Uplink

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CAR TOPICS

To share or not to share

By Brian Hamman
IRE and NICAR

After Matthew Waite wrote stories about rising home sale prices for the *St. Petersburg Times*, real estate agents lined up to buy the data he used for his reporting. Doug Haddix, projects editor at *The Columbus Dispatch*, turned down a request by a state agency that sought data from the newspaper. Officials said the agency would have to spend $60,000 to $70,000 to create the data itself.

These stories shine light on a dilemma that journalists doing computer-assisted reporting sometimes face: Whether to share data with others.

Deciding whether to reject requests for data is not always simple, according to several CAR experts. Journalists need to weigh standards of fairness and transparency against the potential harm to the reputation or bottom line of the organization, they say.

SPOTLIGHT: THE WAR AT HOME & ABROAD

Analysis shows feds' claims about charity

By Jaimi Dowdell, *IRE and NICAR*

For more than a year, the Islamic American Relief Agency (IARA) existed in my world as a series of documents, lines, dots and connections. When the FBI raided and the U.S. Treasury Department froze the assets of the Columbia, Mo., charity it was evident that the U.S. war on terror was active in mid-Missouri. It also provided an opportunity to test social network analysis as a computer-assisted reporting tool.

Social network analysis and IARA have been my obsession on-and-off since late 2003. I spent a good deal of that year

reading about social network analysis and fiddling with UCINET for Windows software from Analytic Technologies. While journalists have traditionally used data to analyze specific details, or attributes about certain individuals or things,

SPOTLIGHT:

For more on The War at Home and Abroad see:

Peace Accidents

By Michael Fabey, *Savannah (Ga.) Morning News*

When I asked for the U.S. Army's database of aviation accidents in June 2004, I was hoping to find out the accident numbers, scenarios and other details of the service's helicopter fleet.

As the military reporter at my newspaper, I cover the locally based 3rd Infantry Division, whose soldiers earned fame for their lightening-fast march from the Kuwaiti border to the heart of Baghdad during the first weeks of the 2003 invasion.

The division had suffered its first fatal Apache crash and a cursory look at the history of the helicopter promised a potential gold mine of stories.

I requested a record layout of the Army's mishap database from the Army Safety Center at Fort Rucker, Ala.

I had learned about the existence and availability of the database at an Inves-

Bits & Bytes

O'Reilly joins IRE team

Veteran computer-assisted reporting expert Richard O'Reilly has joined IRE and NICAR as a consultant for special database projects. O'Reilly, who worked 30 years at the *Los Angeles Times*, will collaborate with the IRE and NICAR database library staff on analysis for broadcast and print organizations.

O'Reilly was the CAR coordinator at the *Times* and worked on numerous projects involving data analysis. In addition, O'Reilly has assisted IRE and NICAR by speaking and teaching at training events and conferences. He will work directly with Database Library Director Jeff Porter.

Updated data

The U.S. Food and Drug Administration relies on the Adverse Event Reporting system to flag safety issues and identify pharmaceuticals or therapeutic biological products (such as blood products), for further epidemiological study. It may ultimately prompt regulatory responses such as drug labeling changes, letters to health care professionals, or market withdrawals.

Journalists who have used this data recommend using it to guide reporting on consumer medical issues, the FDA or the pharmaceutical industry. This data is current as of December 2003. For more information, see *www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases/AERS*. To order the data, call 573-884-7711.

INSIDE NICAR

War Stories

By David Herzog, *NICAR and Missouri School of Journalism*

Two years ago U.S. forces pushed across the Kuwait border into Iraq, starting the war that continues today. Since then, we've kept you posted about the best stories about the war at home and abroad in the pages of *Uplink*. We've also been trying to spotlight data you can use in your own reporting, and bring you tips from journalists who have already done so.

We have provided a comprehensive list of data resources (March-April 2003) and details about analyzing federal procurement data to find military contractors near you (May-June 2003).

You have responded by producing dozens of significant stories that look at war casualties, homeland security spending, border and airport vulnerability, terrorism prosecutions and immigration – all based on analysis of databases.

This issue of *Uplink* looks at some of those stories: the war burden in South Carolina, alleged charity-terrorist ties and noncombat deaths. I know there will be many more great stories.

On an unrelated note, in the coming months we are planning to link Uplink's printed edition more closely with NICAR's Web site (*www.nicar.org*). Stay tuned for further developments and be sure to send me a message if you have ideas of how we can better serve you with the newsletter and the Web.

Contact David Herzog by e-mail at dherzog@nicar.org.

UPCOMING HANDS-ON CAR TRAINING

IRE and NICAR have several training opportunities for journalists seeking hands-on instruction in using computer-assisted reporting.

