The IRE Journal

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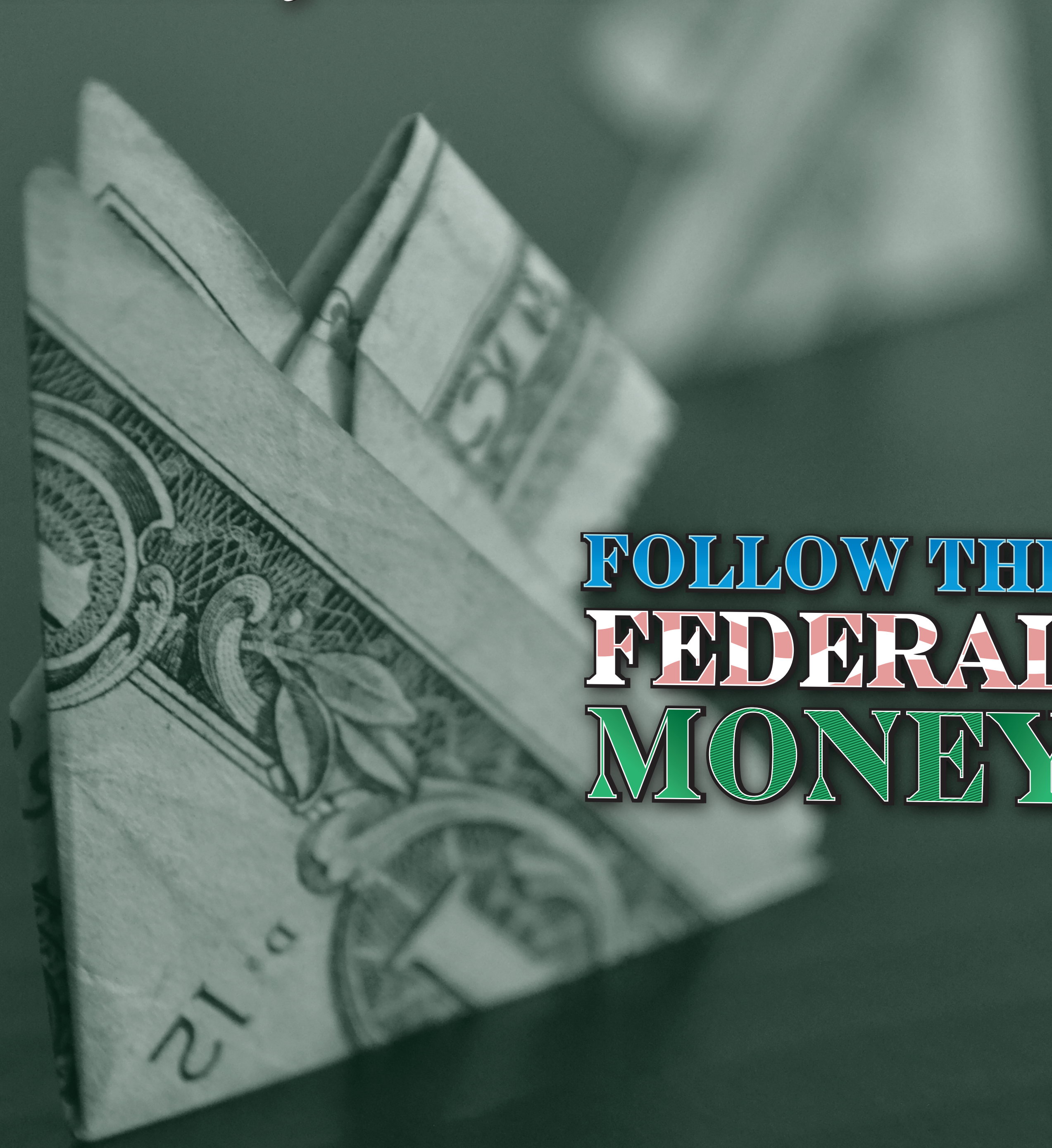

