GHOSTBUSTING IN EAST ST. LOUIS

by George Landau,
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A man named Admiral Wherry, an army veteran who owned a barbecue pit and tire repair shop in East St. Louis, died more than two years ago.

But that didn't stop him from voting in the Illinois Democratic primary on March 20.

That's how reporter Tim Novak and I began our Page One account of voter fraud and inflated voter roles in East St. Louis, Ill., an impoverished city straight across the Mississippi river from downtown St. Louis.

In less than a month, using an IBM-compatible PC, two sets of computer data and printed listings of registered voters, we found dozens of ballots cast in the names of dead people.

And by sampling 10 percent of the city's precincts, we found more than 100 people registered to vote from vacant lots, 16 of whom had voted in the March primary.

Reporters, politicians and state election officials have heard allegations of voter fraud in East St. Louis for at least a decade, but no one had produced hard evidence. Novak and I decided to give it a try after finishing our computer-assisted analysis of property ownership in East St. Louis.

For that project, we acquired from the county assessor a magnetic tape listing the owners and addressees of every parcel in the city. Of 27,000 lots, nearly 5,000 were vacant.

> ## "Of those 1,000 dead people, 270 were still registered to vote. Some had been dead for 11 years."

One of our colleagues had suggested that we use the computer to match the list of vacant lots against the addresses of registered voters. A great idea; the only problem was that the state and local election

PLUGGING IN: THE HARTFORD CONNECTION

1) Learn the language.

"The people who give you advice on computers speak in a foreign tongue.... Learn enough of the lingo to know when data processing people (inside and outside the newsroom) are trying to snow you.

Getting a computer-assisted reporting program started in a traditional newsroom is typically the first and toughest step for the trained reporter. Brant Houston is a reporter for The Hartford Courant, (Conn.) who, along with Kenton Robinson, has braved the challenge of introducing computer-assisted reporting to new territory.

The above are some of their experiences and survival tips. If you have any of your own words of wisdom, please send them to the Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, and we'll pass them along.

2) Know your hardware and software requirements.

"Expert computer people, usually from the land of the mainframe, want to give you a sledgehammer to hit a nail.... Those people will do a special program for you when a store-bought piece of software will do."

3) Educate your editors.

"Once you score your first major story, editors will want a similar story every day and not understand why you can't hit a few buttons and run out a blockbuster every 24 hours. You need to work on convincing editors that many stories take time, and end up being much better in content, much wider in scope and have greater impact."

4) Educate other reporters.

"Reporters will want to stick to their tried and true ways, talking to people for anecdotes and slowly sifting through thousands of pages of documents. They also have

Ghosts.....

boards were prohibited by law from releasing the list of voters in machine-readable form.

Our lawyer said our prospects of getting the data on magnetic tape were slim, so we got printouts listing the city's 30,000 registered voters by precinct (there are 50) and alphabetically for the entire city.

We then decided to enter only the addresses of voters from five small precincts into the PC. This took two days. We then edited the list of street names so that abbreviations (such as "ave" and "st") were in the same style as the assessor's data. We matched the two sets of data and came up with a list of several hundred properties valued at less than $200 where voters were registered.

We then visited each of the properties to make sure they were vacant or abandoned. This property review only took two days because we organized the list by street name and were able to check several properties at the same time.

We were surprised to learn that the assessor's records were often inaccurate, to the point that we found well-kept 20-year-old homes on lots listed as vacant. This, of course, became another story.

At the same time, I received on magnetic tape a set of all Missouri Death Certificates from 1979-89. (Our efforts to obtain Illinois Death Certificates have not yet succeeded).

Reasoning that many East St. Louis residents might die in the large medical centers on this side of the river, we searched for their death records among the 550,000 Missouri death records spanning 11 years.

We came up with more than 1,000 people's names, addresses, social security numbers and dates of birth and death. We alphabetized this list and compared it by hand with the citywide alphabetical listing of voters. This sounds onerous but took only one afternoon.

Of those 1,000 dead people, 270 were still registered to vote. Some had been dead for 11 years. And some, we discovered later after looking at their registration cards, hadn't begun to vote until after they died.

We're still following up the story, which immediately prompted investigations by the U.S. Justice Department, the Illinois Attorney General and the state election board.

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Plugging in....

computer or keyboard phobia. Get them to sit still for 15 minutes and show them time-saving tricks."

5) Know how to fight for funds.

"Once you have bought your equipment, no one may see any reason that you need more. Some people won't understand that the computer business is developing rapidly. Become a superior memo writer and use graphics and documentation to back up the memos. Also, keep a list of every major and minor success."

6) Learn how to get government data.

"With constant self-education, you can learn to discern the amount of manure you are being served by government owners of computer data. If they say they can't technically give you something, offer to get your own data processing people to help them do it. Also, scoff at their first purchase price figure (unless it's zero)."

7) Do even the boring work yourself.

"You will spend time on janitorial work such as saving and backing up files of information, cleaning your computer files and installing new software. You probably will want to get someone else to do this. This is a bad idea because you lose track of your own information and how to move it around and use it."

8) Work with a partner.

"If you are a reporter your production will suffer and thus your stature with production minded managers. If possible pursue this with another editor or reporter because the buddy system works well. At The Courant, my editor Kenton Robinson and I work together, teaching each other, with me concentrating on data tapes and diskettes, and with him nailing down getting information through the phone lines."