There are two weeklong Boot Camps in Columbia, Mo., for journalists who want to learn how to acquire electronic information, use spreadsheets and database to analyze the information, and to translate that information into high-impact stories.

IRE and NICAR provide follow-up help after participants return to their news organizations. The boot camps are May 15-20 and Aug. 7-12.

News managers interested in learning how to better integrate CAR into their newsrooms can attend the April 8-10 mini-Boot Camp in Columbia. Participants will learn enough about spreadsheets and database managers to understand the programs and effectively manage journalists who use the programs in their reporting and analysis.

Journalists interested in learning how to map data for news stories can take advantage of a min-Boot Camp in using geographic information systems (GIS) Aug 19-21 in Columbia.

For more complete information about these and other IRE and NICAR training opportunities, visit www.ire.org/training.

2005 IRE Conference • June 2-5

The best in the business will gather for more than 100 panels, workshops and special presentations about covering public safety, courts, national security, the military, business, education, local government and much more. Visit *www.ire.org/training/denver05* for more information and updates.

Conference Location and Hotel:
Grand Hyatt Denver, 1750 Welton St., Denver, CO 80202

Hotel Reservations:
Please call 800-223-1234 by **Friday, May 6**, to get the discounted room rate of $119 plus tax. When making your reservation please ask for the Investigative Reporters and Editors room block. If making your reservation online, please visit *http://denverregency.hyatt.com/ groupbooking/invr*

If you have hotel or general conference questions, please contact Ev Ruch-Graham, sr. conference coordinator, ev@ire.org or 573-882-8969. If you have registration questions, please contact John Green, membership coordinator, jgreen@ire.org or 573-882-2772.

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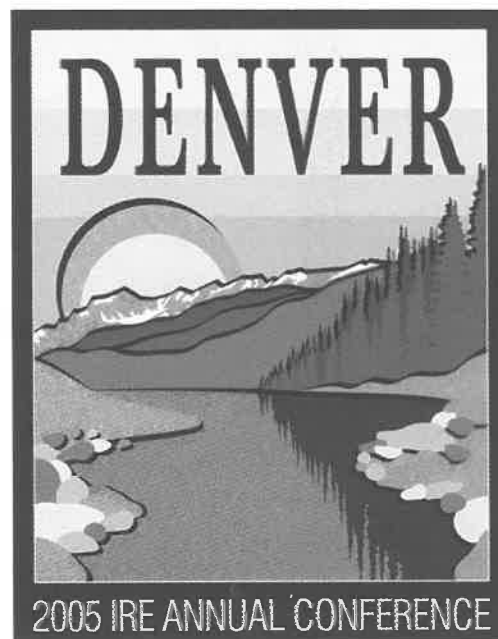
NOTICE: You will be listed on the IRE Web site as an attendee. If you don't want to be listed, please e-mail John Green at jgreen@ire.org

REGISTRATION FORM.
To register, please complete this form. Visit our Web site regularly at **www.ire.org** or **call 573-882-2042** for the latest details. Preregistration closes May 19. After May 19, you must register onsite. *Please write carefully! This information will be used to make your nametag.*

Name: _____

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To register, mail this form and a check to IRE, 138 Neff Annex, Missouri School of Journalism, Columbia, MO, 65211. To register by credit card, you must have a VISA, MasterCard or American Express. You may fax your credit card registration to 573-882-5431 or register online at *www.ire.org/training/denver05*.

Cancellations need to be sent via e-mail to jgreen@ire.org. There is a $50 processing fee for all cancellations until June 1, 2005. Refunds will not be given for cancellations after June 1.

Card Number: _____ Expiration Date: _____

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To attend this conference, you must be an IRE member through July 1, 2005. Memberships are nonrefundable.

MEMBERSHIP:
_____ I am a current member of IRE through July 1.
_____ **$50** I need to join/renew my U.S. or international
☐ Professional   ☐ Academic   ☐ Associate or
☐ Retiree membership.
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LATE FEE:
_____ **$25** for onsite registration (after May 19)

CAR DAY – optional: Thursday, June 2
(requires additional fee)
_____ **$50** Professional/Academic/Associate members
_____ **$35** Student members

BLUES BASH – optional: Thursday, June 2 at 7:30 p.m.
_____ **$15** Advance tickets (specify how many tickets)
Tickets sold June 2 at the conference site will be $20. Tickets at the door - if available - will be $25.

FRIDAY RECEPTION (Advance Ticket Required)
_____ **$10** (Only 2 tickets per registrant) limited to first 200 people to sign up

SATURDAY RECEPTION (Advance Ticket Required)
_____ Free (Only 4 tickets per registrant) limited to first 500 people to sign up

SPECIAL NEEDS:
☐ Do you require special assistance?
Specify _____
☐ Are you a vegetarian?