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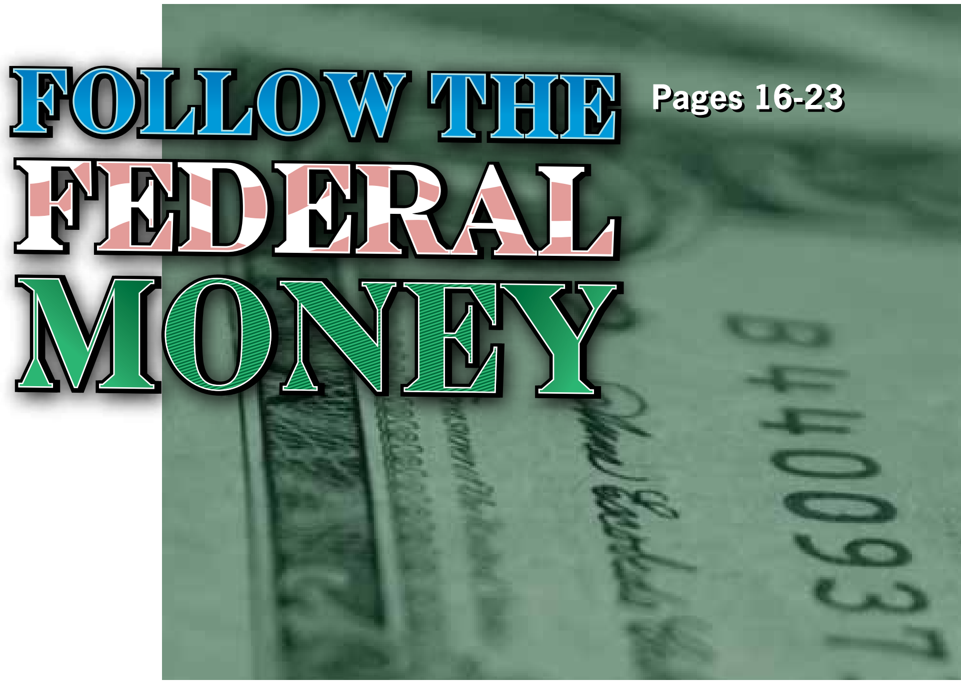

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Uniting for the greater good

BY MARK HORVIT
IRE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Collaboration has become a dominant theme in much of the investigative journalism world during the past couple of years. Two new IRE projects show how partnerships can have a big impact for journalism organizations like ours.

In June, we unveiled Census.IRE.org, which offers a streamlined way to work with data from the 2010 census. The service itself is groundbreaking, but the way in which it came about is equally important.

At the 2010 IRE Annual Conference in Las Vegas, several attendees began formulating the idea that it would be much more efficient if they could get together to work on building a program to crunch data for the upcoming census. After all, each news organization was going to have to do the work on its own, and collaboration would mean that each shop wasn't duplicating effort. If IRE could help make this happen, the results could be shared so that even the smallest news organizations and freelancers would have access to the same basic tool as some of the largest news organizations in the country.

Census data is rolled out in multiple phases, and the plan was to prepare for the large data dump scheduled to take place this summer.

In the spring, when a smaller but important subset of the data was released, two IRE members at *USA Today* offered to take the work they were doing and make it available to all IRE members. The efforts of Paul Overberg and Anthony DeBarros led to several hundred IRE members downloading data they were able to use on deadline to inform their communities about crucial demographic changes and what those could mean.

Meanwhile, IRE obtained a grant from the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute to fund the larger project. Thanks to the support from RJI, which like IRE is housed at the Missouri School of Journalism, two meetings were held at which top developers gathered to hash out a plan to deal with the big summer census release and to build a tool that all journalists could use. While the RJI grant covered travel and lodging, each newsroom contributed the manpower, without which the project could not have succeeded.

This collaborative effort brought together several news organizations that, in many cases, are direct competitors on national stories: *The Chicago Tribune* (Brian Boyer, Joe Germuska and Chris Groskopf); *The New York Times* (Jeremy Ashkenas and IRE Board member Aron Pilhofer); CNN (Curt Merrill); and *USA Today* (Overberg). Also joining the team was the University of Nebraska (Matt Waite, who was subsequently elected to the IRE Board) and the *Spokesman-Review* in Spokane, Wash. (Mike Tigas).

Thanks to the work of the team members – who donated plenty of their own time to the project – journalists now have an online tool built specifically to meet their needs. It's fast, it provides an easy way to compare two or more locations, and it allows for direct comparison of 2000 and 2010 data, providing crucial context about how communities have changed. And it's easy to work with on deadline. If you haven't checked it out yet, give it a try.

In another type of partnership, IRE is now operating DocumentCloud, a fantastic service that gives news organizations cutting-edge tools to analyze documents and present them to their audience.

DocumentCloud was made possible through the Knight News Challenge and was led by a team from ProPublica (Scott Klein and Eric Umansky) and *The New York Times* (Pilhofer). It has become a vitally important tool for many IRE members, both in reporting their stories and presenting their work.

As the DocumentCloud team looked ahead to the time when its initial Knight grant would end (this November), discussions began with IRE about integrating the service. As a nonprofit journalism organization whose members represent a huge percentage of DocumentCloud users, the partnership made sense.

DocumentCloud became part of IRE in July, and the service has been awarded a second Knight News Challenge grant that will allow us to work on incorporating annotated reader comments. Other efforts to expand DocumentCloud are in the works; stay tuned.

One of the many things I find exciting about both Census.Ire.org and DocumentCloud is the collaborative nature in which they came together. As IRE looks to the future and works to add services that benefit our members and our industry, such collaboration will be key.

