IRE AWARDS 2007

CALL FOR ENTRIES

The annual contest of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc.

DEADLINE: Postmark by Jan. 7, 2008

Categories

Newspaper:
For outstanding investigative reporting at a daily or weekly newspaper. (Use highest one-day circulation of the week.) Categories are: Circulation less than 100,000; Circulation between 100,000 and 250,000; Circulation between 250,000 and 500,000; Circulation more than 500,000; and Local-Circulation Weekly.

Television:
For outstanding investigative reporting by a television outlet. Categories are: Network or syndicated program; Top 20 market; and Below Top 20 market.

Other Media:
For outstanding investigative reporting in other media such as Magazine, Newsletter, Specialty Publication, Book and Radio.

Online:
For outstanding investigative reporting.

Special Categories:
Tom Renner Award: Outstanding reporting in any medium covering and exposing organized crime (limited to 10 stories). You must submit TWO sets of copies if submitting an entry in the Tom Renner category and in another category.

IRE FOI Award: Honors individual or organization in any medium whose significant actions further open records or open government. You must submit TWO sets of copies if submitting an entry in the FOI category and in another category.

Student Award: Outstanding investigative reporting by a student in a college-affiliated newspaper, magazine or specialty publication (or while serving a print internship), or broadcast work that has been publicly reviewed, screened or aired.

International Entries: International entries will be placed into appropriate categories by IRE staff. Contest judges can then move entries into other categories. IRE can award a special citation for deserving international work.

NOTE: Judges reserve the right to give more than one award in a category or to declare no winner in a category

The contest recognizes the best investigative reporting in print, broadcast and online media, and helps identify techniques and resources used by entrants.

For entry forms and additional information, visit our Web site at www.ire.org/contest

THE IRE JOURNAL

TABLE OF CONTENTS
NOVEMBER/DECEMBER 2007

INSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE

ABOUT THE COVER
The I-35W bridge lies collapsed in the Mississippi River near downtown Minneapolis Wednesday, Aug. 1, 2007 in this aerial view looking south.

Cover photo:
By Sherri LaRose-Chiglo
St. Paul Pioneer Press

Cover stories:
Pages 14-27

THE IRE JOURNAL

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Horvit to lead IRE in next phase of transformation

JAMES GRIMALDI
THE WASHINGTON POST,
IRE BOARD PRESIDENT

Mark Horvit passed his first test. When a couple of IRE Board members and I took him out for dinner, we went to a Kansas City barbecue joint cloistered inside a working gasoline station. Mark didn't bat an eye.

Of course, maybe that was an easy test. After all, Mark is from Texas.

Still, it gave us a sense that Mark Horvit—IRE's new executive director—probably could take anything that might be thrown at him. And given what we've seen in our industry in the past year, we figured that's just what IRE needs.

Mark, 43, comes to IRE from the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, where he has been the projects editor for the past two years. He is an energetic, passionate, outstanding investigative journalist from IRE's grassroots culture who has skills to forge IRE's future in a turbulent media environment.

Like the profession we serve, IRE has had its own year of transformation. But we are emerging from this year as strong as ever with exciting plans for the future, including dozens of conferences and seminars, more electronic resources and programs for ethnic media newsrooms.

We think that Mark Horvit is the right leader at the right time for an ambitious agenda.

The board's decision to hire Mark emerged from a weekend retreat in Kansas City, Mo., in early October. It was part of a discussion about the future of the organization at a time of declining financial support from traditional media organizations. Board members left that retreat more optimistic than ever as we developed ideas to better serve investigative journalism in the world today.

Our choice of executive director reinforced our optimism, but that's not to say the choice was easy. We thank everyone who applied and interviewed for the job. Any one of the finalists could have performed with aplomb and skill. We also are indebted to a skilled search committee, chaired by David Boardman of *The Seattle Times*, for its work over the past eight months. (As we announced in March, acting executive director Brant Houston is leaving us after 13 remarkable years; his duties as Knight Chair in Investigative and Enterprise Reporting at the University of Illinois began this fall.)

By the time you read this, Mark should have completed the steps in the hiring process, which include election to a teaching position on the Missouri journalism faculty. His appointment officially begins in January.

Active in IRE for more than a decade, Mark presented a powerful set of ideas for the future, such as upgrading services to our members, upgrading our technological capability and providing more downloadable information on our Web site.

Mark says he was drawn to investigative reporting because he had a desire "to figure out what was going on behind the surface, to expose problems, to tell people things they couldn't know any other way."

Reporters say they love to work for Mark, and he has a reputation for juggling many projects and deadlines at once. He has worked as a reporter and/or editor at *The (*Panama City, Fla.) *News Herald,* the *Corpus Christi* (Texas) *Caller-Times*, the *Houston Post*, the *Columbia* (Mo.) *Daily Tribune* and *The Charlotte* (N.C.) *Observer* before joining the *Star-Telegram* in 2003. He was born back East but raised in Texas. Hence, he likes barbecue and beer.

One important footnote: Let's bring Mark in on a great note and reach our fundraising goal for the Knight Foundation Challenge Grant. If you have thought about giving or pledging to IRE's Endowment Fund, please do so NOW. Until Dec. 31, the Knight Foundation will give $1 for every $2 you donate. *See p. 10 for more information.*

Contact James Grimaldi at irepresident@ire.org.

CAR 2008 to launch with advanced Web topics

By IRE Staff

When it comes to the burgeoning world of Web 2.0 and database mining, the 2008 Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference in Houston will offer new ideas and techniques, and a lot of conversations about critical thinking and quality content.

As always, the CAR Conference—which runs Thursday, Feb. 28, until Sunday, Mar. 2, will provide sessions and hands-on training for journalists at every level and in every medium.

The conference will start with panels and hands-on classes in advanced topics. This day has become a gathering for expert CAR practitioners who are providing the foundation for newsrooms' interactive databases and maps on the Web, newsroom intranet resources, and programming new tools for sharing and understanding information.

Thursday's panels will run through the terminology and how-to's of Web and mapping servers, dynamic graphics and creating innovative online content. Special attention will be paid to the visualization of data including social network analysis and other techniques. Panelists will share information about open-source options that help CAR practitioners innovate on a budget.

On Friday, the general conference begins with three tracks of panels and five classrooms with hands-on training. Those panels will include: a tour of the latest CAR stories from every beat; the basics of finding and downloading data; using spreadsheets and database managers; and strategies for starting to blend CAR into everyday reporting.

Speakers will show participants how to navigate an increasingly complex Web with more sophisticated search tools, guides to best sites, tools to find out who is behind online content, and how to dig into pages that common search engines miss, including the "Invisible Web" and social network sites like MySpace and Facebook.

Experienced journalists will share approaches, databases and sources for covering essential news beats every day or in special investigations. The sessions will include campaign finance, immigration, the census, environment, government contracts, schools and health—to name only a few.

The latest twists and turns in Freedom of Information requests and data will be covered, too, and journalism educators will get together to discuss approaches to teaching CAR and preparing journalists to make the most of technology.

The conference will deal with the concerns of editors who are more and more often confronting the challenges and opportunities of CAR. Panels will address such issues as asking the right questions, bulletproofing the story, pushing for the appropriate graphics, presenting the story and data on the Web, and facing new ethical questions caused by new technology.

Specialized panels will be available for broadcast journalists who face different hurdles created by time pressures, shorter presentations and fewer staff members. Trainers from IRE and NICAR will also show how broadcasters can make the most of the services from the Data Library and cite recent successful examples of these collaborations.

The Philip Meyer Awards for the best use of social science methods in journalism also will be presented in Houston. Sessions, appropriately, will talk about applying social science methods and the appropriate use of statistics in news stories.

As in past conferences, all participants will be able to sign up for at least three hands-on sessions and attend any of the Demo Room sessions, which offer informal presentations of up-and-coming CAR tools. A special Mini Boot Camp track will pack the curriculum from a weeklong CAR Boot Camp into the conference.

Register now at www.ire.org/training/houston08. The deadline for $175 early-bird registration is Feb. 15.

The conference will be held at the Doubletree Houston Hotel Downtown. The conference room rate of $139 plus tax is available until Feb. 5, but early reservations are recommended. In past years, the room block has sold out before the deadline. Hotel reservations can be made online at http://tinyurl.com/2beuuv or by phone at 713-759-0202. The group code is IVR.

To submit a suggestion for a conference panel or recommend a speaker, please send ideas to confideas@ire.org.

MEMBER NEWS

Walt Bogdanich and Jake Hooker of *The New York Times* won first place at the inaugural Barlett & Steele Awards for Investigative Business Journalism for "A Toxic Pipeline." ■ **Abbie Boudreau** has joined CNN's Investigative Team at the network's world headquarters in Atlanta. She previously worked at KNXV-Phoenix. ■ **Tyler Christensen** has been named the opinion page editor at the (Montana) *Missoulian*, where she was previously a business reporter. ■ **Fernando Diaz** is a bilingual investigative reporter with *The Chicago Reporter*. He previously was the night police reporter at the *Rochester* (N.Y.) *Democrat and Chronicle*. ■ **James Drew** is an investigative reporter for *The* (Baltimore) *Sun*. He previously worked at *The* (Toledo, Ohio) *Blade*. ■ Longtime IRE member **Mike Dunne** of *The* (Baton Rouge, La.) *Advocate* was posthumously awarded the David Stolberg Meritorious Service Award by the Society of Environmental Journalists. ■ **Bill Hogan**, Jim Morris, **Josh Israel**, Robert Brodsky, Gail Gibson, Lisa M. Fetta and **Wendell Rawls Jr.** of The Center for Public Integrity won first place for outstanding online reporting in the Society of Environmental Journalists' annual contest for environmental reporting. ■ **Merilee D. Karr** wrote the lead essay in "Silence Kills: Speaking Out and Saving Lives," an anthology of essays concerning medical errors and communication, edited by Lee Gutkind. ■ **Bill Lueders**, news editor of *Isthmus* (Madison, Wis.), has a new book, "Cry Rape: The True Story of One Woman's Harrowing Quest for Justice," now available in paperback from the University of Wisconsin Press. ■ **Judy Pasternak** of the *Los Angeles Times* won the James V. Risser Prize for Western Environmental Journalism for "Blighted Homeland," about the uranium mining on Navajo land. ■ **Jennifer Portman**, Bruce Ritchie, Glenn Beil and John Roberge of the *Tallahassee* (Fla.) *Democrat* won first place in the Society of Environmental Journalists' annual awards for outstanding small market reporting

CONTINUED ON PAGE 34 ➢

Send Member News items to Megan Means at meganm@ire.org and include a phone number for verification.

WTVJ-Miami

Hundreds of designer puppies became seriously ill or died soon after their new owners took them home.

PUPPY HEARTBREAK

Hidden cameras show true plight of dogs sold by "celebrity kennel"

BY SCOTT ZAMOST AND JEFF BURNSIDE
WTVJ-MIAMI

It's one of those tips every journalist gets, but which never seems quite strong enough to grab and turn into a story. Every so often, we'd get a call or e-mail from a heartbroken customer complaining that a pet store was selling sick dogs that sometimes died days after they're brought home.

Profiling one customer's plight doesn't establish a pattern. Our goal was to reach other customers whose dogs quickly became ill.

Our investigative series "Puppy Heartbreak" accomplished everything we set out to do and more: track specific dogs back to their breeders, capture on tape the actual delivery of dogs to the retail pet operation and see what consumers are told when they want to buy a puppy. And these were no ordinary puppies—those for sale at the South Florida-based Wizard of Claws sold for thousands of dollars and are described by the operators of the business as the "best of the best." In fact, numerous celebrities had purchased trendy tiny teacup puppies from the store, which advertises itself on television and its Web site as the "world's largest celebrity kennel."

WTVJ-Miami

Reporter Jeff Burnside is wearing a hidden camera to document conditions at a puppy breeding operation in Oklahoma.

Our initial break came through a contact who put us in touch with an angry, unhappy and very determined customer of Wizard of Claws. We were skeptical because the puppy mill story was not new, even though we had not done it at our station.

The couple bought Nacho, a $5,000 teacup Chihuahua, and they had done their homework. They detailed what would become a pattern for customers around the country: paying thousands for a tiny dog that gets very sick shortly after the purchase. Moreover, this couple even obtained paperwork about the conditions of the place where "Nacho" was born. It was the kind of place the Humane Society of the United States calls a puppy mill, where dogs live in cages in unhealthy conditions.

At the interview, we learned that a woman was running a Web site for "victims" of Wizard of Claws. And she happened to be a former Miss Florida. Around the same time, investigative producer Scott Zamost confirmed that the operator of the business was an ex-felon who also had been fined for violating federal animal welfare laws. Based on those two facts alone, it sounded like we had a story.

Unhappy customers

Zamost began compiling public records from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, which keeps track of pet-related complaints, along with information from the Better Business Bureau, our own tipline and Wizard of Claws' customers. Many times one customer knew someone else whose dog had gotten sick or even died shortly after purchase. Our database kept getting bigger and bigger as we documented unhappy customers from around the country. By the time the story aired, we had tracked down 160 customers nationwide, a number that eventually grew in the follow-up stories to 275 customers in 34 states, Mexico and Canada.

One of the most important resources in our investigation was the ability to trace the path from the pet store to the dogs' point of origin—the actual breeder in the Midwest. That's information you normally don't get until you buy a dog. We wanted to see if there were signs the puppies had any pre-existing illnesses before they were purchased, suggesting that Wizard of Claws knew it was acquiring sick or genetically flawed dogs.