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MAPPING IT OUT

*The latest uses of mapping
in news reporting.*

Uncovering an age-old scam

By Ron Hurtibise,
Daytona Beach News-Journal

Interested in buying some Florida swampland?

If you have any idea how much prime real estate in Central Florida sells for these days, you'd probably think twice before believing you could spend a mere $5,000 to $7,000 an acre for your future retirement home site.

That's why our newspaper's investigative team was surprised that many people are still spending thousands of dollars for soggy, inaccessible land they'll likely never be able to develop or sell at a profit.

In Volusia County, between Daytona Beach and DeLand, eBay auctioneers are amassing small fortunes by peddling lots that had been targeted for purchase by the county's wetlands acquisition program. The sales are pricing the county out of the market, creating an uncertain future for a vital water recharge area and setting up unsuspecting buyers for a bitter reality check.

We uncovered the story, in part, by analyzing property data with a geographic information system (GIS) program.

The *News-Journal* had played a prominent role exposing boiler room swampland scams to a national audience in the 1960s, but it took an alert reader and a few minutes on eBay to tip us off that the cycle is repeating itself in the Internet age.

In April 2003, I received an e-mail from a real estate agent in Flagler County, on the north side of our coverage area, alerting me to eBay sales of subdivision lots that could not be developed. So I checked it out: Sure enough, ads touting "beautiful Florida land" filled eBay's fledgling Real Estate auction pages.

A call to Flagler County's zoning department confirmed that buyers of lots in a "paper subdivision" called Flagler Estates stood little chance of getting building permits because there were no roads or utilities available.

> # Readers could see how the private sales ... encroached on the taxpayer-funded conservation effort.

The situation they described was fascinating, and totally new to me: Back in the 1960s, a supposed development company bought a large tract of land, carved it into hundreds of lots, named it Flagler Estates and sold the lots as "investment properties" for as much as $2,000 or $3,000 apiece, plus financing charges.

Buyers, usually retirees from the north, bought the parcels sight unseen on installment plans from telephone salespeople, and then often stopped paying local property taxes on the lots after realizing they'd been duped. The lots reverted

to the county, which sold them at tax sales for as little as $300 an acre. Buyers of the auctioned properties then made thousands of dollars selling them on eBay.

After we ran a story on Flagler Estates, a Volusia County resident told me that eBay sales of lots in paper subdivisions was much more widespread than we had realized or reported, involving half a dozen large tracts in the Daytona Beach area and others throughout the state.
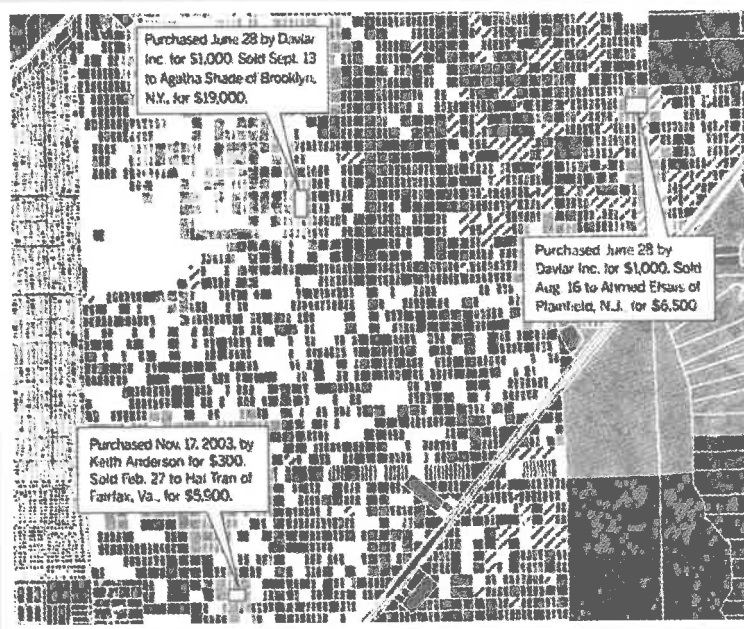
The most blatant example was University Highlands, a 9,400-acre watery no-man's-land between Daytona Beach and DeLand. Dozens of yellowed clippings in the newspaper's archives told the story of how the subdivision was created:

Lax 1960s-era county development regulations enabled the Firstamerica Development Corp. to plat a subdivision with no roads, sewers, drainage ditches or utilities; set up a telephone boiler room and market the lots as investment parcels to out-of-state buyers.

The county's zoning board, alarmed by the prospect of development on what was even then recognized as an important water recharge area, tried to rezone the tract for conservation in the mid-1960s. Faced with the prospect being unable to market the rezoned lots as investment properties, Firstamerica threatened legal action, contending the zoning board had overstepped its authority. After the Volusia County Commission refused to fund any legal defense of the rezoning, all five zoning board members resigned and the rezoning was rescinded.