Mark Horvit is executive director of IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. He can be reached at mhorvit@ire.org or 573-882-2042.

Members decide IRE Board election

Four incumbents and two new members were elected to the IRE Board of Directors during the annual membership meeting June 11 in Orlando. The board members will serve two-year terms on the 13-member board.

Incumbents continuing their board service are: Alison Young, *USA Today*; Leonard Downie Jr., Arizona State University/*The Washington Post*; Lea Thompson, broadcast journalist/producer;and David Cay Johnston, Reuters. New members joining the board are: Josh Meyer, Northwestern University; and Matt Waite, University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

The newly elected board elected the following members to serve on the Executive Committee: president, Manny Garcia, *El Nuevo Herald;* vice president, Andrew Donohue, voiceofsandiego.org; treasurer, David Cay Johnston, Reuters; secretary, Sarah Cohen, Duke University; and Lea Thompson.

Elected by IRE members to serve on the Contest Committee were T. Christian Miller of ProPublica and Nancy Amons of WSMV-Nashville.

Fund honors longtime IRE leader

A fellowship fund has been created to honor the memory of longtime IRE member David Dietz, president of the organization in 2001-02. Dave was a beloved colleague and friend to many IRE members, and was honored last year with IRE's Lifetime Achievement Award in recognition of his many contributions.

During the past decade, Dave worked as a San Francisco-based investigative reporter for Bloomberg Markets magazine. He had a 40-year career in journalism, including positions at TheStreet.com, *The San Francisco Chronicle* and *The San Francisco Examiner*.

The fund in his honor will create a fellowship to send a business reporter to IRE's annual conference. Bloomberg has made a generous pledge to the fund. You may donate online (please mention the Dietz fund on the form) at http://ow.ly/5Jeau.

DocumentCloud joins IRE

IRE is providing a home for DocumentCloud and ensuring that news organizations can continue using its services, even as those tools continue to evolve and expand.

DocumentCloud, funded through a grant from the Knight News Challenge, provides a set of tools and technologies designed to help journalists analyze and share source documents, and make it simple to publish those documents to the Web. Launched less than a year ago, the service, which allows news organizations to upload documents and make them public, is used by more than 250 news organizations and is home to more than 80,000 documents.

"This is a win-win," said Eric Newton, senior adviser to the president at the Knight Foundation. "IRE, its members and other journalists get the latest tools, and Document Cloud gets a permanent partner to sustain it during its growth phase."

New online Census service launches

A new online interactive tool has been developed to crunch and download data from the latest series of census data releases this summer. The project is the result of work by journalists from the *The Chicago Tribune*, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, CNN, the *Spokesman-Review* (Spokane, Wash.) and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. It's funded through generous support from the Donald W. Reynolds Journalism Institute at the Missouri School of Journalism.

The goal of IRE's Census Data website is to provide reporters a simpler way to access census data so they can spend less time importing and managing the data and more time exploring and reporting with it. The site provides the latest 2010 data for states, counties, cities and towns ("places" in Census-speak) and census tracts. The amount of change since 2000 will also be included, where possible.

The site is online at census.ire.org. Thanks to the following journalists for their time and expertise: Brian Boyer, Joe Germuska and Chris Groskopf of *The Chicago Tribune*; Jeremy Ashkenas and Aron Pilhofer of *The New York Times*; Paul Overberg of *USA Today*; Curt Merrill of CNN; Matt Waite of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln; and Mike Tigas of the *Spokesman-Review*.

MEMBER NEWS

Peter Byrne received a James Madison Freedom of Information Award from the Society of Professional Journalists' Northern California chapter. The award recognized his Spot.us series on University of California regents approving university investments in deals where they had personal financial interests.

Mike Fabey is now naval editor for *Aviation Week*. Previously, he was aviation editor for *Travel Weekly*.

David Cay Johnston has joined Reuters to write a twice-weekly column on taxes.

"Disease Maps: Epidemics on the Ground," by **Tom Koch,** has been published by the University of Chicago Press.

The SPJ's Best of Indiana Journalism award for non-deadline reporting was presented to **Marisa Kwiatkowski** of the *Times of Northwest Indiana*. She shared first place for business reporting with colleague **Marc Chase**.

Scott Pelley was named anchor of the CBS Evening News. He will continue as a correspondent for "60 Minutes."

Chandra Thomas, formerly a reporter for the Kennesaw State University Juvenile Justice Information Exchange, was selected for a 2011 Soros Justice Media Fellowship.

Cheryl W. Thompson of the *Washington Post* received an Emmy award from the National Capital Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for "A Cop Killer's Remorse." She shared the award with videographer Ben De La Cruz.

Tisha Thompson of Fox 5 WTTG-TV won an Emmy from the National Capital Chapter of the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for her investigative report "Out of the Office." She shared the award with producer Mike Cephas.