We learned that this information was disclosed on a Web site called www.pbtmarketplace.com, available only to those buying and selling dogs—a sort of eBay for the dog industry. A source got us access to the site. Armed with information on some of Wizard of Claws' breeders as well as screen names, we were able to trace actual purchases. In several cases, Wizard of Claws made it even easier by using on its glitzy Web site the very same photo of the puppy used by the breeder on the pbtmarketplace.com Web site.

Our hidden cameras captured puppies shivering from sub-freezing temperatures in outdoor cages and other poor conditions.

The challenge was how to capture the poor conditions on tape. We had information about numerous breeders supplying Wizard of Claws and chose two Midwestern breeders to visit. We knew we would have to go in with hidden cameras, but we would only really know how to proceed once we got there. We sought guidance from the Humane Society of the United States, PETA and Last Chance For Animals. The groups have investigators who routinely check out puppy mills, usually a lengthy and delicate process. We only had days to figure it out.

Cameras in the kennels

Burnside and photojournalist Pedro Cancio dressed as scruffily as possible to blend into the rural areas of Missouri and Oklahoma where everyone knows everyone. Burnside also spoke with the operator of www.nopuppymills.com, who happened to live near one of the breeders we were targeting; she had a wealth of information.

When Burnside and Cancio arrived in tiny Edgar Springs, Mo., they befriended locals at the diner and found a waitress who offered to call the breeder on our behalf. Luckily, the breeder had a small yard sign advertising puppies for sale. So when they showed up, the breeder—who was very suspicious at first—agreed to show them around. We knew she would not show us the breed stock where conditions are often the worst. So Cancio peeled away from the tour just long enough to capture video inside the breeding area. We had traced 50 dogs from Wizard of Claws to this location. Our hidden cameras captured puppies shivering from sub-freezing temperatures in outdoor cages and other poor conditions. If these dogs were the "best of the best," why did they come from such a place?

The second breeder in Oklahoma was more difficult. The location was so remote that one couldn't just show up. So Burnside, still in his best raggedy attire, called first, mentioning the name of a local restaurant, allowing her to believe they were interested in seeing the breeder's dogs, which was true. Both Burnside and Cancio again wore hidden cameras and even set up a static third camera inside the car, capturing dramatic video of hundreds of puppies packed in multi-level cages. Cameras even captured the very same cage that Nacho the Chihuahua came from. It was a powerful contrast to the images of the happy puppy in his new home.

Back in South Florida, we conducted extensive surveillance of Wizard of Claws and eventually found out the delivery schedule for the puppies. We were able to videotape a van loaded with tiny puppies being delivered to the back door. Not surprisingly, the van had a Missouri license plate. And during several undercover visits to the pet store, we were given the same pitch as customers who purchased sick dogs: They came from great breeders.

A former employee told us there was an unmarked "sick bay" next to the pet store where ill dogs were kept. He said sick dogs were, in fact, being sold. During weeks of surveillance, we saw those dogs taken from the sick bay to the main store where prospective buyers waited.

Exposing the truth

But perhaps the most compelling videotape came from customers whose puppies got seriously ill. One recounted how her dog died. Zamost reviewed hundreds of veterinary reports and called experts about what could cause the diseases. We showed up to watch several customers bring in their sick dogs for treatment at a local clinic. A tearful 9-year-old girl whose dog was very sick eloquently told us, "Each day that we sit there, someone's going to buy a new dog, and they're going to have to go through the same thing we went through."

Finally, we attempted to contact all the celebrities listed on the Wizard of Claws Web site. Most were not happy customers and complained their dogs, too, became sick. Others were surprised to learn they were being used to advertise the business.

With all this material on tape, we were ready to call Jim Anderson, the operator of Wizard of Claws. Burnside had previously spoken to him by phone to discuss the allegations in general, so he wasn't surprised to hear from us again. Getting the subject of an investigation to go on camera is always our goal, and Anderson didn't disappoint us. He answered every question during a three-hour interview, during which we showed him video of our findings in Missouri and Oklahoma. He continued to insist that his dogs were superior but expressed surprise at the number of dogs and conditions we uncovered. Later in the day, he agreed to give us a tour of the facility, and we persuaded him to let us shoot the "sick bay." To our amazement, a salesperson entered the sick bay and took a sick dog to the customer waiting room right in front of us.

The original series, which stretched over five days, has had a major impact. Florida's attorney general filed a lawsuit against Wizard of Claws, and the Humane Society of the United States filed a class action suit. Anderson promised not to do business with the two breeders we investigated, but there was evidence he was still purchasing from one of them. More than 500 viewers from around the world, watching our investigation online, responded with outrage.

One of the more poignant viewer e-mails ended with this: "You have given me faith in journalism."

Scott Zamost is the investigative producer for NBC 6, WTVJ-Miami. Jeff Burnside is a special projects reporter. The duo won a 2006 IRE Award for large market television for "Citizenship For Sale." Their "Puppy Heartbreak" series won a National Press Club award and a national Clarion Award.

Cesar L. Laure | The Morning Call

In Pennsylvania, 55 dog wardens are responsible for about 2,700 licensed kennels, including the one owned by Aaron Burkholder, a farmer in Kutztown, Pa.

IN THE DOGHOUSE

Flawed state system lets 9 out of 10 kennels pass inspection

By Tim Darragh
The (Allentown, Pa.) *Morning Call*

Our story about Pennsylvania's broken system for inspecting dog kennels had its roots in a 2005 project we did on another poorly run state program: inspections of food establishments. In that story, then-database editor Chris Schnaars and I found gaping holes in the state's food safety net, with some restaurants going four or five years without being inspected. As we dug into the workings of the state Department of Agriculture, which is responsible for roughly half of all restaurant inspections in Pennsylvania, I learned of the existence of a low-profile speck of state bureaucracy also under Agriculture: the Bureau of Dog Law Enforcement.

If Agriculture failed at a function as vital to public health as food inspections, we wondered how likely it would be that the bureau had a good grip on matters affecting dogs. We were already aware of Pennsylvania's abysmal reputation as a state that allowed "puppy mills." Pennsylvania's dog law bureau has about 55 dog wardens, who are responsible for investigating dog bites, abandoned or loose dogs and inspecting kennels, among other things. They have a tall order: The state has about 2,700 licensed kennels for boarding or breeding dogs or both, which means close to 50 licensed facilities under the jurisdiction of each warden. Licenses are required for kennels that have 26 or more dogs a year, and some breeders move more than 1,000 dogs annually.

Initially, the prospect of a definitive story seemed dim. Bureau clerks in Harrisburg granted us access to their kennel inspection records but told us the records were available only on paper. While poring over thousands of paper records, however, I saw a clerk typing the wardens' hand-written reports into a computer. The employees confirmed they were entering the inspection records into the computer but insisted the information was not housed in a database and that they only knew how to pull up one record at a time.

Schnaars and I returned to Harrisburg for interviews and discovered the computer system was really just a Microsoft Access database. The department balked at turning over the records but eventually gave in three months after our first official request.

That database was not without problems. The biggest issue was that while a warden's comments could be quite detailed, the database field to house that information was limited to 255 characters. That meant a lot of information was truncated in the database, usually for the worst offenders, where a warden was more likely to write a lengthy narrative.

To get that information, Schnaars identified comments fields in the database that were at or near the maximum—about 400 reports – then made repeated trips to Harrisburg to pull the paper records and add the truncated data to our own database. After a few weeks, we had a fairly clean dataset. During his analysis, Schnaars identified more than 1,300 inspections in which a kennel got a satisfactory final grade even though the warden marked items as unsatisfactory, such as frozen water bowls, protruding wires and unclean quarters. (The state, in its wisdom, this summer "resolved" the inconsistent grading problem by eliminating final grades, even for records from earlier years.)

Our primary finding was the opposite of the troubles the Department had with its restaurant inspections. Kennels were getting inspected, but more than nine out of 10 inspections came back perfect, an absurd finding in a state animal welfare experts call the "Puppy Mill Capital of the East Coast."

Meanwhile, I handled the rest of the reporting: interviewing breeders, veterinarians, dog trainers, shelter operators, rescue groups and dog welfare organizations such as the American Society for

Here are a few tips if you want to investigate kennels:

- Go see for yourself. If the kennel owner will not let you inside the kennel, that in itself suggests conditions that could be offensive to the average person. Healthy animals should not be penned up all day. Do they have room to run? Are the dogs clean? Do they appear well-adjusted, or do they look sluggish? Do they exhibit behavior associated with excessive confinement such as chewing on their pens?
- Do not rely solely on dog clubs, the American Kennel Club, rescue organizations or animal welfare organizations for opinions on the optimal conditions for breeding and keeping dogs. These groups are frequently at odds with each other. What is a "puppy mill" to some is a legitimate breeding establishment to others.

the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. I viewed numerous Web sites that dog lovers, a truly dedicated bunch, updated daily and even attended a dog show.

Many of the kennel operators I interviewed were friendly, but getting to observe some of the large operations was difficult. Over the years, some kennel operators have become extremely guarded and fearful of meddling by "animal rights activists." Many of these same kennel operators also are clannish farmers, often Amish and Mennonites, who keep their kennels far from public view. If they sell their dogs, farmers frequently will bring the puppies out to customers, rather than have them walk through the kennel.

Since the state wardens were to conduct "surprise" inspections, I could not accompany them. They were not useful sources anyway because the Agriculture Department prohibited them from speaking out publicly without prior approval. We discussed visiting kennels as potential "customers" but decided against it.

With the complete records in hand, we fleshed out our reporting by working off the wardens' narratives. We found eye-opening examples of poor management and enforcement: a kennel owner who got a slap on the wrist even after a warden found dead puppies; a kennel that less than nine months after its tenth consecutive satisfactory inspection had 23 dogs so sick they had to be seized; inspections that consisted entirely of looking at the dogs and the kennel through an exterior fence; a hole in the law that prohibited wardens from filing cruelty charges.

As it turned out, our investigation coincided with the unveiling of an overhaul of the state's outdated dog law. That set off a flood of public comment, and months later the state continues to respond to the 16,000 individuals and groups that responded.

Revisions are still under consideration. Whatever reforms are enacted, they will be highly influenced by the public's complete access to kennel inspection records and the findings from our stories.

Following our practice with the food inspection story, Schnaars cleaned up the records and created the first public searchable database of state kennel inspections to post on our Web site. (See www.mcall.com/dogs.) We also created a widget to the database and invited interested parties to place the widget on their sites, an offer that some accepted.

Soon readers and Web surfers from far beyond our circulation area were e-mailing tips and comments. Even better, the state took the hint and began posting kennel inspection records on their own site in May (http://services.agriculture.state.pa.us/KennelInspections/SearchKennelInspections.aspx).

Timothy Darragh is investigations editor at The (Allentown, Pa.) Morning Call. Over the past 25 years, his positions have included reporter, assistant city editor and bureau editor.

Harry Fisher | The Morning Call

The Krupa family's Jack Russell terrier, Zoey, nearly died shortly after they brought him home from a Bucks County pet store. *The Morning Call* posted an online database that now allows consumers to check kennel inspection records.

Cesar L. Laure | The Morning Call

Many of the state's kennels are owned by Amish or Mennonite farmers. Jessie L. Smith of the Pennsylvania Dog Law Advisory Board speaks with two women at a meeting about reforms to the state's dog laws.

During his analysis, Schnaars identified more than 1,300 inspections in which a kennel got a satisfactory final grade even though the warden marked items as unsatisfactory, such as frozen water bowls, protruding wires and unclean quarters.

ENDOWMENT NEWS

Grassroots support on deadline: Join the $25 Club today!

Dear Colleagues,

IRE has one of its most critical deadlines ever approaching, and we need your help to make it.

On Dec. 31, our matching grant from the Knight Foundation ends.

The foundation adds 50 cents to every dollar given or pledged to IRE's Endowment Fund. IRE already has earned more than half of the available matching funds from Knight. We can earn hundreds of thousands of dollars more by meeting our Dec. 31 deadline.

So we are appealing to you to help us by joining our new grassroots fundraising effort—The $25 Club. It's a club in which IRE members and friends give $25 before Dec. 31, 2007, and pledge to give $25 a year for the next three years ($100 total). That qualifies for a $50 match.

Please think about how easy it would be to make this donation and pledge. $25 a year is less than 50 cents a week—far less than a cup of coffee or equal to buying a daily paper off the newsstand. **And your donations are tax-deductible.**

We know most journalists don't have a lot of extra money. But any gift would be an important contribution. For one thing, it lets us tell foundations and big donors that a high percentage of members give. For another, there is power in our numbers. If about half of IRE's members made this pledge, we would raise $200,000 and Knight would match it with $100,000. The total of $300,000 would provide permanent investment income for fellowships, conferences and other IRE services.

IRE is a strong, vigorous organization. We want to ensure that it has an equally vibrant future.

If IRE has helped you in your career, please give back now. If you love investigative reporting and its value to our society, please give now. If you want to help IRE help journalists, please give now.

(If you have already given, please encourage your fellow members, colleagues, friends and family to give.)

Sending your pledge is easy. Please fill out the form on the right and mail or fax to IRE. Or you may visit www.ire.org/endowment and click on the "Join the $25 Club" at the top of the page. For more information, contact Jennifer Erickson, jennifer@ire.org, 573-884-2222.

We personally have made our own pledges to the fund. But we also want to make a pledge to you. We promise that the IRE Board of Directors will make the best use of the investment income from these donations to further the cause and practice of investigative reporting and provide the best services possible to you.

Please help us ring in the New Year with a celebration of having met our goal in earning all of the Knight matching money.