In a way, the mess created by Firstamerica was good for conservation. With ownership of the subdivision's lots divided among thousands of owners across the nation, no developer was interested in spending the time, money and effort to assemble

Purchased June 28 by Davlar Inc. for $1,000. Sold Sept. 13 to Agatha Shade of Brooklyn, N.Y., for $19,000.

Purchased June 28 by Davlar Inc. for $1,000. Sold Aug. 16 to Ahmed Elsais of Plainfield, N.J. for $6,500

Purchased Nov. 17, 2003, by Keith Anderson for $300. Sold Feb. 27 to Hai Tran of Fairfax, Va., for $5,900.

enough lots to create a profitable development plan – especially with larger, cheaper, drier tracts available elsewhere. Today, according to county planners, residential development on a commercial scale would require acquisition of contiguous parcels and most likely a replatting of any portion submitted for development.

But buyers who dreamed of one day building on their Florida dream lots didn't know this.

We guessed that few of today's eBay buyers were aware that prospects for developing the area remain just as slim. We set out to change that by mapping parcel data.

The availability of local land recording and appraisal data made it possible for us to identify the most prolific swampland resellers and show that some were making as much as 1,900 percent profit selling lots.

I used the Clerk of Courts' Web site (*www.clerk.org*) to identify who was buying and selling the most lots in University Highlands, how much they had paid for them, who the buyers were, and the selling price. I copied parcel numbers from the

eBay ads and pasted them into the search field of the clerk's public records database. The database stores property transaction data and images of nearly all documents recorded at the Volusia County Courthouse since the mid-1990s.

The data revealed that many of the buyers had Asian surnames, leading us to suspect many were immigrants most likely unfamiliar with the historic risks of buying inexpensive Florida land.

At this point, we knew we had a powerful story. But I wanted to give readers a visual sense of the size of the tract and the high volume of sales activity there. From two highways that flank it, the tract looks like nothing more than undeveloped woods. Road maps show nothing there. Only a parcel record map, never seen by the average reader, could convey what the Firstamerica Development Corp. created.

I set out to create the most cumbersome graphic I've ever pitched – a map of the entire 9,400-acre, 6,167-lot tract that pinpoints all lots that changed hands since its discovery by the eBay sellers.

For $30, the Volusia County property appraiser sold us a copy of its entire database – with 352,000 records – in a Microsoft Access file, burned onto a CD within 24 hours.

Typing University Highlands subdivision numbers in the WHERE statement of my Structured Query Language query, I built a table of property sales in the subdivision over the past three years. I converted the Access query result to a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet table, and then exported that as a tab-delimited text file.

From the property appraiser's Web site, I downloaded aerial photographs of the subdivision that illustrated the size of the tract and the lack of development there since the 1960s. The photo, shot by the Florida Department of Transportation and made available in a Seamless Image Database (.sid) file format, was embedded with geographic coordinates enabling its precise placement in ESRI's ArcView 8 mapping program.

From the county's geographic information system Web site, I downloaded a shapefile that displayed the original plat and all of the lots.

I overlaid the parcel map onto the aerial image, then joined the property identification number field in my recent-sales table to the property ID field in the parcel map's attribute table. I sorted the joined attribute table in descending order so the recent sales records were grouped at the top. I selected those tables so the recently-sold lots appeared highlighted in blue on my map.

I created a new map layer from the selected lots, then re-sorted the attribute table of the new layer to isolate lots purchased by the county for conservation. After creating yet another map layer of just the conservation lots, I shaded them yellow and red so readers could see how the private sales, shaded in blue, were

SPOTLIGHT: THE WAR AT HOME & ABROAD

Big bucks flow to rural areas

By Bert Dalmer, *The Des Moines Register*

By now, every journalist with a passing interest in federal or state government has heard the complaints out of New York and Chicago – that America's largest cities are being shortchanged by the federal government in the area of homeland security.

At a glance, the fussing seems logical. Especially when you discover that a state like Iowa, whose largest city would constitute a neighborhood in Chicago, has been pledged more than $100 million thus far to protect its populace from terrorists.

Few in the media have suggested that police and firefighters don't need equipment to respond to a large-scale attack. But few have bothered to dive into the records to illustrate the problem in terms every reader can understand.

That was the challenge *The Des Moines Register* took on in the wake of a flurry of praiseful but cryptic news releases from Iowa congressmen and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security. After a few weeks of background study and another week of crunching the numbers, Iowa's grant decisions were revealed at best to be questionable, and at worst, laughable. (See page 8 for information about other government defense and security spending stories.)