"Killings At The Canal: The Army Tapes," a CNN documentary produced by senior investigative producer **Scott Zamost** and reported by former CNN correspondent **Abbie Boudreau**, won both the CINE Gold Eagle for Investigative Reporting as well as a gold medal for investigative reporting in the New York Festivals international awards. The documentary investigated why a U.S. policy on handling prisoners led to the killings of four Iraqi detainees by decorated U.S. soldiers.

Sharon Walsh, enterprise editor of the *Lexington Herald-Leader*, was named editor of PublicSource.org, a new Pittsburgh-based investigative reporting website that expected to launch in August.

WVUE-TV won an SPJ Sigma Delta Chi Award for its 60-part series, "The Gravy Train," which showed improper spending and mismanagement at a New Orleans railroad. The team included **Lee Zurik, Donny Pearce, Greg Phillips** and **Mikel Schaefer.** The team also received the Edward R. Murrow Award in the Video Investigative Reporting-Small Market.

WTVF-TV, Nashville

An investigation by WTVF-TV in Nashville discovered that Nashville police were undercounting crimes in Music City and exaggerating their success in solving crime.

CRIME COVER-UP

Comparing crime reports and crunching numbers reveal abuses in Nashville

By Phil Williams
WTVF-TV, Nashville

In the end, police were forced to admit that they had underreported crimes such as rape and burglary. Nashville Mayor Karl Dean quickly ordered an audit of how the city keeps crime stats.

In the classic HBO series *The Wire,* police brass issued an edict to precinct leaders that the city's crime rate was going to go down.

"We all understand there are certain processes by which you can reduce the overall number of felonies," one precinct commander noted to his boss. "You can reclassify an agg assault or unfound a robbery.

"But," he asked timidly, "how do you make a body disappear?"

That scene dramatizes the challenge that our *NewsChannel 5 Investigates* team in Nashville faced as we launched a yearlong investigation, "The Truth About Crime." That investigation discovered crimes not being counted, while police grossly exaggerated their success in solving crime. In the end, police were forced to admit that they had underreported crimes such as rape and burglary. Nashville Mayor Karl Dean quickly ordered an audit of how the city keeps crime stats.

It was an investigation that required some heavy-duty data crunching to get to the truth.

So how did Nashville police hide the crime?

At the heart of our investigation was CompStat, the computerized statistical analysis first developed in New York to plot where police resources were most needed. In 2004, Nashville's charismatic new police chief, Ronal Serpas, promised to put his Ph.D. and his knowledge of CompStat to work to make the city safer. Instead, just like in other cities, CompStat quickly became a tool for measuring the effectiveness of precinct commanders, who controlled how the crimes were reported.

As the years passed, Serpas began to boast of an "unprecedented" success in reducing crime. Even in a year when the murder rate skyrocketed – and bodies could not be made to disappear – the chief was able to boast of success in reducing overall crime.

"You are measuring people – their success or their failure – on something where they have complete control of the statistics, and this is very tempting for people to do," said Dr. John Eterno, a criminal justice professor at Molloy College, a retired NYPD captain and author of a blog called "Unveiling Compstat."

Serpas himself had acknowledged the temptation in scholarly articles in which he claimed to have implemented audit processes to ensure that precinct leaders did not whitewash their crime stats.

Facing a daunting task, we decided to turn this investigation into a team project. I would do the basic initial research and data analysis, taking on some of the stories myself and farming out others to my fellow team members: investigative reporters Jennifer Kraus and Ben Hall, photojournalists Bryan Staples and Iain Montgomery, and producer Kevin Wisniewski.

Here's the approach that worked for us:

Brainstorm about potential hiding places. As the scene from *The Wire* suggested, there are some well-established ways that police can hide the crimes in their communities. Aggravated assault, to use the example, counts in the FBI's Uniform Crime Report (UCR) tallies; simple assault doesn't. Knowing that, one could search for simple assault cases where the description – perhaps the use of a bat or a broken beer bottle – suggested that it should have been classified as a more serious crime. With that in mind, I began by examining crime stats scandals in other cities to use as our roadmap and drafting a memo for the team about where we might find crimes hidden.

Compare crime reports issued to different audiences. Every year, the Metro Nashville Police Department released an annual crime report to city leaders and to the public. These reports, spun to reflect departmental successes or to place blame outside the department when the numbers were less than glowing, had been dutifully repeated by the city's media. Yet, no one ever noticed that the department's numbers did not always reflect the same trends as those appearing in FBI or Tennessee Bureau of Investigation annual reports. The police department said that rapes, aggravated assaults and larcenies were all down in 2008; however, the FBI and TBI said all three of those crime categories were up. How was the public supposed to know which numbers to believe? "I think they've just got to take a leap of faith," Chief Serpas insisted.