Sincerely,

Duff Wilson
Reporter, *The New York Times*
dwilson@nytimes.com
Co-Chair, IRE Development Committee and IRE Board Member

Cheryl Phillips
Deputy Investigations Editor
The Seattle Times
cphillips@seattletimes.com
Co-Chair, IRE Development Committee and IRE Board Member

Lea Thompson
ThomThom Media
thompson@thomthommedia.com
IRE Development Committee and IRE Board Member

Please note that all donations, of any size, qualify for the Knight Foundation matching program. If you would prefer to make a one-time donation—or if you'd like to pledge more than $25 per year—Knight will match every dollar with 50 cents.

Also, if you have ideas for fundraising in your newsroom or region, please contact IRE development officer Jennifer Erickson at jennifer@ire.org or (573) 884-2222. Jennifer is also available to answer questions about the IRE endowment drive, the $25 Club and related inquiries.

BREAKTHROUGHS

Please make your annual contribution to **IRE**!

FUNDING **IRE**'s FUTURE

2007 Annual IRE Endowment Appeal

Help us ensure that IRE's independent voice, state-of-the art training, up-to-date resource library, and vast array of networking possibilities for journalists continue into the future. Join the hundreds of IRE members who have donated and pledged to IRE's endowment fund.

And, through Dec. 31, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation will give $1 for every $2 you donate or pledge under a $1 million partial matching program. See your philanthropic dollars immediately grow!

IRE seeks donations from all audiences that value quality investigative journalism and recognize its importance in keeping governments, businesses and individuals accountable.

IRE depends on contributions to maintain and improve its services and to create long-term financial stability. At present, more than one-third of IRE's $1.4 million annual budget is funded through donations.

By achieving a $5-million endowment, IRE will ensure its uninterrupted support of investigative journalists and editors and will be able to focus its efforts on emerging programs. In short, a strong endowment will allow IRE to continue to foster excellence in investigative journalism, a mission essential to a free and democratic society.

All endowment gifts make a difference because, taken together, they form a strong foundation that continues to grow for years to come.

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RENTED RISKS

U-Haul skipped safety inspections, violated its own towing policies

By Alan C. Miller and Myron Levin
Los Angeles Times

We were deep into reporting on U-Haul's slipshod maintenance practices when we realized that the do-it-yourself moving company had the equivalent of a public database with 200,000 entries crisscrossing America's highways.

Our epiphany concerned U-Haul's "safety certification" program, which required a thorough inspection of most trucks and trailers at least every 30 days. The employee or independent dealer who did the check was then supposed to punch the week, month and year on a sticker and affix it to the outside of the equipment.

We'd seen evidence through litigation in accident cases that these inspections—a pillar of U-Haul's safety program—were only done sporadically. Many of the 60-plus current and former employees we interviewed told us they often didn't have time to do the safety certifications or other required maintenance when faced with angry customers who had reserved equipment that wasn't available where and when they needed it.

Here was a chance to test our preliminary findings against U-Haul's own standard.

Reporters and researchers with the *Times* hit the road on weekends in January and February to record the most recent safety certification on U-Haul rentals, looking everywhere from highway rest stops in California to IKEA parking lots in Maryland and Atlanta.

We checked 207 pieces of equipment and found that about half the trucks and more than three-quarters of the trailers were overdue for the inspections. One-fifth had not been safety certified in at least six months.

U-Haul executives did not dispute our findings, although they defended the quality of their maintenance program.

This was one of several investigative techniques that proved valuable in the course of reporting "Danger in Tow," our three-part series on U-Haul (*Los Angeles Times*, June 24-26).

Among the major findings:

- As the nation's largest provider of rental trailers, U-Haul International's practices have heightened the risk of towing accidents, specifically from a peril known as "trailer sway;"
- U-Haul tries to squeeze the last mile from its vehicles and often fails to meet its own standards for inspecting and maintaining them;
- U-Haul has repeatedly lost, altered or discarded truck and trailer parts sought by injured customers who sued the company.

The series prompted a huge response. The Latimes.com Web site has recorded more than 965,000 hits and we received more than 200 e-mails, most chronicling a negative experience with U-Haul.

Following the *Times*' report, U-Haul chairman Edward J. "Joe" Shoen defended the company's safety program. But in a memo to the company's 18,000 employees and 14,500 independent dealers, he also urged them to perform "timely" inspections of equipment and encouraged them to enroll in training classes.

In October, we reported that U-Haul had overhauled its inspection program and was pushing its employees and dealers to be more vigilant about checking equipment. "Now, if inspections aren't done when they're supposed to be, you hear about it," a veteran supervisor in Connecticut said.

Stalled access

In investigating U-Haul, empirical data was especially vital because of the size of its fleet, including more than 200,000 trucks and trailers and millions of annual rentals. We needed to go beyond anecdotes and lawsuits to examine the Phoenix-based company's performance.

Moreover, we had to overcome the fact that the only available accident data is maintained by U-Haul and has never been independently verified. The company claims its statistics show it's safer to tow its equipment than to drive a car without a trailer— a claim experts view skeptically.

Our analysis of major accidents—gleaned from thousands of pages of court documents; interviews with lawyers, victims and experts; and two trials we attended—provided an initial framework.

We created a matrix of accident cases to track common lapses by U-Haul. These included brake problems, failure to provide user instructions or to complete safety certification, and rentals that involved unsafe towing weights.

Our dealings with U-Haul were protracted and often contentious. After preliminary interviews with U-Haul attorneys, the company hired the Los Angeles-based crisis communications firm Sitrick and Company. For nearly a year, we had to submit all questions in writing; carefully worded and sometimes opaque responses arrived weeks or even months later. At one point, U-Haul's Sitrick handler inadvertently sent us a response with his color-coded edit of the company's draft answers.

On the plus side, U-Haul devoted an extraordinary amount of time to fielding our questions, which ultimately numbered in the hundreds. On the downside, our dealings with the company became frustratingly slow and formalized.

An exception was the three days we spent in Phoenix with Shoen and company attorneys.

We had been promised a 90-minute interview with Shoen. But he unexpectedly led us on a 10-hour tour of U-Haul operations in the Phoenix area—in record-setting 118-degree heat.

Policy of contradictions

Our series highlighted cases that reflected patterns of negligence or mistakes. The first-day story focused on U-Haul's handling of the risk of trailer sway. We opened with the story of Marissa Sternberg, a 19-year-old who suffered brain damage that left her barely able to move or communicate after a 2003 trailer sway crash. The trailer she rented to transport her belongings to veterinary school had not been safety certified in more than eight months, and its brakes were inoperable.

A trailer traveling downhill or shaken by a sharp turn or gust of wind can begin swinging so violently that only the most experienced—or fortunate—drivers can regain control. The best way to prevent sway is with a vehicle that weighs much more than the trailer.

By comparing U-Haul's policies to those of its major competitors, we were able to show that U-Haul is the only large self-moving company that allows its customers to tow behind passenger vehicles. Penske and Budget provide their tow equipment only to customers who rent large trucks to pull the load. The reason, they say, is safety.

By reviewing vehicle makers' owner's manuals and towing guides, we were able to show that U-Haul's rules often conflict with manufacturers' more conservative recommendations for towing. This applies to weight standards as well as trailer safety features, such as brakes and sway-control devices.

By surveying brake regulations in numerous states, we found that U-Haul's decision not to put brakes on its mid-size trailers conflicted with the laws of at least 14 states.

During our Phoenix interviews, a day after we had confronted the company's attorneys with this finding, we got a surprising response.

Shoen acknowledged that U-Haul was not in compliance with the state motor vehicle codes. To illustrate his view that authorities have no reason to enforce these rules, he pulled a news clipping from his pocket about a 201-year-old North Carolina law barring unmarried couples from living together.

What's important, he said, is that vehicles towing U-Haul equipment can stop within state-mandated braking distances.

Overall, Shoen defended U-Haul's safety policies and record as first-rate. "Our equipment is suited for your son and daughter," he told us.

Crashes and complaints

But we found instances of U-Haul violating its own rules—including its requirement that cars or trucks hauling a second vehicle on a tow dolly weigh more than what they're pulling. To check U-Haul's compliance, we reviewed police reports and other records on 222 crashes nationwide from 1989 through 2004 in which drivers lost control while pulling tow dollies. In 105 of those cases, the documents contained enough detail to determine the weight of the tow vehicle and the vehicle it was towing. In 51 of those crashes—49 percent—the rentals violated U-Haul's own weight rule.

We determined that at least 12 people died in those 51 wrecks.

To examine reports of poor customer service, we obtained from a source more than 2,000 consumer complaints filed with the Better Business Bureau in Phoenix. We also got additional complaints from the Federal Trade Commission through a FOIA request and Arizona state agencies through public records requests. These provided vivid portraits of customers who suffered accidents, breakdowns, delays in filling reservations and rude treatment.

In our second-day story, focusing on deficient maintenance, we included several such accounts. One involved a woman whose truck suffered the equivalent of multiple organ failure during a move from Michigan to Arizona with her daughter and young granddaughter. "It was a trip from hell," she said.

We had our own wild ride as well.

During our day with Shoen, he stowed a 750-pound concrete block in the back of an open U-Haul trailer he was towing behind his Lincoln Town Car in an effort to induce sway. By deliberately failing to follow U-Haul's instructions to put more than half the weight in the front, Shoen sought to demonstrate that towing the company's equipment is safe unless the customer screws up.

He gunned the Lincoln along a suburban thoroughfare to get the trailer to whip behind it. Then, Shoen said, "I want to see if I can reload it." He hit the brakes and the concrete block shot forward, denting the trailer's front.

"Now," he said, "I can drive 140 miles an hour and drink a Coke." Pushing to 80 mph and thrusting his hands in the air, Shoen rested his case.

Alan C. Miller is an investigative reporter in the Washington bureau of the Los Angeles Times. He won the Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting in 2003 and has twice received an IRE Award. He's been with the Times nearly 21 years, the last 13 as an investigative reporter in Washington.

Myron Levin, a member of the California investigations desk at the Los Angeles Times, has been a reporter for 35 years. Prior to joining the Times in 1984, he worked for the Kansas City Star, the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, and for newspapers in Maine.

Sherri LaRose-Chiglo | Pioneer Press

THEY'RE THE FOUNDATION OF SO MANY PARTS OF EVERYDAY LIFE — BRIDGES, HIGHWAYS, DAMS AND MORE — THAT WE OFTEN TAKE FOR GRANTED UNTIL THEY FAIL. BUT WATCHDOG JOURNALISTS KNOW THAT THESE STRUCTURES ARE ONLY AS SOLID AS THE SYSTEMS THAT MAINTAIN THEM. THAT'S WHY KNOWLEDGE ABOUT INSPECTION DATABASES, FAST-TRACK DOCUMENT REQUESTS AND DEADLINE WEB RESEARCH SHOULD BE PART OF EVERY NEWSROOM'S ESSENTIAL FUNCTIONS, TOO.

INSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE

MAKING EVERY RESOURCE COUNT

A VIEW FROM ST. PAUL

By MaryJo Webster
St. Paul (Minn.) *Pioneer Press*

Brandi Jade Thomas | Pioneer Press

Twin Cities media outlets worked long hours to cover details from the scene, as well as answer larger questions about bridge safety and accountability.

QUICK LOOK

Name of the series and when it was published:
Interstate 35W bridge collapse. Stories published Aug. 2-10.

How the story got started:
Breaking news after the collapse of the Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis on Aug. 1.

Length of time taken to report, write and edit the series:
It was a series of stories reported and written within a week of the Aug. 1 collapse. Each story took a few hours or perhaps a couple of days at most.

Major types of documents used:
National Bridge Inventory database from NICAR. Inspection reports on the I-35W bridge that were available on the Minnesota Department of Transportation's Web site. No FOIA requests needed.

Major types of human sources used:
Bridge engineers, inspectors and state Department of Transportation officials

I was driving home from work that evening, just a little past 6 p.m., when several squad cars blazed past my left shoulder. Minutes later at home, my phone rang. "What do you know about bridges?" our new city editor asked.

I flipped on my television and saw where the police had been heading: the carnage of twisted metal, concrete, cars and horrified victims. The Interstate 35W bridge in Minneapolis had collapsed into the Mississippi River.

It was Aug. 1, just hours from deadline. The *St. Paul Pioneer Press* was facing one of its biggest stories in years, and it was happening in the backyard of the *Star Tribune*, our much larger competitor next door in Minneapolis. I jumped back in the car.

Brandi Jade Thomas | Pioneer Press

Rescue workers work at the scene where a freeway bridge collapsed into the Mississippi River just north of downtown Minneapolis. The *Pioneer Press* newsroom covered real-time developments while furiously digging for information on the bridge's inspection history.

Without the public records, our first-day stories would have missed a major part of the story.

INSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE

Pioneer Press reporters and photographers rushed to the scene. One even rode his bicycle, and editors didn't know he was there until he started filing stories. Editors divvied up duties and made sure all the bases were covered.

Despite the impending deadline and limited resources, editors assigned a core group of people the job of answering "Why did this happen?" and "What can we get that nobody else has?" Their task: find public records, officials and experts to provide some clues.

Two hours later, we had records from the Federal Highway Administration's National Bridge Inventory database showing that this bridge had been deemed "structurally deficient." We also uncovered an outside consultant's report that pointed to numerous problems. At about the same time, the Minnesota governor, in his first statement to the media, said the I-35W bridge had "passed" its most recent inspections.

Without the public records, our first-day stories would have missed a major part of the story.