Initially, the task of following the money seemed daunting. The bureaucracies were extensive; the jargon was mind numbing. Not only were we tracking budgets set in Washington, D.C., from Des Moines, but also it was nearly impossible to find anyone who could explain the grant process or to define the government's overall homeland security strategy.

When half a dozen phone calls to the Homeland Security press office yielded little more than referrals to old press releases, it was clear that our research time would be better spent close to home.

We scheduled a pair of meetings with the state's homeland security office just to get the lay of the land. Then we made a verbal request for a county-by-county accounting of all the homeland security grants it had received.

Curious patterns emerged in the Excel spreasheet right away.

We received a Microsft Excel spreadsheet just a few days later.

For a number of reasons, the grants as a whole defied neat and easy explanation.
Many homeland security grants are administered by federal agencies with differing purposes and grant rules. Many traditional grant programs, particularly in the Department of Justice, were taken over by Homeland Security, which offered money for a whole new set of initiatives.

For ease of explanation, we decided to concentrate our efforts on just one grant program that would be both interesting and relevant. We chose the State Homeland Security Grant Program, which has thus far funneled $28 million to Iowa's first-responders, such as police, firefighters and emergency managers.

Under this program, the state had wide latitude to decide how the money was to be allocated to its first-responders. Eventually, we learned that the counties also had wide latitude to spend their share of the grant.

In 2003, the grant's first year of existence, money was awarded in two waves. I asked the state for a further breakdown of the funds and added a column of population statistics from the U.S. Census Bureau.

Curious patterns emerged in the Excel spreadsheet right away. Why were the two grants awarded so differently? Why were some grants spread evenly among counties, while others had skipped some counties altogether?

When I asked for an explanation, state officials acknowledged that they had divvied up most of the first state homeland security grants without much prioritization or forethought. By the time of the second grants, a more complex formula was devised, based in part on population, critical infrastructure (like power plants, refineries, skyscrapers and landmarks) and agricultural production.

I asked the state for a further breakdown of the second round of grants.

After some basic Excel sorting, the numbers revealed a few eye-opening trends:

• All 99 Iowa counties had received a base share of the grants, and often thousands more without regard to how vulnerable they were to a terrorist attack.

• The state had kept almost one-third of the grants for administrative costs and statewide purchases, like 98 pairs of night-sight binoculars for park rangers.

• Iowa's five largest counties, home to one-third of the state's population, received just 15 percent of the homeland security money. The state's largest county, Polk, shared only $250,000 of

its $1.2 million with the state's largest city, Des Moines.

A subsequent analysis of a master equipment request compiled by the state for review by the feds fleshed out the story in more tangible terms. This was the nut graf of the *Register* story:

"Iowa counties' first anti-terrorism requests to the federal government include $6,700 in traffic cones, signs and barricades; $21,000 for six squad-car cameras; $4,500 in night-sight equipment; a $500 underwater camera; a $370 wall clock with a built-in hidden camera; and megaphones, pagers, work gloves, rubber boots and paper shredders."

Furthermore, money that had been awarded in the name of fighting "agro-terror" in one of America's most rural states was often used to buy everyday equipment like radios.

Authorities in Iowa's most prolific farm county received $114,000 specifically for its agricultural resources, but officials there said the money was too insubstantial to try to protect their crops and livestock.

Experts called the Iowa grant formula politically safe but strategically silly. The state spending plan, they said, paralleled the indecision seen at the federal level, where grants were handed down to the states based only on population – not risk.

A Congressional report issued in the days following the *Register* story showed that Iowa was among a minority of 21 states that considered some terrorist risk before parceling out federal grants to cities and counties. But Iowa was also one of 25 states that gave money to counties, regardless of the risk.

Sounds like Chicago might have a point after all.

Contact Bert Dalmer by e-mail at bdalmer@desmoine.gannett.com.

Data for examining security spending

By Jeff Porter, *IRE and NICAR*

Security = money.

The U.S. Department of Homeland came into existence midway through federal fiscal year 2003. Since that time, the agency has poured billions of dollars worth of contract work, assistance and pay into every state and even beyond U.S. borders.

To follow the money – and show how it impacts your community with jobs and grants – you'll need to get acquainted with several government data sources, all available from the IRE and NICAR Database Library:

• Federal contracts – The General Services Administration keeps a database of almost every agency's contract transactions, including Homeland Security. The database includes company name and location, dollar amount, type of work, location of work and other pieces of information. (More details: *www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases/fedcontacts*)

• Federal Assistance Award Data System – If the Department of Homeland Security provides a grant, this database shows the name of the recipient, location, the specific federal program, the amount, date and, often, a project description. (More details: *www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases/faads*)

• Consolidated Federal Funds Report – Unlike the award data system, this report, produced annually, shows the total dollars committed to a specific state, county or city. While it does not identify the recipients (as the previously mentioned databases do), it identifies the agency and specific program, and includes contracts, payroll, grants, loans and other types of transactions. (More details: *www.nicar.org/data/cfff*)

Each database serves a different purpose. For mapping, Consolidated Federal Funds reports can show county-by-county totals by general spending categories. The Federal Assistance Award Data System can pinpoint recipients and more detailed look at type of recipient (for example, nonprofit, college or university, small business, local government) and often, details about the use of the money. The federal contracts database is a tool to show how businesses are interacting with the Department of Homeland Security.