Compare crime classifications to 911 dispatches. As part of our investigation, we obtained a database listing all police dispatches – or "calls for service" – during a two-year period (about 2 million records) and compared that to another database showing the offense classification for those incidents. Using this method, we discovered about 2,000 cases where police were dispatched on burglaries (which count in the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports), but ended up classifying the calls as vandalism (which doesn't't). After pulling numerous incident reports, we discovered that officers were downgrading such calls to vandalism if the burglar broke into a house but did not find anything of value to steal.

Yet, by querying the data for arrests in those "vandalism" cases, we discovered that police sometimes ended up charging the suspects with burglary.

"Such an error rate … leads to an appearance that we are trying to fudge numbers," one precinct commander later emailed his subordinates. "It can also prevent us from being able to get an accurate picture of the crime problems being faced by the precinct."

Audit the audits. As mentioned above, Chief Serpas had written an article for a police journal in which he describe his department's audit processes. The article included charts showing that, for a number of reportable crimes, the number of offenses recorded closely mirrored the way that the calls were dispatched. So I asked to see the full audits, and one chart – not included in his scholarly presentation – jumped off the page. Police were getting a lot more rape calls than the crime statistics reflected.

Going back to the data, I discovered a startling trend that I had missed at first. Hundreds of sexual assault calls, instead of being classified as crimes, were being written off as "matters of record" – a category that did not show up in any crime stats. In fact, we discovered that the number of "matter of record" reports shot up dramatically as reported rapes showed an equally dramatic drop.

"I know for a fact there was a crime that happened," one tearful rape victim told us, "and it's insulting to me that it's not counted, like my pain is not counted, like my hurt is not counted."

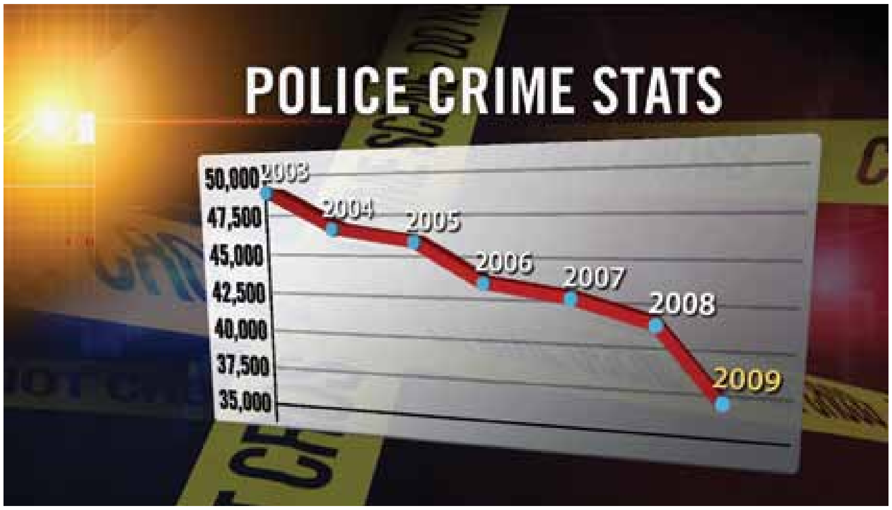
Police later ended up reclassifying hundreds of sexual assaults cases.

Look behind the numbers. Nashville police claimed to have one of the best records in the country for solving crimes. Under FBI rules, a department can claim that it has cleared a crime by (1) making an arrest or (2) by writing it off as an "exceptional clearance." Under FBI rules, an exception would be a case where investigators know the name of the suspect, they know where the suspect is located, and they have enough evidence to charge the suspect. But because of matters outside police control – usually either the district attorney or victim does not want to prosecute – officers cannot make an arrest. Exceptional clearances have to meet each of those criteria. Yet, Nashville police were claiming that well over half of their cases solved were exceptional clearances, instead of arrests.

"I don't believe that people should be convinced that this occurs with such a high frequency because that's just not credible," said Boston University criminologist Tom Nolan.

Analyze how easy it is to report crime. Police can not only drive down the crime stats by reclassifying incidents, they can also make crime more difficult to report. Under Chief Serpas, officers were told that traffic stops and other proactive measures to look for the bad guys were a higher priority than responding to calls to take crime reports.

We obtained data showing that, as a result, police response time had skyrocketed. But average times do not tell the human story, so I wanted to do a basic fractal analysis – breaking the stats into broad categories. I asked the police department to give me the number of people who waited more than an hour, more than two hours, more than three hours, etc. The numbers were stunning. Additionally, I analyzed data showing the number of times that calls showed a "Code 5" disposition, meaning that the subject was "gone on arrival." Those numbers had also skyrocketed during the period where police showed the greatest reductions in reported crime.



Despite police department stats showing crime on a steep decline, one caller said, "If you can't get them to come the one time in your life that you need them, I don't think we're safe."