In the days that followed, the *Pioneer Press* devoted almost the entire newsroom to covering the bridge collapse. Reporters scoured the scene, tracking down family members of victims and writing compelling stories about the horrific minutes and hours after the collapse.

Back in the office, editors made tough decisions about what to sacrifice to keep a core group of reporters pursuing the more analytical in-depth reporting.

How the *Pioneer Press* reacted is a useful lesson for other small news organizations covering a major disaster.

The story of the bridge collapse was particularly challenging for the *Pioneer Press* because two recent rounds of buyouts had slashed the newsroom ranks by more than 30 people. Gone, too, was the newspaper's investigative team, which had been dismantled a year earlier.

It was also the first major disaster where the paper's Web site was a significant factor. The need for continuous updates added a new layer of complexity for editors to manage, while the opportunity for audio and video presented a new way to tell the story.

Ultimately, four relatively simple things made it possible for this underdog to keep up with—and sometimes surpass—the bigger competition:

- Filing public records requests immediately and asking for more than just paper records.
- Mining existing databases and using those as leverage to pry open other records.

- Assigning one editor to oversee everything bridge-related.
- Sacrificing to cover the bigger story.

The first few hours after the collapse could have been unrestrained chaos. Good communication and key decisions pulled it together.

Among the decisions that paid off handsomely was making one assignment editor the "bridge editor." The second was assigning another editor to focus solely on planning the next days' coverage. The third was to assign a reporter to rewrite feeds from other reporters and post them immediately to the Web site. Finally, one assignment editor volunteered to shepherd all non-bridge stories.

Mobility and technology

City Hall reporter Tim Nelson is a good example of fast footwork. He got wind of the collapse as he lit the candles on his 7-year-old daughter's birthday cake. "Blow 'em out quick," he told her, before he grabbed a digital recorder and camera, jumped on his bicycle and headed for the scene. The combination of mobility and technology netted him the only two recorded interviews in the nation with survivors of the collapse.

After pedaling home to upload the audio to the paper's Web site, Nelson started banging out boiler-plate public records requests to the state Department of Public Safety and local police agencies. But he wasn't asking only for paper records.

Seven hours later, the first response arrived from the Department of Public Safety: a digital video clip showing the actual collapse, taken by a nearby security camera. It was on the *Pioneer Press* Web site minutes later and traffic skyrocketed. CNN was the only other media to get the footage. It is the only known videotape or image of the actual collapse.

Without an existing investigative team, editor Thom Fladung had to pick reporters who would answer "Why did it happen?" He says he looked for four qualities: experience using public records, ability to explain complex concepts, skill at tracking down officials and getting them to talk, and ability to work well with others.

The key members ended up being business reporters Jennifer Bjorhus and Christopher Snowbeck, metro reporter Jason Hoppin and me, the paper's computer-assisted reporting editor. (Coincidentally, two days earlier Hoppin had been interviewing bridge inspectors and engineers about one of St. Paul's bridges in need of replacement.)

The strategy came at a cost. Removing two of the best reporters from the business team was a huge sacrifice that meant the business section couldn't cover some stories in the days that followed. The metro desk was incapacitated because everyone was covering the collapse, so the paper dramatically cut back on stories zoned to specific areas for several days and few non-bridge stories made it into the paper.

Fladung says having the investigative angles was worth any sacrifice, even if that meant sending fewer people to the scene or giving up other stories.

"That allowed us to spin it more forward, which was crucial," Fladung said. "And it informed our reporting along the way so it wasn't all emotion."

Rapid inspection

The National Bridge Inventory database was indispensable to unlocking the I-35W bridge's inspection history, as well as understanding how bridges in the U.S. are categorized and prioritized for badly needed funding for repairs. Fast access to the database enabled us to jump on these central questions immediately.

The first thing I did that night was try to find a home or cell phone number for Jeff Porter, the current Database Library director, so I could get the data. He quickly posted the database to the FTP server for us to download. (For more information on the bridge data, see an article by Jeff Porter on p. 23.) I knew about the database and had experience working with it from my days as IRE and NICAR Database Library administrator. Despite that prior experience, I was still petrified to work with it on a tight deadline.

Less than two hours after the bridge plunged into the Mississippi, I had the data and knew the results of the 2005 inspection, the most recent report in the database. Business reporter Snowbeck and I were furiously learning new terms such as "structurally deficient" and "fracture critical."

Finding officials to help interpret it all, however, proved impossible that first night. No one was answering their phones, and phone numbers were hard to find even with the plethora of public records that we had at our fingertips, including driver's license and voter registration data, Lexis-Nexis and property records. A reporter banged on the front door of one state bridge inspector whose home address we found; he didn't answer.

At about 8:30 p.m., after some intensive Web research, Snowbeck unearthed a very recent University of Minnesota engineering report on the bridge. The 80-page report noted problems on the bridge but concluded that it didn't require immediate replacement. The report foreshadowed many other inspection reports to come. All identified problems but stopped short of calling for immediate replacement.

Data in the big picture

Our first story, published immediately that night on the Web, raised more questions than it answered. But the information we found about the bridge's inspection history opened several doors in the coming days.

Specifically, it gave us leverage to pry loose copies of the recent inspection reports from the Minnesota Department of Transportation. Eventually they created a Web site with PDFs of all inspections, outside reports, construction drawings and other information about the bridge: www.dot.state.mn.us/i35wbridge/index.html.

The National Bridge Inventory database was indispensable to unlocking the I-35W bridge's inspection history, as well as understanding how bridges in the U.S. are categorized and prioritized for badly needed funding for repairs. Fast access to the database enabled us to jump on these central questions immediately.

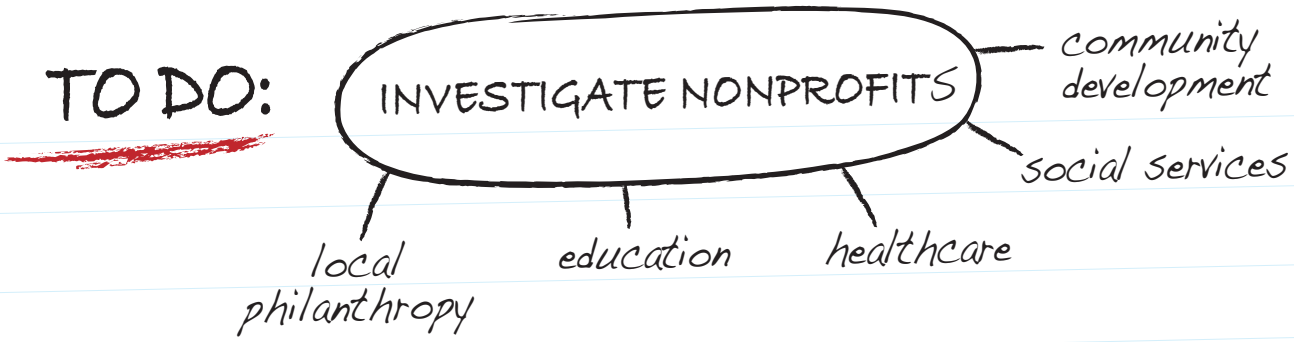
Several more significant stories came from the bridge database that first week. For one, I mined the inventory to show the strange history of the bridge's "sufficiency rating"—the overall condition rating assigned by the Federal Highway Administration, the arm of the U.S. Transportation Department responsible for rating bridges, maintaining the National Bridge Inventory and distributing money for replacement and rehabilitation.

In 1994, federal bridge authorities assigned the span a 46.5 rating out of 100. Eight years later in 2002, the rating rose to 50—the rating it had when it collapsed—despite the fact that the bridge hadn't undergone any major rehabilitation work in that time. The higher rating of 50 likely made the bridge ineligible for replacement funding.

We also used the database to give readers an overview of the health of bridges throughout the state. Due to lack of time, we focused on the ones our readers would care most about: the handful of bridges in St. Paul that were listed as structurally deficient and also fracture critical.

We may never truly know the full effect that the extra digging had on our overall reporting. Readers sent plenty of e-mails indicating they appreciated it, and at least one reader who complimented our coverage the Sunday after the collapse even used our favorite phrase: "I didn't see any of this in the Minneapolis paper."

MaryJo Webster is the computer-assisted reporting editor at the St. Paul Pioneer Press, where she works on daily and long-term stories, develops interactive Web applications and provides CAR training for reporters and editors.



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David Denney | Star Tribune

Reporters continue to pursue public records to follow up on the Aug. 1 collapse.

DIGGING FOR DATA IN A CRISIS

A VIEW FROM MINNEAPOLIS

By Dan Browning
Star Tribune

I was wrapping up a story out of federal court about 6:10 p.m. on Aug. 1 when a reporter ran back into the newsroom and breathlessly announced that a bridge on Interstate 35W had collapsed into the Mississippi River.

I looked out the window and saw a plume of smoke. Moments later, the sirens started. I began typing faster, knowing what lay ahead.

INSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE

QUICK LOOK

Name of the series and when it was published:
"After the Collapse." Publication began Aug. 2, 2007 and is ongoing.

How the story got started:
The story got started Aug. 1 when a bridge on Interstate 35W across the Mississippi River collapsed, killing 13 and injuring more than 100 people.

Length of time taken to report, write and edit the series:
It was a series of stories reported and written in the weeks after the Aug. 1 collapse. The stories took from a few hours to a couple of months to report and write. Individual segments of the ongoing series have taken between hours and weeks to report and write. This is still a developing story.

Major types of documents used:
The National Bridge Inventory database, bridge inspection reports, In-depth Fracture Critical Bridge Inspection Reports, e-mails, scholarly papers, consultant reports and related documents. Many of the documents were obtained through the state's sunshine law, known as the Minnesota Government Data Practices Act.

Major types of human sources used:
Engineers, academics, bridge inspectors, politicans and transportation officials in Minnesota and around the country.

INSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE

I had not worked with the Federal Highway Administration's National Bridge Inventory database since 1994, when I discovered its complexity and shortcomings while working at the *St. Paul Pioneer Press*. Minnesota is known for taking good care of its bridges, and that's what I had found in the data. As usual, we were above average, and I aborted the story I'd been planning. Five years later, when I became the *Star Tribune*'s computer-assisted reporting editor, I decided against buying the bridge data again. That turned out to be penny-wise and pound-foolish.

Now we had a bridge in the water, and I desperately hoped that the paper's current CAR editor, Glenn Howatt, had the data. Unfortunately, he was on vacation and could not be reached. I searched through some CDs on his desk, but the bridge data weren't among them.

The newsroom jumped into action almost immediately. Reporters and editors who'd gone home returned to work without prompting. Management pulled everyone together and announced their plans. We'd be adding pages, but the deadlines would be tight.

After discussing what I remembered about the National Bridge Inventory database with reporters Paul McEnroe and Tony Kennedy, they pressed me to find the ratings on the collapsed structure, known as Minnesota Bridge #9340. I found an Internet search engine for the database at www.nationalbridges.com. But I soon discovered that it has some bugs; no matter what I tried, it returned ratings on the wrong bridge. The owner of the site could not be reached that night.

Enter Jeff Porter, Database Library Director for IRE and NICAR.

At 8:33 p.m., Porter sent out a brief note on the IRE Listserv reminding reporters around the country that the organization had infrastructure resources, including data on bridges. I left voice-mail and e-mail messages: "Can you run the condition report on NIB ID Number 9340?" I pleaded.

"Will shoot you the record on that one right away," Porter responded by e-mail about 30 minutes later.

Just before 9 p.m., I had the data in hand and turned in a front-page story about the bridge's "structurally deficient" rating.

I am wary of deadline reporting based on unfamiliar and unverified databases, so I kept the story conservative and simple. I knew that we'd be digging much deeper in the ensuing weeks and months.

Database savvy

The next day, with an assist from Ron Nixon, a former IRE training director now at *The New York Times*. I obtained the bridge data from the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting and began reading the corresponding 125-page Recording and Coding Guide for the data.

I reasoned that readers would want to know not only about the bridge that collapsed but also about similar bridges that they must cross. I decided to create a list of bridges on major roadways that were rated similar to or worse than Bridge 9340—in other words, bridges that rated both structurally deficient and 50 or lower in the sufficiency index, the number that indicates that a bridge is eligible for replacement funds.

Bridge 9340 also was labeled "fracture critical," meaning that it was designed in such a way that a single failure could lead to a catastrophic collapse of a span or the entire structure. I did not restrict my queries to that type of bridge when I produced the list of the state's worst bridges. I figured that readers would want to know whether a large chunk of a bridge could fall away as they were driving across it, regardless of whether the entire span might collapse.

Meanwhile, reporter David Shaffer worked on an in-depth story about fracture-critical bridges in Minnesota. I pulled the data to help flesh it out.

The governor and the Minnesota Department of Transportation tried to put the best face possible on the state's bridge maintenance practices. When discussing the state's structurally deficient bridges, for instance, they only cited data from bridges on the National Highway System, which makes the state look better by excluding a large number of sub-par bridges on other roadways. We used the numbers for all roadways in our stories.

As the story developed, I monitored the IRE and NICAR Listervs to see what others were doing. This story struck a note nationally, and many reporters did excellent work. A number had worked with the bridge data in the past, and the messages were filled with cautionary notes and good ideas.

Among my favorites: Mark Houser of the *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review* said he was using the "Structure Evaluation" field—in addition to structural ratings for deck, substructure and superstructure—when he did his analysis. The field contained pithy definitions, including "basically intolerable," which made it easier for readers to grasp, he said.