To order any of these, contact the Database Library at 573-884-7711 or 573-884-7332.

Contact Jeff Porter by e-mail at jeff@ire.org.

readme.txt

These downloadable reports are helpful in understanding more about homeland security grants:

• General Accounting Office report, "Reforming Federal Grants to Better Meet Outstanding Needs," #GAO-03-1146T (Search for the report at *www.gao.gov*).

• The United States Conference of Mayors, "Tracking Federal Homeland Security Funds Sent to the 50 State Governments," available at *www.usmayors.org/72ndWinterMeeting/homeland report_012204.pdf*.

• The U.S. House Select Committee on Homeland Security, "An Analysis of First Responder Grant Funding," available at *http://homelandsecurity.house.gov*.

• The California Institute for Federal Policy Research, "Federal Formula Grants and California" at *www.ppic.org/main/publication.asp?i=481*

Mapping

continued from page 5

encroaching upon the taxpayer-funded conservation effort.

I exported the graphic as a camera-ready .JPG file that required minimal work from the art department before it was ready for publication in an information graphic. To bolster my pitch, I created a mock-up of how the map could look as a stand-alone graphic, with its own headline and text box. Atop the map, I pasted fact boxes pointing out five examples of quick-turn sales for big profits.

The Sunday editors liked my mock-up and approved the graphic at nearly a full page inside, with color.

None of the major eBay sellers agreed to be interviewed for the story. I emailed them through their eBay accounts, and when possible, tried to contact them via addresses and phone numbers filed with the state Division of Corporations.

The state Division of Land Sales, created 30 years ago to regulate swampland sales, said it was unaware that the practice had been revived. After an initial interview in September, the division chief said he had begun an investigation and could not comment on specific examples.

A retired division investigator living in southwest Florida had no such qualms. He reviewed several examples of eBay ads and pointed out ads that appeared to violate state laws barring sellers from claiming development was imminent and predicting how much a lot's value would increase in the future. And he pointed us to laws requiring sellers of undeveloped subdivision lots to register with the state and submit examples of advertising for review — laws the highest-volume eBay sellers we identified appeared to be ignoring because the state had no record of their registration. We continue to await results of the state's investigation.

Contact Ron Hurtibise by e-mail at ron.hurtibise@news-jrnl.com.

SPOTLIGHT: THE WAR AT HOME & ABROAD

IRE and NICAR resources for war, security coverage

The Iraq war and homeland security have been hot issues in news coverage. The IRE and NICAR Database Library and IRE Resource Center have resources for journalists who want do in-depth reporting about these subjects.

Federal Assistance Award Data System (FAADS) contains records of federal assistance awarded to state and local governments as well as all major programs are covered under FAADS. With FAADS and CFFR you can find grants and loans that are awarded to your local or state government for homeland security purposes.

For more information, log on www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases. Contact the Database Library at 573-884-7711 or 573-884-7332 to order the data.

The Resource Center offers tipsheets and story reprints that can help guide journalists who want to report on war and security issues using databases.

Adam Bell of *The Charlotte Observer* provides advice for using the procurement database to analyze military spending and avoid pitfalls along the way. (Tipsheet No. 1765)

Maud Beelman, formerly of the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists, provides a list of Internet and printed resources for following the multinational arms trade in Tip Sheet No. 591.

The Washington Post featured a story about how the Immigration and Naturalization Service system that keeps tabs on foreign students is riddled with errors. The *Post* exposed the problems in the system, since scrapped, and showed the flaws can be a risk to homeland security. (Story No. 20463)

The Oakland Tribune, Los Angeles *Daily News* and smaller sister Media News Group newspapers in California found that officials in the state misused homeland security funds. After obtaining more than 2,000 pages of purchase order documents from area counties, the newspapers put the data into a spreadsheet. The journalists then compared the data to a master list of identified terrorism targets in California. Some of the smaller counties used the anti-terrorism funding for such minor repairs as fixing courthouse doors, instead of becoming better prepared for future terrorist attacks. (Story No. 21353)

In "Anti-Terror Funds Buy Wide Array of Pet Projects," *The Washington Post* traced the path of the region's first wave of homeland security aid from its distribution to its final use. The *Post* found the path of the aid is largely unexamined by federal regulators. Reporters analyzed contracts, grant proposals and purchasing databases. Results showed millions were spent on items such as leather jackets for police officers. (Story No. 20865)

You can purchase stories and tipsheets by contacting the Resource Center at 573-882-3364 or rescntr@ire.org.