Our investigation also discovered a declining clearance rate for homicide cases, meaning more people getting away with murder. In addition, the statistics-driven approach to policing had resulted in officers being told that they had better arrest more people for DUI – or face discipline. As might be expected, we found a case where that policy may have led to an innocent man being taken to jail.

The possibilities are limited only by the imagination of the police.

Our investigation also discovered a declining clearance rate for homicide cases, meaning more people getting away with murder.

Phil Williams is chief investigative reporter for WTVF-TV in Nashville. He is a two-time winner of the George Foster Peabody Award and the Columbia University-duPont Award, as well as a Pulitzer Prize finalist. He is a member of the IRE Board of Directors.

WTVF-TV, Nashville

Former Nashville Police Chief Ronal Serpas promised that his statistics-driven approach to crimefighting would lead to a reduction in reported crimes.

BEHIND THE POLICIES

Complex documents, data reveal the shortcomings of insurance companies

By Paige St. John
Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Paige St. John | Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Guests spill out into the street during the reinsurance industy's annual Rendez-Vous de Septembre in Monaco.

Insurance is highly regulated, so there are treasure troves of untapped records and databases for any reporter daring to ask.

The game played in Florida is high stakes.

Floridians build their homes, most of them, in the world's largest flyway for hurricanes. On average, more than two storms barrel through the low-lying state every year. And because this is how the economy works, they build those homes without the fortitude to withstand such pummeling, and borrow money from banks that refuse to share the risk of where they live.

To take on the risk on behalf of homeowners and banks, the property insurance industry insists that Floridians pay a high price, the highest in the world. And it keeps going up.

The state has a hurricane problem. Or so the politicians and insurance lobbyists told us.

What ultimately became a two-year investigation for the *Sarasota Herald-Tribune* started with an unproven accusation thrown down by a populist governor amid voter anger about constantly spiraling insurance rates. Gov. Charlie Crist accused insurers of colluding to pump up rates.

Investigative editor Chris Davis and I decided to try to answer that allegation. We never did. Instead, we discovered Florida's property insurance problems are not what they seem. The deeper that I dug, the more unfamiliar the landscape became, and the more unwieldy the project threatened to become. Davis and Mike Connelly, our hands-on executive editor, always gave the same reply: Keep digging.

Ultimately, we found property insurance itself is not what it appears.

And whether there will be money to rebuild homes and restore communities and lives on the day when the storms do return to Florida is increasingly in question. And though the insurers won't tell you this, the question is not just for Floridians, but communities throughout the Gulf Coast states, up and down the Eastern Seaboard, and perched atop earthquake faults or set up like bowling pins in Tornado Alley.

The system

To find out why property insurance rates keep climbing in Florida and why property insurance companies in this state keep failing – even when there are no hurricanes – we needed first to understand the system.

Most consumers think an insurance company collects their checks and invests the money someplace safe, earning interest to give the insurer an operating profit, covering the customer's losses when the water heater blows up.

Hurricanes and other disasters pose a problem. Carriers can go years without needing to pay a single storm claim, but when they hit, they take out chunks of states. In 100 years, an insurer sticking to actuarial tables would have collected enough money in the bank to write the check, but certainly not if the storm is next year. Especially not when the U.S. tax system penalizes insurers for amassing large catastrophe funds, and when there's better money to be made playing other games on Wall Street.

So insurers started buying their own insurance policies – a product called reinsurance – from large underwriters capitalized by wealthy individuals who can afford to put $1 billion here and another $1 billion there on the roulette wheel of global disaster.

Thanks to Hurricane Andrew, the vast majority of reinsurance sold to U.S. insurance companies comes from offshore companies. In Florida, most of it comes from Bermuda. It is largely untaxed and as far as consumers are concerned, unregulated.

We found Florida's market also had changed. National carriers left the state and new, single-state companies popped up to write some of the insurance policies. They developed virtual insurers, shell companies, affiliated ventures and self-dealing to create business plans that require very little start-up money, exposes the owners to very little risk and permits large profits out of reach of state regulators. The only question: Can they pay claims?

I slowly pieced together this elaborate and complicated system – first by getting an artist's sketch book and drawing large cartoons, and later by plugging names and relationships into a social network analysis program. None of that made it into print but it helped me visualize where I needed to go with my reporting, such as the key companies and players.

The people controlling Florida's insurance system weren't in Florida. They were in Bermuda, of course, and we went there. And they were in Monte Carlo. So we went there, too.

The sources

Insurance is highly regulated, so there are treasure troves of untapped records and databases for any reporter daring to ask.

State insurance offices collect amazingly detailed information about the inner workings of an insurance company – even those that are privately owned – in the course of reviewing rate hike requests, conducting periodic audits or investigating complaints. There are also background checks of key officers, inquiries into hidden ownership, and revealing business plans voluntarily passed out to regulators when carriers want favors, whether it is a low-interest state loan or a bloc of policies from the state disaster pool.