I reran all of my queries to include Structure Evaluation and found that Houser was right. MnDOT officials groused that they'd never heard of a bridge rating described as basically intolerable. But we were able to point to the definition on page 45 of the Recording and Coding Guide for the Structure Inventory and Appraisal of the Nation's Bridges.

Of course, we didn't just rely on computerized data for our reporting. I filed a public records request the day after the bridge collapse for every scrap of paper and electronic digit I could imagine on the bridge. I knew from extensive reporting

When John Sievert of Lake St. Croix Beach, Minn., stopped to looked at the bridge his wife drives under daily to work he discovered exposed rebar and crumbling concrete. His concerns led him to contact state Sen. Kathy Saltz, who was equally concerned about the conditions of the bridge. They returned to the site to show a reporter and photographer after the I-35W bridge collapse.

on MnDOT several years ago that it would be a tough slog to get what we were after. As I write this, we still haven't received everything we've demanded.

Sniffing out contracts

McEnroe and Kennedy did excellent work early on by prying loose a consulting contract from MnDOT. The San Francisco-based engineering firm URS Corp. had recommended shoring up the bridge with steel plates. Upon further review, MnDOT decided to conduct further inspections, a process interrupted by the collapse.

Reporter Pat Doyle and I figured that the documents in MnDOT's possession would tell only part of the story though. Like many government agencies, MnDOT has been downsizing for years and relied more and more on contractors. But we knew that state professional service contracts are supposed to include clauses that make the work product subject to the state's public records law, known as the Data Practices Act. So we demanded that MnDOT compel the firm to produce its records for inspection, too.

Meanwhile, we discovered that fracture-critical bridges must undergo yearly, in-depth inspections in addition to the annual routine inspections that flow into the National Bridge Inventory. So a group of reporters began poring through the in-depth inspection reports on the I-35W bridge. These reports run up to 50 pages and contain some vivid descriptions and photographs. They're chapters in a story about what the inspectors knew about the bridge's gradual deterioration. Most recently, we obtained the inspectors' notes from the last partial bridge inspection this spring.

Our reporting about this disaster continues and will occupy us for some time to come. But we've already learned (or reinforced) some valuable lessons that will be useful to anyone covering infrastructure stories in the future, whether they deal with roads, bridges, dams, shipping ports, airports or railways.

Tips for infrastructure coverage

- Readers are deeply interested in these issues. They'll reward your stories with thanks and, more importantly, tips.
- Few people can master all of the databases that exist on infrastructure. But reporters and/or CAR

Like many government agencies, MnDOT has been downsizing for years and relied more and more on contractors. But we knew that state professional service contracts are supposed to include clauses that make the work product subject to the state's public records law, known as the Data Practices Act.

Renee Jones Schneider | Star Tribune

The Star Tribune and other news outlets immediately wanted to know if any other structures were at risk.The ability to pinpoint deteriorating bridges has made the National Bridge Inventory a standard tool in computer-assisted reporting.

Go beyond the data. The reports underlying these databases are often rich in detail. There's no substitute for a damning note scrawled in the margin of some government document.

INSIDE INFRASTRUCTURE

editors should know that the government has been collecting data on the nation's infrastructure for decades. For a good primer on what other reporters have found useful, check IRE and NICAR Database Library at www.ire.org/datalibrary. Be forewarned that while some of these datasets are rich, they also can be complex. Never state more in a story than you know for sure!

- Lurk on the NICAR and IRE Listservs. The wheat-to-chaff ratio on these lists skews strongly toward wheat. Reach out to colleagues who have worked with the data before. They will save you hours of frustration and help you avoid having to write corrections.
- Go beyond the data. The reports underlying these databases are often rich in detail. There's no substitute for a damning note scrawled in the margin of some government document.
- Seek the data from multiple sources. When MnDOT has stalled on giving us data, we've occasionally found it at the Department of Administration, which oversees contracting in Minnesota. Similarly, an e-mail request that turns up nothing at one agency might produce results from the senders or recipients, proving that someone at the first agency had deleted public information.

Use agency payroll databases to develop contact lists. And make sure when you update the payroll data to archive the old data. This way you can find both current and former employees. The current workers will have more active knowledge, but those who left may be more likely to talk or to direct you to key documents.

- Don't neglect scholarly works. A great deal of research has been done on infrastructure. Try http://scholar.google.com to "stand on the shoulders of giants."
- Go after nongovernmental sources. Many consultants will be reluctant to talk on the record, but you just might find some concerned engineers, truck drivers, aggregate suppliers, chemical producers, lawyers or others who will let loose.
- Expand your concept of public data to include voice recordings, video, photographs, sonar readings and anything else you can think of. These media can put you and your readers inside the room where the decisions were made.

Dan Browning covers federal government for the Star Tribune. He has a special interest in computer-assisted reporting (CAR), having served as the Star Tribune's CAR editor from 1998 to 2001. He has won numerous reporting awards for his investigative work and stories on racial issues, public affairs, health, spot news and military affairs.

BRIDGE DATA

FEDERAL BRIDGE DATABASE HAS ITS OWN STRUCTURAL ISSUES

By Jeff Porter
IRE and NICAR Database Library Director

It started with a recording on Aug. 1. After a family function, I came home around 8:30 p.m. to an urgent answering machine message from a colleague seeking National Bridge Inventory data.

About 6:05 p.m. that evening, a bridge over I-35W in Minneapolis had suddenly collapsed with vehicles falling into the Mississippi River. Thirteen people died and many more were injured.

In 48 hours, the IRE and NICAR Database Library provided more than 150 news organizations with the National Bridge Inventory. Over the next few days, that number grew to 200. The term "structurally deficient" was all over print, on the air and online, in stories comparing local bridges and generating serious questions.

The database, obtained by IRE and NICAR since 1995, allows journalists to check bridge inspection records. Each bridge inspection also results in a sufficiency rating—in essence, a grade for each bridge. Other key elements include the status of the superstructure, or above-the-road parts of the bridge; the deck, or the part of the bridge that carries traffic; and the substructure, or parts of the bridge supporting the deck.

Other important pieces of information in the database include the number of cars the bridge carries on average; the year it was built; estimates of repair cost; the state, county and city it is located in; and the last inspection on record.

With so much information—and with the assistance of the Database Library and IRE Resource Center, plus our NICAR-L Listserv—journalists started reporting on the status of local bridges shortly after the catastrophe. In the days following, millions of drivers who travel on America's bridges became far more informed about the fragile state, in some cases, of the country's infrastructure.

Bridge safety has long been a staple in computer-assisted reporting, and Minnesota's own bridge problems were common knowledge. In 1994, for example, the *Post-Bulletin* of Rochester, Minn., reported that deteriorating bridges were not being repaired and replaced fast enough, forcing some counties to restrict or close bridges while they waited for money needed for repairs. At the time, the newspaper reported, the cost of addressing the problems would have been $184 million.

But past and present bridge problems aren't confined to Minnesota. In 1999, for example, KOMU-Columbia, Mo., used the database to identify deteriorating Missouri bridges, including large chunks of concrete falling onto interstate traffic lanes. The state was so behind, reported Mark Greenblatt, now an investigative reporter at KHOU-Houston,

, that it would take 49 years to fix the problem with the funding level at the time—even though an average bridge has a lifespan of 50 years.

And between 2000 and 2007, media report after media report from Boston to Portland, Ore., and from Paducah, Ky., to Camarillo, Calif., showed the problems of the nation's bridges. In a two-part series in 2003, *The Cincinnati Enquirer* dissected a long, heavily traveled interstate bridge that didn't meet federal safety standards and outlined the problems entailed in fixing or replacing it.

The stories written about the country's bridges before and after the I-35W bridge collapse are based on a database with its own quirks.

One quirk is terminology. Because the database was created by engineers, much of its terminology is quite technical. Journalists' work began revolving around terms such as "structurally deficient" and "sufficiency rating." The first is a designation by the Federal Highway Administration to describe bridges that have major deterioration, cracks or other deficiencies in their structural components, including decks, girders or foundations. A sufficiency rating is more complex—a calculation based on the status of the bridge's key components. Its purpose is to help determine if the bridge should be placed on a list for repair or replacement. According to the agency's Web site, "The National Bridge Inventory will be used for preparing the selection list of bridges both on and off of federal-aid highways. Highway bridges considered structurally deficient or functionally obsolete and with a sufficiency rating of 80 or less will be used for the selection list. Those bridges appearing on the list with a sufficiency rating of less than 50 will be eligible for replacement or rehabilitation while those with a sufficiency rating of 80 or less will be eligible for rehabilitation" (www.fhwa.dot.gov/legsregs/directives/fapg/0650dsup.htm).

Another quirk: timing. Most bridges aren't inspected every year. The latest available database, from early 2007, includes thousands of bridge inspection records prior to 2006, and even for 2006 the bulk are based on inspections from early that year. That means, of course, that the bridge might have been repaired or even replaced since the last recorded inspection. While overall statistics are one thing, it is always advisable to check further records on any specific bridge you intend to highlight.

Another potential problem: counting bridges. Ignore an easy-to-miss data field called "record type," and you'll potentially miscount bridges. The database contains two kinds of records: "on" and "under." What's the difference? An "on" record is what you'd normally think of as a bridge—the road is "on" the bridge. There is also an inspection record for each instance a road goes "under" the bridge. If a record is an "on" type, the record type field shows a "1." Otherwise, it's an "under" record. So any overpass would have at least two records—for the road that goes "on" the bridge and the one that goes "under" it. The "on" record typically is the one to look for; often, critical fields are not filled in when it's an "under" record. As in any database, the National Bridge Inventory contains human errors. For example, in 2003 the agency stopped releasing latitude and longitude, citing national security. That decision was reversed in 2007, but in two states the format of those fields did not follow the federal instructions in the Recording and Coding Guide. The guide notes that the latitude and longitude are to be recorded as degrees, minutes and seconds, but in two instances—Iowa in 2006 and Michigan in 2000—the data files include decimal-degree values. Use the wrong method and you've misplaced thousands of bridges. So NICAR treated those states' latitude and longitude differently.

With the just-upgraded version of the National Bridge Inventory available through NICAR, journalists have a resource for quick-hit bridge status stories or more long-term projects. The NICAR version of the database includes story ideas, warnings and suggestions, and archival data back to 1994. As many states respond to the 35W bridge collapse with promises of more bridge inspections and repair, journalists can mine the database for story after story.

Jeff Porter is director of the IRE and NICAR Database Library and has served as an instructor at the Missouri School of Journalism. Since 2001, he has provided ready-to-use government databases to hundreds of journalists. He helps lead computer-assisted reporting boot camps for journalists and has spoken during journalism training events across the United States and in China, England and South Korea.

Gary Porter | Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

The Monterey Mill Pond Dam in far northwestern Waukesha County hasn't been inspected in more than 10 years.

FALLING BEHIND

WISCONSIN DAM SAFETY LAGS BEHIND NEIGHBORING STATES

By Ben Poston and Patrick Marley
Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

After the I-35W bridge in Minneapolis collapsed, we did what most of you did: We obtained a state slice of the National Bridge Inventory from the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting to gauge the safety of bridges in our state.

Then we began to wonder about the safety of Wisconsin's additional infrastructure. In a state with more than 15,000 lakes and who knows how many farm ponds, we decided to focus our attention on dam safety.

First, we read that the American Society of Civil Engineers gave Wisconsin a C-minus grade on dams and river infrastructure earlier this year, saying the state needed to devote more money to dam inspections and maintenance. OK, so what does C-minus mean, we asked.

We found out that inspectors do not rate the condition of dams numerically, as bridge inspectors do. Bridges are ranked on a scale of 1 to 100 that gives the public an easy way to tell if they are up to current standards. There is no such rating for dams, however.

That turned our focus to inspections—something we could easily track. We could also identify which dams were the largest and most dangerous because of a broad labeling system that tells the public how much damage could result if a dam were to fail.

A week later, we published "Falling Behind," a story that showed the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources had not inspected at least 230 state-regulated dams—including 67 that are considered a "high or significant hazard"—since August 1997, despite a state law that requires inspections at least once every 10 years. The dams that weren't inspected made up one-fourth of the 926 state-regulated dams. This story is an example of a quick-hit investigation you can complete in one week.

Checking the clips

In preparing to report the story, we looked to IRE's Resource Center for ideas and past investigations. In 1994, Dateline NBC drew NICAR's attention to the data when it investigated the nation's aging and failing dams, including footage from Wisconsin and a look at the role of broken dams in widespread Georgia flooding (Story no. 12918).

We looked at Perry Beeman's story in *The Des Moines Register* on Iowa's missing inspections in 1999 (Story No. 16170).

We also reviewed Tipsheet No. 2424, by Lee Davidson of the (Salt Lake City) *Deseret Morning News*. This 2005 tipsheet advises reporters to look at whether local dams have emergency action plans in place.

After looking at these resources, we knew that a quick hit investigation should likely focus on these two subjects.

We also found that nearly 80 percent of all state-regulated dams have no emergency action plans in case the dams fail, as required by law. Emergency action plans are designed to evacuate people living downstream if a dam should break.

Early in the week, we requested the databases from neighboring states Minnesota, Iowa and Michigan, which were e-mailed as Excel spreadsheets, in some cases the same day. We found that all three states did a better job of inspecting their dams. Iowa ranked the best, with only 1 percent of its state-regulated dams going without an inspection in the last 10 years. In Wisconsin, 25 percent of dams hadn't been inspected in the last 10 years. Minnesota hadn't inspected 20 percent of its dams and Michigan hadn't inspected 14 percent of its dams during that time frame.

