of some of the pioneers in the field: Elliot Jaspin of Cox Newspapers, Dwight Morris of the Los Angeles Times and Philip Meyer of the University of North Carolina.

CAR TREK was sponsored by Investigative Reporters and Editors, the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting (a joint venture of IRE and the Missouri School of Journalism) and the San Jose Mercury News.

If you want to hear the tapes of panels you missed or get panelists' electronic handouts on diskette, call IRE at 314-882-2042 or via e-mail at jourire@muccmail.missouri.edu. If you want more information about training, call NICAR at 314-882-0684. or via e-mail at nicar@muccmail.missouri.edu

The four-day conference included 60 panels, 75 hands-on training classes and a constantly buzzing demonstration room where conference-goers got one-on-one tutorials.

Freedom Forum, Nieman Foundation online

For those of you who haven't noticed yet, the Freedom Forum and the Nieman Foundation have gone online.

Both organizations are available on the Web via NandO.net, an Internet gateway operated by the Raleigh *News & Observer*.

The Nieman Foundation page (*http://www.nando.net/may/confpage.html*) offers full transcripts of discussions at its recent conference dealing with the role and challenges of public-interest journalism in an expanding information marketplace.

The Freedom Forum page (*http://www.nando.net/prof/freedom/1994/freedom.html*) features some of its published reports (including some color photographs and graphics) and selected transcripts of seminars and audio "sound bites."

Access drug "street names" online

The Drugs and Crime Data Center and Clearinghouse has made its document "Street Terms: Drugs and the Drug Trade" available online. The document contains more than 1,500 street terms that refer to specific drug types or drug activity, from "A" (LSD or amphetamines) to "Zoomers" (individuals who sell fake crack then flee). To access the document via the net, FTP from *ncjrs.aspensys.com/pub/ncjrs/street.txt*. For source information, contact the DCDCC at (800) 666-3332.

AT&T puts "800" directory on Web

AT&T's 800 Directory of toll-free numbers throughout the United States is now available on the World Wide Web (*http://att.net/dir800*).

The medium is the message — Part Two

Covering the computer beat

By David Bloom
The Los Angeles Daily News

Editor's Note: This is the second of a two-part article offering advice to computer-assisted reporters who might cover or develop a computer beat. Part I ran in the October issue of Uplink.

These ideas ought to get you started and many, in fact, can either come out of or lead to computer-assisted projects. Often, you'll get leads on problem systems when you try to get copies of interesting tapes of information. Additionally, you'll make important contacts within the bureaucracy who can point you to problems while you do the kind of small-talk kibitzing that leverages these tips out. Working on computer-assisted projects also will give you the background and lingo you need to intelligently explain what's going on in what can be a difficult and challenging area for readers and bureaucrats alike. Have at it.

In the last issue we talked about a variety of government operations that are ripe for good investigative pieces. You might also look at data coordination across departments.

Frequently you will find a large government agency has numerous systems, none of which are compatible. Many times they can't even share e-mail.

Sometimes personal disputes can lead to computer problems. In Los Angeles County, for instance, the Treasurer-Tax Collector, Auditor-Controller and Assessor departments all are responsible for part of the property tax billing and collection process.

When it came time for a new property tax system, however, the three departments didn't work together. The Assessor developed one system on its own, while the other two departments separately developed a second one that was supposed to hook up with the assessor's new computers.

When a new Assessor got into a personal war with the Auditor, communications between the departments ceased. Months later, when the assessor's new computer system went on-line, it kicked out 15,000 parcels, just didn't recognize them. No one caught the problem in the Assessor's office. The department that DID catch the problem, the Auditor's office, didn't bother to tell the assessor for months, until the problem entries filled boxes and boxes.

And when the Auditor-Treasurer system started running two years later, it also didn't work well with the assessor computer, causing another 26,000 problem parcels that took years, millions of dollars and dozens of additional staff to fix.

Information, please

There are also a number of "softer" stories about computer systems that newspapers ought to run more often, spotlighting issues of public access to the information we've all paid so much for government to collect.

Many revenue-starved governments are looking at ways to make money. The possibility of selling of tapes of property tax records, or voter registration rolls or other information at a premium is quite tempting, but often is a violation of the spirit if not letter of open records laws.

Then there's the general problem of just getting information out of these computers. Some systems don't even allow you to get electronic versions of their records easily and inexpensively.

When I sought a text-only dump of all the appointees to county boards and commissions, bureaucrats told me it would cost well over $200 for what should have been a 15-minute (or less) text dump onto a single floppy disk. The mainframe they use would require special programming to do even that basic task, they said. We passed on the opportunity, but there's no reason why it should have required anything like that kind of cost.

Often, the information is in a proprietary format that can only be read by a single program, which in turn may cost thousands of dollars. How does the public get access in a reasonable way to this information? And what happens when the agency gets a new system and wants to convert the information to that program? Can it?

Sociology 101

Computers are changing the way we relate to each other, through e-mail, on-line chat services, and more. George Gilder, among others, has written interestingly about the changes being wrought.

E-mail, for instance, causes people to communicate in different ways (more candid, sometimes painfully, or rudely so) than we do in person.

It's worth investigating as we network more and more to see what it means for streamlining government and improving public access.

Politicians are increasingly seeing the Internet and other online capabilities as a great way to reach out and tell their side of things. That's worth following up.

There are issues of children's access to the sometimes raw discussion channels and chat lines of adults in online services and bulletin boards. There are concerns about child molesters and pornographers using the lines to recruit new victims and trade their materials with each other. There have been occasional scandals afflicting some of the national on-line services in this regard in the past three or four years.