The numbers on those documents seldom tell the same story as those parroted by company flaks or sympathetic policymakers, so be fearless and jump in, or you'll likely never know the real truth.

To take it up a step, all state insurance regulators are in league through a nonprofit organization: the National Association of Insurance Commissioners. The NAIC does many things, most helpful of which is that it serves as a national clearinghouse of an incredible amount of financial data on insurers. How much did they collect? How much did they pay out? Where is their money invested? Even whom do they do business with?

Time and again, I mined NAIC records and databases, combining information from many sources to create my own gigantic custom database. This eventually allowed me to follow the dollar of Florida homeowners as it changes hands again and again through the state's complex insurance system – and to calculate how much profit was being siphoned off in all these years and where in the world it was going.

Hard numbers allow reporters to speak with authority, but also are the magic key to winning over incredible sources. I spent hundreds of hours crunching data, and an equal amount of time working with sources, starting with retired and helpful actuaries and insurance agents and eventually, company presidents and the powerbrokers at the top of the food chain.

An example: at the outset of the project, I quickly realized a single reinsurance company in Bermuda was the largest provider of hurricane reinsurance to Florida and thus probably making the biggest profits off the dysfunction of the Florida system. But my request for an interview led to a recorded message on my voicemail from a hired publicist in New York politely educating me that this company did not do interviews and in fact, preferred not to be mentioned in my stories at all.

Is there possibly anything he could have said to make me more determined?

Colin Hackley | Sarasota Herald-Tribnue

Florida Insurance Commissioner Kevin McCarty talks with reporters after a presentation on the state's insurance industry to the governor's cabinet.

I tried working my way in through background interviews with low-level insiders. No good. I tried knocking on the door, literally, at the corporate offices in Bermuda. No luck. He ducked me even at a Bermuda industry conference, though CEOs of several other competitors were willing to stop over coffee and explain their take on the Florida crisis.

So I found him in Monte Carlo, entrenched in a three-day champagne-soaked glamfest of the world's biggest and richest reinsurers.

I found his personal email and requested a meeting. Just as the publicist in New York was yet again refusing my interview request, the relaxed CEO on business holiday had agreed to meet me outside the casino. A promise of 10 minutes turned into a 30-minute interview. It served as a strong reminder: Never give up. Never go away.

Colin Hackley | Sarasota Herald-Tribune

Florida's deputy insurance commissioner, Belinda Miller, blocks the door to an underground parking garage to allow Insurance Commissioner Kevin McCarty (not pictured) leave the state Capitol without answering further questions about failing companies.

Regulators have ordered several insurers to return millions of dollars in unjust profits. Lawmakers have raised the requirement for how much capital an insurer needs to operate in the state.

The morning after

The original stories from 2010 that made up the Pulitzer entry can be found at www.heraldtribune.com/floridainsurance, but we continue to report the issue, taking it to the Florida Legislature, and beyond.

Regulators have ordered several insurers to return millions of dollars in unjust profits. Lawmakers have raised the requirement for how much capital an insurer needs to operate in the state.

More importantly, readers across the state are now armed with access to large parts of the databases we created – through online applications that let them look up the financial health of every insurer in the state, see who's taking new business or canceling policies in the county where they live, or see what the insurance industry's own computer models say about the real hurricane risk on their own home.

To allow readers to grasp otherwise cumbersome numbers, we created our own indexes of broad concepts such as leveraging and capital, and presented each as a five-star scale, not that different from the stars given movie listings.

Florida's Legislature once set aside $1 million for a consumer website to grade insurers, which was ultimately killed by the insurance industry. We created a similar site with much greater detail for the price of one week of a consultant's time.

Despite tremendous response to the project, Florida's reliance on offshore reinsurance remains unvisited.

It is a project in danger of never ending – or ending badly. Sooner or later, Florida again will be besieged by hurricanes that will put the state's insurance system to the ultimate test. Insurers will pay up or fail. Reinsurers will pay up or fold.

It's as reinsurance guru William Buffet – who not only backs Florida's hurricane bet through Berkshire Hathaway but also by way of owning a big chunk of global reinsurer Swiss Re – was quoted: "You never know who is swimming naked until the tide goes out."

Paige St. John joined the Sarasota-Herald Tribune in 2008 as an investigative reporter. She has been a journalist for more than three decades, covering Florida politics, the Michigan environment and natural disasters in many states. The property insurance project received a Pulitzer as well as awards from Scripps Howard, IRE, Green Eyeshade, Sigma Delta Chi and National Headliner.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DIGGING INTO INSURANCE

Friendly Fidelity claims it is broke and needs a 50 percent rate hike or it will stop writing policies in your state. Or SafeNSecure opens up and begins writing thousands of high-risk policies. How do you get past the press releases and unhelpful regulators to inform your readers about what is really going on?