By looking at the inspection records of neighboring states, we also found Wisconsin wasn't inspecting all of the state's dams on time, even though our inspection schedule was more lax than neighboring states. Records for Illinois dam inspections were not available in time for publication.

The next question: why was the Wisconsin DNR performing so poorly?

Dam safety engineers said they were understaffed and had tried for years to get funding for additional inspectors; but top DNR officials disagreed, saying the current staffing was sufficient.

In the 1990s, the DNR distributed about $12 million in grants that helped dam owners fix or remove dams, but in 1999 then-Gov. Tommy G. Thompson and lawmakers let the program expire. Wisconsin spent $537,500 on dam safety in the fiscal year that ended June 30. In 2005, Wisconsin's dam safety budget ranked 19th in the United States, according to the Association of State Dam Safety Officials.

Dirty dam data

Getting the data was the easy part. Determining its accuracy was a bit trickier.

The Wisconsin DNR had its spreadsheet of dam inspections available on its Web site, but an interview with a dam engineer revealed it was more than 18 months out of date. Eventually the dam safety staff e-mailed a more current version of the database.

On further reporting, we found out that hardly any of the records for the emergency evacuation plans were updated. Records for dam inspections were not updated regularly either. We then had to request yet another spreadsheet with accurate inspection updates. Using a unique ID field, we linked the accurate table to the original table. Eventually we sent our findings to the DNR for verification, and they found 23 dams that had been inspected but were not updated. Talk about dirty data.

Our reporting spurred action even before the story went to print. Randy Romanski, a top aide to the DNR secretary, recognized that the state had fallen behind in its inspections and said that it would do visual inspections of all dams that were behind schedule within two months. That comment led to an easy follow-up story.

Ahead of the news

A week after our story was published, areas in southern Wisconsin received as much as 12 inches of rainfall during a three-day period. Immediately, the integrity of dams in the state became breaking news. A dam in rural Vernon County failed, as water spilled over its rim. That dam *had* received a formal inspection this year, dam officials said. A short time later, another dam in Waukesha County had to be drawn down because officials were concerned about its structural integrity. In both instances, we were able to cite the *Journal Sentinel*'s recent Watchdog Report on dam safety.

"Falling Behind" can be found at www.jsonline.com/watchdog, and a searchable database of Wisconsin dam inspections can be found at www.jsonline.com/dataondemand.

QUICK LOOK

Name of the story:
"Falling Behind," Aug. 12, 2007

How the story got started:
After a week of reviewing state and national databases on bridge inspections following the Minneapolis bridge collapse, we were curious about the safety of the 926 state-regulated dams.

Length of time taken to report, write and edit the story: One week.

Major types of documents used:
Databases of dam safety inspections from Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota and Michigan.
We reviewed the National Inventory of Dams to guide reporting.

Major types of human sources used:
Wisconsin Department of Natural Resource dam safety engineers, Wisconsin residents and experts on infrastructure safety.

Patrick Marley has covered the state Capitol for the Journal Sentinel since 2004 and earned his master's degree in journalism from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in 2000.

Ben Poston, a Journal Sentinel CAR specialist, worked as a NICAR data analyst while earning a master's degree at the Missouri School of Journalism.

Karen Sherlock | Journal-Sentinel

Reporters needed multiple data requests and reviews to assemble an up-to-date set of inspection records from the state.

INFRASTRUCTURE RESOURCES

By Kate Rainey
The IRE Journal

The safety of infrastructure is at the forefront of readers' minds, and investigations on this topic are in high demand. If you're starting your own, check out some of the investigations that have come before. Copies of the stories are available by calling the IRE Resource Center at 573-882-3364 or e-mailing rescntr@ire.org.

Bridge stories

- **Story No. 22667:** Twenty welders who helped with the construction of a new Bay Bridge span said they were pressured to conceal substandard welds in the bridge's foundation and they witnessed the contractor concealing injuries from health and safety regulators. At the time of publication, the investigation was ongoing. Sean Holstege, Jill Tucker, *The Oakland* (Calif.) *Tribune* (2005)
- **Story No. 22553:** New York's Tappan Zee Bridge was deteriorating because of structural decay, failing safety ratings and failed restoration efforts, and the state authority resisted disclosing the inspection reports. Jorge Fitz-Gibbon, Bruce Golding, Dwight R. Worley, *The* (White Plains, N.Y.) *Journal News* (2005)
- **Story No. 22426:** An investigation revealed significant structural problems on a New York bridge's busy off-ramp, and internal e-mails obtained from the state Department of Transportation indicated the department covered up their knowledge of the extent of the damage. Luke Moretti, Joseph Schlaerth, Mike Mombrea, Paul Woodson, WIVB-Buffalo (2005)
- **Story No. 21886:** One-third of Ventura County's bridges were built before 1965. Although 28 of them have been declared structurally deficient, the county is still waiting for funds to repair or replace them, even after winter floods washed away one bridge and further weakened others. Dani Dodge, *Ventura* (Calif.) *County Star* (2005)
- **Story No. 21709:** Lee County siphoned nearly $50 million in tolls from Sanibel Causeway bridges to pay for other projects, and the bridges have rapidly deteriorated because of a lack of maintenance. The county faces a $105 million bill to replace the bridges and tolls have doubled to pay the extra expense. Jeff Cull, *The* (Fort Myers, Fla.) *News-Press* (2004)
- **Story No. 21397:** This three-part series examines Oregon's deteriorating bridges. Some argue the damage is due to the state's allowing truck weights that exceed the capacity. The bridges are cracking, but it's not up to the designers to fix them; the delay is in state politics. Les Zaitz, James Long, *The* (Portland) *Oregonian* (2002)
- **Story No. 20792:** Nearly 24 percent of all railroad bridges in Ohio are of poor quality. Repair costs are in the millions and disputes over the railroads' responsibility mean taxpayers pick up the tab. Richard Exner, *The* (Cleveland, Ohio) *Plain Dealer* (2003)

Dams

- **Story No. 22793:** Some "high hazard" dams in Maryland, which the state Department of the Environment considers unsafe and a threat to public safety, are in imminent danger of failing. David Collins, Augusta Brennan Jones, Joyce Karp; Gregory Marsh, Charles Cochran; James Finney, Roy Taylor, WBAL-Baltimore (2006)
- **Story No. 16170:** Iowa state officials have failed to inspect major dams since 1990 despite a state law requiring such checks." The Des Moines Register, Perry Beeman (1999)

More infrastructure stories

Reporting on other types of structures, or related issues, such as the roads or rails that cross bridges.

- **Story No. 22613:** Certain trucks deemed too heavy for the federally-regulated interstates are allowed to use North Carolina's state highways. Other trucks are allowed to use roads that highway engineers say are too fragile to carry the trucks' weight. The trucks are damaging the state's roads and bridges and driving up maintenance costs. Pat Stith, *The* (Raleigh, N.C.) *News & Observer* (2005)
- **Story No. 21760:** Before a pier on a $350 million highway project collapsed, an investigation had revealed incorrect construction. The investigation resumed after the collapse, and reporters uncovered more mistakes, including inadequate ground testing methods. Mike Mason, Aaron Wische, Matt McGlashen, Randy Wright, WFTS-Tampa (2004)
- **Story No. 21059:** In less than a decade, Missouri's roads went from some of the nation's best to the third worst, with an average of more than 20 major potholes and bumps per mile. This investigation cites practices at the Missouri Department of Transportation as the cause. Judy Thomas, Gregory S. Reeves, *The Kansas City* (Mo.) *Star* (2003)
- **Story No. 20206:** Boston's "Big Dig," the nation's largest and most expensive public works project, had more than $1.6 billion of excess construction costs, but no one had been held accountable. The reporters found that mistakes and poor decisions by the corporate joint venture running the project had caused about two-thirds of the overrun. Raphael Lewis, Sean P. Murphy, *The Boston Globe* (2003)

Tipsheets

- **No. 2683:** "Reporting on Federally-Funded Highway and Transit Projects," David Barnes, Office of Inspector General, U.S. Department of Transportation. This tipsheet provides an oversight of federal transportation funds, common contract fraud schemes, and how to find problems during construction projects and helpful Web sites, along with other information. Disponible en español: #2870.
- **No. 2656:** "Toll Roads: Finding and Using the Data," Paul Overberg, *USA TODAY*. Toll road records offer an abundance of material for CAR stories. This tipsheet lists potential story ideas and suggests ways to begin investigations.
- **No. 2464:** "Tearing up the Highways," Aaron Wische of WFTS-Tampa, Mark Greenblatt of KHOU-Houston. This tipsheet offers ideas on how to start investigating local highways and bridges, such as reading daily construction logs or attending board meetings. The authors also include advice on phrases to look for and examples of helpful documents and databases.
- **No. 2424:** "Oldies but Goodies: Probes into Dams and Bridges," Lee Davidson, *The* (Salt Lake City) *Deseret Morning News*. This tipsheet has a section each on bridges and dams, with possible issues to investigate and helpful Web sites, as well as tips on data analysis.
- **No. 2399:** "Uncovering Bad Bridges," Mark Greenblatt, KHOU-Houston. This tipsheet is a comprehensive guide to investigating local bridges, explaining what information to look for in the data and how to glean multiple stories from the same database.
- **No. 2103:** "Transportation and Infrastructure," Doug Haddix, *The Columbus* (Ohio) *Dispatch*.

This tipsheet explains how to make the most of dozens of databases provided by the Ohio Department of Transportation, with ideas for stories, including wrongful allocation of highway funds and analyses of traffic volume.

- **No. 2050:** "Measuring and Reporting on Highway Road Roughness," Greg Reeves, *The Kansas City* (Mo.) *Star*. This tipsheet examines at length three ways in which a reporter can obtain highway data: from the Federal Highway Administration, from the state highway department or with do-it-yourself data gathering.
- **No. 1645:** "Railroad Data and Document Sources," Russell Clemings, *The Fresno* (Calif.) *Bee*. This tipsheet lists Internet sources that can be used to access railroad data, such as a Highway-Rail Grade Crossing Accident/Incident Report Form.

Web Sites

- **Department of Transportation Agencies** (www.dot.gov/DOTagencies.htm): This Transportation Department page links to 13 agencies, such as the Federal Aviation Administration, the Office of the Inspector General and the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.
- **American Society of Civil Engineers (www.asce.org):** The resources include event listings and links to articles and discussion groups, along with an annual report card on America's infrastructure.
- **The Reason Foundation (www.reason.org): The Reason Foundation** is a free market group that does nonpartisan public policy research. Their Web site has access to their studies and reports, such as the recent study on state highway and bridge performance, and lists of experts.
- **The Infrastructure Security Partnership (www.tisp.org):** TISP was formed after 9/11 as a collaborative forum toward improving U.S. infrastructure.
- **House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee (http://transportation.house.gov):** The committee's Web site includes live Web casts of committee and subcommittee meetings, proposed initiatives and copies of the legislative agenda. It also includes links to relevant reports and proposals.

Data

The IRE and NICAR Database Library can help you investigate dams, bridges or the roadways that cross them. See details at www.nicar.org/datalibary or call 573-884-7711.

- National Bridge Inventory (see p.23) See the online description and documentation at www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases/viewdatabase.php?dbaseindex=16.
- National Inventory of Dams (see p. 24-25) See the online description and documentation at www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases/viewdatabase.php?dbaseindex=44.
- Track accidents related to bridges with Dept. of Transportation's Truck Accidents data (www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases/viewdatabase.php?dbaseindex=51) or the DOT Fatality Analysis Reporting System (FARS) (www.ire.org/datalibrary/databases/viewdatabase.php?dbaseindex=9).
- If infrastructure damage triggers federal disaster assistance, the SBA Disaster Loan database shows certain recipients.

NICAR offers several services designed to help ensure that journalists can find data for breaking news stories. Orders can be delivered via FTP for fast access.

Database Library subscriptions allow individuals or subscribing news organizations. Subscribers can pre-order data and download the latest copy on demand.

NICAR staff also will run custom queries for prices starting at $25 per basic query. More extensive analysis (using NICAR data or user-provided files) is available, too, by arrangement. For more information, contact Jeff Porter at 573-884-7711.

IRE Fellowships: Your ticket to Houston or Miami

> "The hands-on seminars on Web scraping were of particular interest to me. Because of what I learned there, I am now able to access various Web sites and pull their information down on a daily basis without much effort. I am currently using those skills on several long-term projects. It was also a great opportunity to exchange ideas and strategies with other journalists who share the same interests."
>
> – Eric Sagara, *The Tucson Citizen*
> Philip L. Graham Diversity Fellow, 2006 CAR Conference

Don't miss the opportunity to attend the 2008 CAR Conference in Houston or the 2008 IRE Conference in Miami with the fellowships offered by Investigative Reporters and Editors.

Several programs are available for women, members of minority groups, college students and journalists from small news organizations. Fellowships typically provide a one-year IRE membership, registration fees, and reimbursement for hotel and travel costs.

IRE thanks our fellowship sponsors and those who donated to the IRE Endowment to help support the programs' future growth.

James Richard Bennett Scholarships — for college students in Arkansas, Mississippi, Oklahoma or Louisiana. The scholarships are made possible by a donation from Dr. James R. Bennett, professor emeritus of English, University of Arkansas. (Offered for annual IRE Conference only)

Philip L. Graham Diversity Fellowships — sponsored by the Philip L. Graham Fund and IRE with the goal of increasing the diversity of IRE's membership.