SPOTLIGHT: THE WAR AT HOME & ABROAD

Simple calculations show S.C.'s war burden

By Chuck Crumbo, *The (Columbia, S.C.) State*

Every day the Pentagon dispatches e-mails with the words "DOD Identifies Army Casualty" in the subject field. Sometimes the e-mails say the casualty is a marine, other times it's a sailor or airman. I read each one.

After reading a few hundred of these Department of Defense e-mails it became apparent that troops from small towns in small states like South Carolina were dying in high numbers in Iraq. This, though, was not a spectacular revelation.

Just months into the war and when the death toll was about 350, the *Austin American-Statesman* reported that 16 percent of the casualties were more likely to come from a county with lower-than-average levels of college education and below-average incomes. Those two demographic categories fit South Carolina to a "T."

In August, after the 20th South Carolinian had died in the war, we decided to see where the state ranked.

I discussed the idea with Chris Roberts, an assistant business editor and computer-assisted reporting specialist, and together we pulled together a story that ran on the front page of *The State* last summer.

To build the spreadsheet, we downloaded the death counts for each state from the constantly updated database maintained by the Associated Press on its Web site for members. We double-checked the AP numbers with the numbers that we compiled for South Carolina and found no discrepancies.

Using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet, we copied the state names and number of casualties into two columns. In the next columns we copied state names and state-by-state population counts from Census 2000, which are available at *www.census.gov/popest/estimates.php*. We made sure the state names from the casualty lists and population numbers lined up, and then deleted the redundant column of state names.

The next step was math: In one column, we calculated each state's number of casualties per 100,000 residents – a simple equation of the number of dead divided by the state's population, multiplied by 100,000. (We used the deaths-per-100,000-residents calculation as the basis for comparison, because each state has at least 100,000 residents and it is a clear way to account for the wide range of state populations.)

The next step, in another column, was to use Excel's Rank function on the deaths-per-100,000-residents calculation.

The results showed that South Carolina, which ranked 26th in population, was eighth in Iraq deaths.

Two other southern states – Mississippi and Arkansas – followed South Carolina in rounding out the top 10.

Our reporting confirmed the Austin story as well as other studies done on the Iraq death toll. For example, the office of U.S. Rep. Ike Skelton, a D-Mo., found that 44.3 percent of troops killed came from hometowns with populations under 20,000. A *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* analysis found that 46 percent of the Americans killed in the war through May 26 came from small towns outside metropolitan areas.

What also was interesting was that smaller, so-called "red" states that President George W. Bush carried in 2000 and 2004 elections, had war death rates well above the larger "blue" states.

We finished off the reporting by talking to members of the South Carolina congressional delegation and leaders of communities that have suffered casualties.

The story also questioned whether the disparity in deaths could prompt Congress to reinstate the draft.

This was a simple story to report, not much different than other statistical analyses we've done on dangerous intersections and highways.

The data is readily available. All you need is some Excel know-how.

Contact Chuck Crumbo by e-mail at ccrumbo@thestate.com.

Share

While most journalists agree that it's important to remain transparent when their work comes under criticism, they disagree on how much journalists need to share for the sake of fairness.

Tom Torok, chief database editor for *The New York Times,* says when journalists analyze data and present their results, they act as social scientists.

"If we do original analysis, then we have to adhere to the standards of scientific analysis, which is replication," he says.

When social scientists do research, they traditionally offer the data to others in a central repository to allow others to verify their conclusions and perform additional analysis.

While Torok says he does not necessarily advocate giving data to anyone who requests it – he might not give it to a competitor or a business whose intent is purely commercial – journalists should give data to those who challenge the results. Torok says the *Times* recently handed over two datasets to government agencies, after the newspaper ran critical stories about railroad accidents and the Occupational Safety and Health Administration.

Bill Dedman, of *The Boston Globe*, also says making the data available helps boost credibility. "There's a point where if you don't give people your data, then they have no reason to believe your story."

How transparent?

Haddix disagrees that it is necessary to release data to justify it. He says the *Dispatch* routinely runs its analysis methods by statisticians and other experts. "It's not really peer-review in the scientific sense, but it works for our purposes."

Waite also disagrees with the characterization of journalists as social scientists. "We are not producing peer-reviewed papers here, we are in a competitive business."

In cases in which real questions may arise with a story, several journalists say it is better to place the data online for everyone to view, rather than provide it only to organizations that request it.