Jennifer Leonard Scholarships — for women of modest means who are college students studying journalism or professional journalists with three or fewer years of working experience. Created in 2007 by IRE member David Cay Johnston to honor his wife, the president of the Rochester Area Community Foundation and a national leader in promoting ethical standards for endowments.

Godfrey Wells Stancill Fellowships — for journalists working for newspapers with Sunday circulation under 50,000. These fellowships were established by former IRE board member Nancy Stancill and her family to honor the memory of her father, Godfrey Wells Stancill, former editor and publisher of the *Suffolk* (Va.) *News-Herald*. (Offered for annual IRE Conference only)

Small News Organization Fellowships — IRE program supporting applicants at IRE and CAR conferences.

Details and application requirements are online at www.ire.org/fellowships.html. Applications are due at least 60 days before the event. Apply by **Dec. 30, 2007**, for the 2008 CAR Conference and **Apr. 7, 2008**, for the 2008 IRE Conference in Miami, June 5-8.

For general conference information, visit www.ire.org/houston08 or www.ire.org/miami08.

In detailing journalistic lapses in Duke case, authors guilty of stereotyping, too

By Steve Weinberg
The IRE Journal

Experienced criminal justice journalists know that police officers sometimes lie when trying to clear a case and that prosecutors sometimes bend or break the rules while pursuing a conviction.

Experienced journalists know that alleged rape victims file false reports; in some jurisdictions one of every two rape reports is false.

Experienced journalists know that stereotyping an entire subculture is unwise and that when racial tension is present, what they hear from sources and subjects becomes easily skewed due to cross-cultural misunderstanding and downright prejudice.

Yet all too often experienced journalists forget what they know in the midst of a big story.

A lot of forgetting occurred within newsrooms in 2006 and 2007, leading to embarrassingly inaccurate coverage of what has become known as the Duke University lacrosse team rape case. The case has become the latest cautionary tale for investigative journalists and this book details every error it can find.

"Until Proven Innocent," the first in-depth book about the case, demonstrates over and over and over within its 432 pages how forgetful journalists can contribute to miscarriages of justice and community disruption. The co-authors, journalist Stuart Taylor Jr. of the *National Journal* magazine and history professor and blogger KC Johnson, are relentless and shrill in their criticism of journalists covering the alleged rape. Only a few journalists receive praise.

Note: A less vicious look at the case was in the Aug./Sept. issue of The American Journalism Review.

Despite their own flaws as authors—most notably resorting to the stereotyping they find so abhorrent in others—Taylor and Johnson have produced a book that, if read a certain way, will lead to improved investigative journalism.

The story began in March 2006, when Duke University students who played on the highly ranked lacrosse team attended a party that included two female strippers hired from an outcall service. Not all 46 lacrosse players attended the party, which was held at a private home. But all 46 became suspects after one of the strippers, Crystal Mangum, told police she had been raped by three men.

Rape allegations and good journalism sometimes fail to mix. Because police frequently shield the names of alleged victims, journalists cannot easily interview them or look into their credibility. Furthermore, journalists who proceed cautiously under the consideration that the rape allegation might be false have to then worry about underplaying a story, being accused of insensitivity, or both.

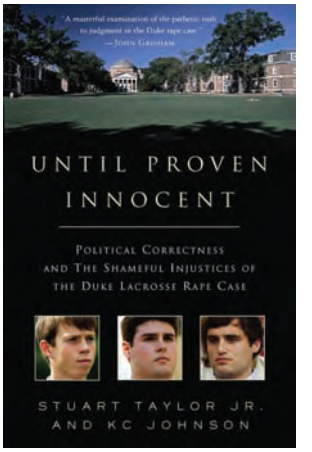
Still, diligent journalists covering the Duke case could have learned early on that the accuser was frequently changing her account. Those same journalists could have learned that the police officer most deeply involved carried a bad reputation, including an apparent disdain for Duke University students. The prosecutor had earned a sterling reputation in previous cases, but journalists with perspective on the criminal justice system realize that previously exemplary prosecutors sometimes become derailed during high-profile cases, especially when seeking re-election against credible opponents. The failure of most journalists to explore more deeply the re-election factor seems surreal.

In most criminal cases, defense lawyers are available for discussions with journalists early in the process. Because most of the Duke students suspected of rape could afford private-sector lawyers, defense attorneys abounded. Yet the book states that too many journalists ignored those defense attorneys or discounted what they said because of the stereotype that such lawyers will cover up for guilty clients.

Furthermore, the book maintains, too many journalists granted instant credence to Duke University administrators and faculty members who rushed to judgment against the lacrosse players. Universities, like many other institutions with reputations to protect, contain sources who will say just about anything to protect a reputation. Just because sources can list the initials Ph.D. after their names is no guarantee of their wisdom or truthfulness.

But Taylor and Johnson weaken the usefulness of their book for journalists by stereotyping reporters and editors as sleazeballs. Furthermore, they assign motives that are impossible to substantiate without outright mea culpas from those journalists.

During email exchanges with co-authors Taylor and Johnson, I learned that, almost without exception, they did not interview the journalists who covered the case. Taylor said he called one reporter who did not reply; then he conducted a "brief and unenlightening conversation" with the editor of that reporter. Johnson said he covered court hearings throughout the year, so "got to know both the good... and the bad" journalists mentioned in the book. Taylor commented that he and Johnson focused on critiquing already published stories about the case, which they could do "almost entirely on the basis of other information in the public record."



UNTIL PROVEN INNOCENT:
Political Correctness and the Shameful Injustices of the Duke Lacrosse Rape Case
By Stuart Taylor Jr. and KC Johnson
St. Martin's Press, 432 pages, $26.95

Those who read the book carefully will find plenty of offending journalists singled out by name and should learn from the mistakes of those identified.

Nonetheless, the book is worthy of study in newsrooms and journalism classrooms. Taylor and Johnson have researched the case deeply and as a result cannot be dismissed. Those who read the book carefully will find plenty of offending journalists singled out by name and should learn from the mistakes of those identified. Better yet, those who read the book carefully will come across positive lessons from a few journalists, most notably Melanie Sill and Joseph Neff of the *The News and Observer* in Raleigh N.C.

Readers of "Until Proven Innocent" who do not want to wade through the muck to find the pearl should start at page 202.

Steve Weinberg is senior contributing editor to The IRE Journal and a former executive director of IRE.

FOI Files

FLOODGATES

FEMA data goes online seven hours after delivery—but three years after Florida media outlets request it

BY BETTY WELLS
THE (FORT MYERS, FLA.) *NEWS-PRESS*

When the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled on June 22 of this year that the addresses of Floridians who received federal aid after the 2004 hurricanes are public record, the FEMA team at *The News-Press* shifted into overdrive.

Which was one gear above "hurry-up-and-wait."

Nearly three years earlier we asked the Federal Emergency Management Agency for the names and addresses of the recipients of FEMA aid for the four storms that tore up the state.

After Hurricane Charley hit southwest Florida, our readers told us loudly and clearly that there was inequity in the way FEMA decided who qualified for funds.

We sought to analyze specifically where the money went, block-by-block, storm-by-storm. We filed our first Freedom of Information Act request on Oct. 29, 2004. For almost six months, FEMA stalled. On March 14, 2005 *The News-Press*, *Pensacola News Journal* and *Florida Today* in Melbourne, all Gannett newspapers, sued in federal court.

Eight months later a judge in Fort Myers upheld the federal government's argument that the names and addresses should remain private. The Gannett newspapers appealed. We were now joined by the *Sun-Sentinel* of Fort Lauderdale, which had won a similar case. FEMA had appealed that decision.

In its ruling, the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals said:

"In light of FEMA's awesome statutory responsibility to prepare the nation for, and respond to, all national incidents, including natural disasters and terrorist attacks, there is a powerful public interest in learning whether, and how well, it has met this responsibility. Plainly, disclosure of the addresses will help the public answer this question by shedding light on whether FEMA has been a good steward of billions of taxpayer dollars … and we cannot find any privacy interests here that even begin to outweigh this public interest."

(The full ruling, coverage by *The News-Press* and the searchable database can be found at www.news-press.com/fema.)

But in June 2007 when the federal appeals court in Atlanta finally issued its precedent-setting ruling, that didn't keep FEMA from stalling again.

In a press release, the agency announced it would notify by automated phone call and letter the 2.2 million people affected by the ruling. Until that was completed, we wouldn't get the information.

Then, in one press release, the agency stated that we sought names, addresses and Social Security numbers of those who received aid. This announcement increased the flood of telephone calls we were already receiving, prompted in part by misleading wording in the letters. Of course we never asked for Social Security numbers, yet it took a call from our lawyer to get FEMA to amend the notifications.

Another factor that upset those receiving the letters was that FEMA notified anyone who applied for aid—not just recipients. Why, they asked, were their addresses being released? (FEMA did not redact these applicants' information from the database they supplied us.)

News-Press executive editor Kate Marymont cites the inaccuracies as a personal lesson gleaned from the case.

"Perhaps I'm naive, but I was shocked that FEMA distorted the truth to villainize the media," Marymont said. "It was astounding that a federal agency would distribute information that was so blatantly misleading."

"We fielded hundreds and hundreds of phone calls and e-mails because FEMA sent incorrect information," Marymont said. "The truth—that we did not ask for Social Security numbers and were not publishing private information but were attempting to hold the agency accountable—eased the anger in almost every case."

Sixty-six days after the appeals court ruled and two weeks shy of the three-year mark since we first asked, we received the data.

At *The News-Press*, we layer our investigative reports and watchdog initiatives across all platforms. We are transparent in our efforts to use all sources available to us and to engage all of our audiences in our goal of holding government accountable.

So within seven hours of receiving the disk we had posted a searchable database with more than 2 million records at www.news-press.com—and at Gannett's other three Florida papers and three television stations. We asked readers to analyze the information and help us investigate.

As our coverage unfolded—led by *News-Press* reporter Melanie Payne and *Florida Today* reporter John McCarthy—here's some of what we found:

Of the more than 1 million to ask for assistance, fewer than one in three people received monetary help to repair damage to their residences. People in later storms fared better. Scores received less than $10 to help repair a damaged or destroyed residence.

A similar pattern emerged for items that needed to be purchased to deal with the effects of the storm—dehumidifiers, chain saws and generators—plus personal property lost in the storm such as tools, toys, clothes and appliances, and for medical and funeral expenses.

More than 21,000 Florida households located in areas with winds less than 39 mph—the threshold for a tropical storm—received aid. But hundreds of people who collected thousands were told by the government they had to pay back the money.

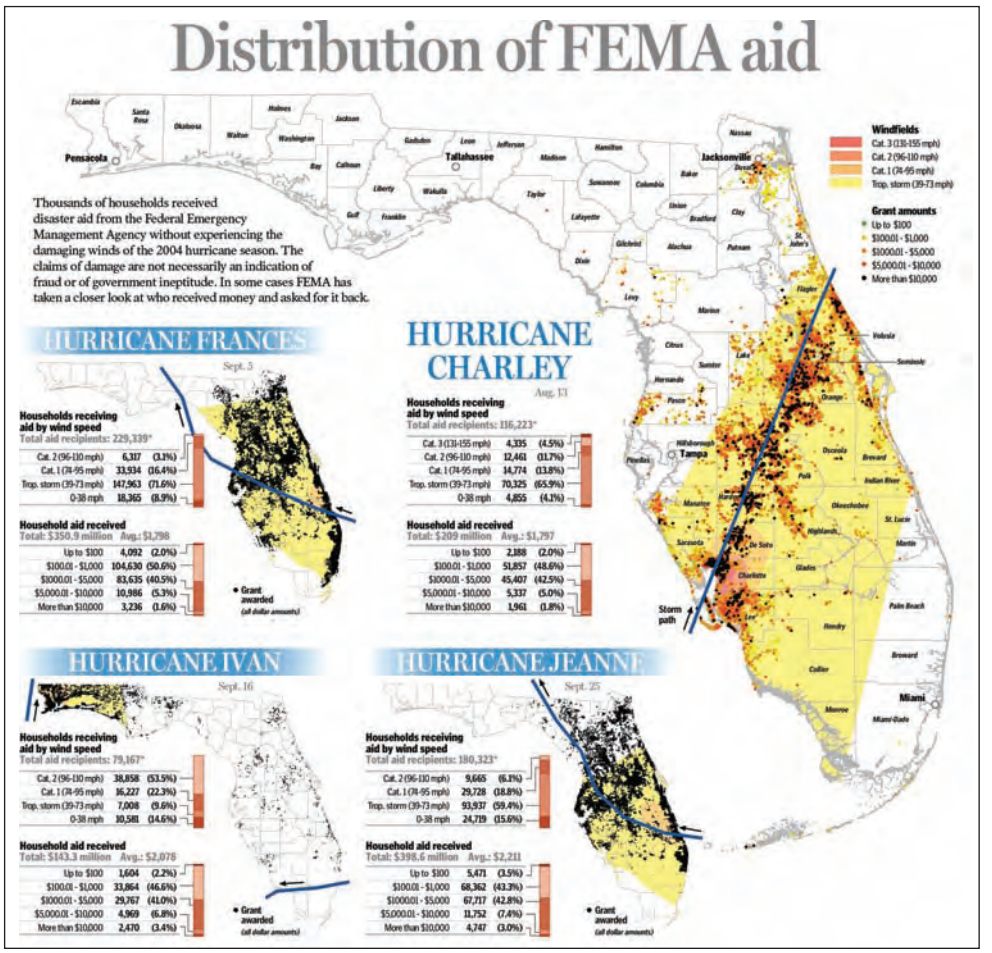
The most recent report analyzed demographics, showing that residents who lived in low-income areas received about twice the amount of aid as those who lived in wealthier areas.