"Our obligation of transparency is to the public, not the government," says Brian Bowling, a reporter for the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review.*

Some journalists say they are concerned that offering such transparency with their data could undermine shield law protection for journalist's notes and interviews.

Sandy Davidson, professor of journalism and law at the University of Missouri, says journalists do not need to worry. She compared sharing data to sharing tools on a farm.

"Just because I say that you can borrow my shovel does not mean you can come and take the wheelbarrow," Davidson said.

Adding value

Generally, however, when someone requests data from a news organization it isn't because they disagree with a story. Journalists add value to data by analyzing it, and that analysis can provide a shortcut to other organizations.

Haddix says that extra value is the primary reason the *Dispatch* often declines to share data.

"It's material that belongs to the *Dispatch*. We've put a lot of analysis into the data and we just don't feel that we should give that away," he says.

In addition to protecting the news organization's bottom line, journalists need to be concerned about appearing to be working with government.

"As a citizen, I want government to go out and dig up its own information, carry out its own analysis and then present all that before it deliberates toward a decision," Bowling says. "News media are not and never should be agents of the government."

But which country had the most? During what years?

I determined the worst years and places for accidents were during the Cold War in the United States, Germany and Korea.

Using fields such as the severity of accident and type, I could do an even more detailed analysis, especially with SPSS, a statistical analysis program.

But, as David Donald, a former editor for the *Savannah Morning News* who is now the IRE training director, explained, SPSS does not like Access database files. So I exported selected fields from the main file to a dBASE file and used Microsoft FoxPro to check it. I learned on FoxPro a decade ago and feel more comfortable with it. Also, working with FoxPro does make it easier to go back and forth with SPSS.

I used SPSS to run frequencies and discovered soldiers were more likely to be involved in more dangerous ground accidents than in those in the air.

The story we printed went a long way to debunk the myth that the Army and other services were trying to perpetuate: more accidents are bound to happen during wartime as more is demanded of warriors and their machines. An analysis of the Army's own databases showed just the opposite to be true.

But the data and story did show that some safety maxims in the civilian world held true in the military one as well:

• Flying was safer than traveling by car – or in the Army's case, by Humvee.

• Not wearing a seatbelt can have deadly consequences.

• Failure to follow regulations, ignoring simple precautionary measures and other types of human error lead to more accidents than equipment failure.

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IRE and NICAR Services

Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. is a grassroots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting within the field of journalism. IRE was formed in 1975 with the intent of creating a networking tool and a forum in which journalists from across the country could raise questions and exchange ideas. IRE provides educational services to reporters, editors and others interested in investigative reporting and works to maintain high professional standards.

Programs and Services
IRE Resource Center: A rich reserve of print and broadcast stories, tipsheets and guides to help you start and complete the best work of your career. This unique library is the starting point of any piece you're working on. You can search through abstracts of more than 20,000 investigative reporting stories through our Web site.
Contact: Beth Kopine, beth@ire.org, 573-882-3364

Database Library: Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. The library has copies of many government databases, and makes them available to news organizations at or below actual cost. Analysis services are available on these databases, as is help in deciphering records you obtain yourself.
Contact: Jeff Porter, jeff@ire.org, 573-882-1982

Campaign Finance Information Center: Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. It's dedicated to helping journalists uncover the campaign money trail. State campaign finance data is collected from across the nation, cleaned and made available to journalists. A search engine allows reporters to track political cash flow across several states in federal and state races.
Contact: Brant Houston, brant@ire.org, 573-882-2042

On-the-Road Training: As a top promoter of journalism education, IRE offers loads of training opportunities throughout the year. Possibilities range from national conferences and regional workshops to weeklong boot camps and on-site newsroom training. Costs are on a sliding scale and fellowships are available to many of the events.
Contact: David Donald, ddonald@ire.org, 573-882-2042

Publications
The IRE Journal. Published six times a year. Contains journalist profiles, how-to stories, reviews, investigative ideas and backgrounding tips. *The Journal* also provides members with the latest news on upcoming events and training opportunities from IRE and NICAR.
Contact: Len Bruzzese, len@ire.org, 573-882-2042

Uplink. Bimonthly newsletter by IRE and NICAR on computer-assisted reporting. Often, *Uplink* stories are written after reporters have had particular success using data to investigate stories. The columns include valuable information on advanced database techniques as well as success stories written by newly trained CAR reporters.
Contact: David Herzog, dherzog@ire.org, 573-882-2127

Reporter.org: A collection of Web-based resources for journalists, journalism educators and others. Discounted Web hosting and services such as mailing list management and site development are provided to other nonprofit journalism organizations.
Contact: Matthew Dickinson, matt@ire.org, 573-884-7321

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