Three years after the storms it was old news that there was fraud in Florida—people had already been jailed for lying to FEMA. But a gratifying story came to light when our readers, using the searchable database, notified us of two cases of residents receiving funds illegally.

They could do that because the public could see the addresses. And that's because we sued.

Betty Wells, special projects editor for The News-Press, spent 23 years with Knight Ridder - at the Wichita (Kan.) Eagle as a reporter and editor, in the Knight-Ridder Washington Bureau as a reporter, and at the Post-Tribune in Gary, Ind., as managing editor and executive editor. She joined the News-Press in 2004.

Michael Donlan | The News-Press



How we engaged readers

This ran in print on Sept. 2 with an installment of the FEMA project.

In the days and months following the hurricanes Charley, Frances, Ivan and Jeanne, *The News-Press* and our sister Gannett Florida newspapers heard from many of you about your experiences with the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Some people expressed concern that FEMA's process for deciding who got money and how much wasn't fair, and fraud was reported in Miami, for example, where there was little damage but large payouts.

The News-Press asked FEMA to tell us who received aid so we could analyze how well and how equitably billions in taxpayer money were doled out.

Monday, after a protracted legal battle, the newspaper received the addresses of those who registered for FEMA aid. In all, there are about 2.2 million "records," although some addresses may be duplicated. The database includes amounts granted for emergency household assistance and other assistance, for everything from doctor visits to replacement of toys.

You can search those addresses yourself at news-press.com.

Here are some of the questions to consider while looking through this data:
- Is what FEMA reported about your home correct?
- Are you listed as receiving more or less money than the government reported?
- Did FEMA give aid to a household you suspect shouldn't have received the grant?

In today's newspaper, we've shared with you our initial observations about what data tells us. This first-day analysis is based mostly on studying emergency housing assistance.

We'll look more closely at the other assistance today, and our analysis will continue in the coming weeks. Next, we'll plot all the addresses on digital maps and look for trends and oddities.

Here are some of the things *The News-Press* is considering:
- From house to house, neighborhood to neighborhood, county to county, was FEMA aid fair?
- Did those funds go to second homes, a violation of FEMA rules?
- Did they go to homes with no damage?
- Were uninsured damaged houses refused FEMA money? Did residents of such homes apply?

We want to hear from you. If you know of inaccurate information or anything that needs a closer look, please contact *The News-Press* at fema@news-press.com.

Legal Q&A

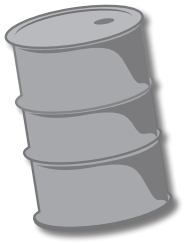
Charles D. Tobin, of the law firm Holland & Knight, represented the newspapers in the suit against FEMA.

Did you ever think that you would not win?
The public interest in these records, given all the documented fraud and waste, always screamed at us. We were confident that, in the end, public interest in FEMA's mismanagement would prevail.

What was the most frustrating aspect of dealing with your opponents in this case?
The government's scare tactics were relentless and frustrating. FEMA consistently raised straw-man arguments about privacy concerns—thieves would pore over the pages of the newspaper, pesky reporters would go knocking on people's doors at all hours, hapless citizens would be inundated with sales calls. Yet FEMA never put a shred of evidence in the record to justify these images of hobgoblins. Thankfully, the appeals court exposed the man behind the curtain.

Do you think FEMA will more readily provide this kind of information now for disasters such as Hurricane Katrina?
Unfortunately for the public, which would benefit so much from consistent access to this type of information, FEMA has said it will not let the appeals decision influence how it releases records. Even though the court held there is no privacy interest at stake in these records, FEMA has trumpeted its intention to safeguard the "privacy rights" of all aid recipients, without restriction. We are hopeful that this is sore-loser talk, but only time will tell.

How would you rate the importance of this ruling? What kind of long-term impact do you think it will have?
This is the most important victory for the public's right to know to come along for years. In the future, to hide important records like these, government officials will have to show concrete evidence—not just inflammatory rhetoric—to support their arguments of a privacy interest. And the appeals court was very clear that in a democracy, the press has the absolute right to ask hard questions when the government falls down on the job as badly as FEMA did. We will see these points cited as precedent in many future access battles.



OIL SAFARI

Investigation traces elusive path of oil from the ground to the gas tank

BY PAUL SALOPEK
CHICAGO TRIBUNE

A few years ago I met a Canadian roughneck in the war zone of southern Sudan. His name was Bob, and he spent his days running a drilling rig that was shielded from rebel attacks by a 15-foot dirt berm. At the time, his company was being savaged in the press for doing business with Khartoum, a regime with a terrible human rights record. Bob was taking it hard.

"People can criticize us all they want," he told me bitterly, "but they always want the oil. We just do their dirty work for them."

Bob's analysis was self-serving. Villagers were being killed in Sudan's oil fields, and he chose not to see it. But his larger point stung: Thirsty U.S. energy consumers—who gulp a quarter of the world's oil output—might not care to examine too closely where their vital fix of petroleum comes from.

That chance encounter in the savannas of Africa was the seed of "A Tank of Gas, a World of Trouble," an IRE Award-winning investigative project I wrote last year for the *Chicago Tribune*. Along with photographer Kuni Takahashi and researcher Brenda Kilianski, I spent nine months trying to do what had never been done before: to retrace, with an engineer's precision, the murky rivers of oil that flowed from around the globe to a single gas station in America. In other words, we wished to link—irrefutably, without resorting to guesswork or metaphors—the lives of ordinary U.S. drivers with the lives of the people who resided atop those far-flung and often embattled sources of oil. It would be a story about consumer responsibility but on a gargantuan scale.

It can't be done

When I approached the petroleum industry about this task, most of its experts said I was naive or crazy. A spokeswoman for the American Petroleum Institute, the industry's main lobbying group in Washington, D.C., actually laughed into the phone. She insisted it couldn't be done. She playfully directed me to Snopes.com, a Web site that debunks urban legends, where it was declared that oil gets swapped, rebranded and shared so often between oil companies, that "by the time crude oil gets from the ground into our gasoline tanks, there's no telling exactly where it came from."

Well, to a point.

An analyst at the Energy Information Administration, the research branch of the Department of Energy, let it slip during a technical interview that every oil refinery in America has something called a "crude slate"—or a list of all the different types of oil it processes every 24 hours. Because the names of individual crudes often can be linked to specific oil reservoirs across the world, such slates offer a remarkably accurate roadmap to the global oil supplies pouring into the United States—amazingly, right down to the metropolitan level. So while gasoline is certainly a fungible commodity, and the unleaded you buy at the corner Shell station can be a swirling brew of Chevron's and BP's fuels, I had discovered a vital document to start unlocking

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- **Story No. 22989:** Ethanol is pushed as a replacement for gasoline, but economically it isn't ideal. Tests show drivers get 27 percent lower fuel economy by using E85 instead of gasoline, leading to drivers paying more on a per-mile basis. Eric Evarts, *Consumer Reports* (2006)
- **Story No. 22390:** The U.S. government's fuel economy ratings data mislead consumers about how many miles per gallon they can expect from certain new cars and trucks because of flawed and outdated testing methods and procedures, and loopholes used by the Environmental Protection Agency, among other factors. Jeff Blyskal, Kim Kleman, Michael Saccucci, Keith Newsom-Stewart, Margot Slade, *Consumer Reports* (2005)
- **Story No. 22225:** For years, the oil industry has been suspected of shutting down refineries to put pressure on the market, as shutting down refineries and reducing access to supplies and materials have helped drive up gas prices and cut jobs. This investigation looks to discover the truth behind rising gas prices. Steve Everly, *The Kansas City* (Mo.) *Star* (2005)
- **Story No. 21674:** In this comprehensive examination of the political influence of the international oil industry, the reporters found that oil companies from Indonesia, Venezuela and the OPEC countries, among others, spent more than $440 million in the past six years to protect their interests with the U.S. government. Bob Williams, Kevin Bogardus, Laura Peterson, Paul Radu, Aron Pilhofer, Teo Furtado, Daniel Lathrop, The Center for Public Integrity (2004)
- **Story No. 21362:** The United States' search for oil outside the Middle East has led to Kazakhstan and other countries around the Caspian Sea. This investigation centers on the Kazakh government and a corrupt regime with a record of human rights violations. Millions of dollars from American firms go to offshore accounts controlled by top Kazakh officials. Ken Silverstein, *Los Angeles Times* (2004)
- **Story No. 20467:** This investigation examines the causes of a natural gas crunch and discovers that federal policies and industry economics are causing the fuel to burn out. Alaska now seems to be a back-up resource, with producers getting around the lack of available shipping by reinjecting gas into their own wells to boost oil production. Alexei Barrionuevo, John J. Fialka, Rebecca Smith, *The Wall Street Journal* (2001)
- **Story No. 18500:** This four-part series investigates the often dangerous conditions of pipelines the American industry uses to transport crude oil and natural gas. Between 1984 and 2000, 366 people died in the U.S. because of pipeline leaks and explosions, with Texas having the highest death toll and the most miles of pipelines. Jeff Nesmith, Ralph K.M. Haurwitz, Mary Alice Davis, Rich Oppel, *Austin* (Texas) *American-Statesman* (2001)
- **Story No 17975:** Nigeria is rich in fuel, but its people and environment pay the price for harvesting gas and oil. The most dangerous consequences are explosions due to leaking gas pipelines, some of which are sabotaged by Nigerians looking for gas to sell on the black market. Pollution from oil spills has also devastated some communities. Greg Campbell, (Chicago) *In These Times* (2001)

one of the industry's oldest secrets—a myth of the untracebility of oil, spread at least in part to avoid consumer boycotts.

But there were two big reporting hurdles.

First, such data are among the tightest-held secrets of a secretive industry. Companies compete ferociously for global oil supplies. No petroleum corporation wants its competitors to know here it buys its stocks. I had to convince someone to break that code of silence.

Inside Marathon

I contacted the five corporations that refined fuel for the greater Chicago area: Exxon Mobil, ConocoPhillips, BP PLC, PDV-Midwest and Marathon Petroleum Co. Three companies declined to share their data. One didn't even bother to return my calls. Only Marathon agreed. To this day, I still don't know why. Perhaps because, as a smaller and more nimble firm, it was more of a risk-taker. Or maybe the company realized that the real target of my vast oil quest wasn't the industry itself—I viewed the companies neutrally, as the suppliers of our oil addiction—but the U.S. consumers who, as Bob alleged, preferred not to know where their latest tank of gas came from. Houston-based Marathon didn't want the dates of its crude slates revealed for competitive reasons. And I asked the company not alter its normal way of doing business during the project, and it agreed.

Having secured access to the Marathon's refinery data in Robinson, Ill., the next problem was finding a gasoline station with the clearest pipeline shot to the refinery. This wasn't easy. If the oil "upstream" from a refinery was complicated to follow—it involved tracking seagoing tankers, monitoring industry purchases online, poring over oil field maps in countries like Nigeria and consulting with Marathon's purchasing department—the "downstream" run to a single gas station was muddled by shared storage tank facilities and independent fuel shippers.

That's where Marathon's vertical integration helped: The company helped identify pipelines, storage tanks and gas stations that it either contracted with or controlled, thus guaranteeing the presence of certain gas molecules at the retail pumps. The ultimate terminus of all these dizzying logistical calculations? A new Marathon gas station located 40 miles west of downtown Chicago.

The chosen station, managed by a harried single mom named Michelle Vargo, was a perfect window into a tale about America's epic and often heedless oil consumption.

A full-service tale

The station served designer coffee, boasted a car wash and a sandwich shop, and its main customers were commuters who racked up hundreds of dollars a month in fuel bills. Over a period of five months, I worked there sporadically as a clerk, manning a cash register and restocking the coolers in order to get to know the regular clients whose stories would be linked with the incoming oil. Every day, before donning my clerk's vest, I would call an engineer at Marathon's Midwest office in Ohio to get the day's particular vintage of gas: It came from the Gulf of Mexico, Venezuela, Iraq and several nations in Africa. A day or a week later, Takahashi and I would be on a plane bound for the blown-up oil patches of Basra, Iraq, or the gas-well-studded swamps of Lousiana.

Accessing an oil company's internal documents was critical to this global investigation. But tying together—and personalizing—the immense scale of America's petroleum habit required a host of other sources. We relied on energy analysts on three continents, harbor masters in Iraq, dissidents in Venezuela, outraged Nigerian tribal chiefs and a proud Cajun family literally scarred by the dangers of the oil business. The story's lofty goal was to make it impossible for readers to fuel up in ignorance ever again. I certainly never will.

Paul F. Salopek is a Chicago Tribune foreign correspondent who has covered Africa, the Balkans, and Central Asia and twice won the Pulitzer Prize.

Member news

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 5

in the print category for "Saving Our Springs." ■ **Mark Schapiro** of the Center for Investigative Reporting has a new book, "Exposed: The Toxic Chemistry of Everyday Products and What's at Stake for American Power" (Chelsea Green Publishing). ■ **Alicia C. Shepard** has been named Ombudsman for NPR. She will serve a two-year appointment, which began in October. ■ **Adam Symson** has been named vice president, interactive for The E.W. Scripps Company's Television Station Group. Previously, he was the director of content and marketing for the Scripps Interactive Media division. ■ Craig Pittman and **Matthew Waite** of the *St. Petersburg* (Fla.) *Times* won the annual Kevin Carmody Award for Outstanding Investigative Reporting, Print, from the Society of Environmental Journalists for their series on a wetlands mitigation program.

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