If it is a request for a rate hike, go to your state insurance regulator and ask to see a copy of the filing. In Florida, these are scanned and downloadable at www.floir.com/edms. In other states, you may have to go to the state and ask to see a copy. And if they want to charge money for these thick documents, see if you can "inspect" it for free (bring your digital camera or scanner).

Most rate hikes talk about the average statewide increase, but you must dig deeper. Sift through to find a description of the physical boundaries of individual territories. These are usually based on ZIP codes and major highways. Earlier filings can help you find territory definitions (i.e. Allstate's Florida territories can be found in 2004 documents).

Read the filing like a mystery novel. Clues can be found anywhere, buried in jargon even state actuaries may not understand. Seek out a retired state actuary or consumer advocate to help you understand what you're reading. But also use your common sense to look for large expenses.

Compare the picture the insurer is giving regulators with the one it provides in its annual financial reports, and to its owners. Quarterly and annual financial forms are filed with the National Association of Insurance Commissioners and can be downloaded at https://eapps.naic.org/insData. The first five are free. Ask the NAIC about access to additional files. Publicly-owned insurers pack a treasure trove of information in their filings to the Securities and Exchange Commission, even boasting of profits while they tell regulators they're losing money.

Annual filings contain many useful forms. The first pages of the Key include a snapshot of premiums and expenses. Net profits or losses that show up there can be misleading. Go to Schedule F on the Other filing to see if an insurer is buying reinsurance from a parent. Go to Schedule Y to see what it is paying sister companies for management, claims and other unregulated services. Read the filing called Management Discussion to get the company's point of view, and sometimes an open admission that they are under secret regulatory watch.

Look at the annual investment schedules filed with the NAIC. Watch for money parked in real estate, or shares in ventures that might be owned by company executives, both red flags. These documents showed State Farm was dabbling in an offshore reinsurer, and another Florida carrier was using insurance premiums to bail out its floundering bank.

UNSAFE SKIES

Newsrooms mine aviation data for near misses, other mishaps

By Robert McClure, InvestigateWest and Kevin Crowe, The Watchdog Institute

How could the reporting not be – at a minimum – a lot of fun when the story starts with a discussion of the little-noticed file known by some journalists as the "snitch and bitch" database?

That was the colloquial description of a rarely tapped air-safety database that came up when Knight chairs Sarah Cohen and Brant Houston were kicking around ideas for a collaboration among members of the Investigative News Network.

The database maintained by NASA and officially called the Air Safety Reporting System (ASRS) produced local and regional stories that were interesting and stimulating to report. But more important, it showed serious close calls that threaten public safety – yet are often unknown to the flying public. (Not to mention folks on the ground who could be harmed.)

These safety slips can be documented in nearly any community with an airfield, thanks to this mostly overlooked trove of near-misses, landings at the wrong airports, pilots taking crazy chances and other dicey maneuvers that occur in the skies daily. Within a single state, you are likely to find seemingly endless examples.

The ASRS database, which the NICAR data library distributes, contains verbatim, digital reports from pilots, air traffic controllers and others regarding incidents or patterns that the person filing the report believes could lead to – or almost did lead to – an accident. The reports are submitted under the filer's name, but the names are redacted in the database.

The database also includes summaries by part-time NASA investigators who have decades of combined experience in the air-safety field.

Compelling anecdotes

Houston checked with half a dozen INN state investigative centers to see if they were interested in pursuing stories using the database. When they said they were, he set up an account on the project software Basecamp where the INN member organizations can cooperate. He also contacted long-time veteran journalist and editor Mike Kelley, who had retired from the *Las Vegas Sun* after it won a Pulitzer Prize, to help edit the project. Robert Benincasa of the NPR investigative team also joined in.

NASA was chosen to host the system because the agency has no regulatory authority over pilots and controllers; the Federal Aviation Administration, founders feared, would not receive as many reports if it were in charge of the system because the FAA has the power to revoke pilots' and controllers' licenses to practice.

The NASA system offers anyone who spots a safety breach – or commits one – to report the misstep confidentially. The system actually offers some protection from FAA disciplinary action for those reporting the breaches. For this reason, some critics of the data say it's all a big cover-your-butt system.

Robert Benincasa | NPR

A simulated Canadair Regional Jet flight deck at Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University in Daytona Beach, Fla. The CRJ-200's mode control panel is used to set automated flight control systems.

AVIATION TEAMWORK

Seven members of the Investigative News Network cooperated to produce the package: Connecticut Health Investigative Team, Seattle-based InvestigateWest, New England Center for Investigative Reporting, NPR, Rocky Mountain Investigative News Network, San Diego's The Watchdog Institute and Wisconsin Watch.

Here are links to the stories:

- **National overview story:** "Aviation Database Reveals Frequent Safety Problems at Airports" (http://ow.ly/5pRZJ).
- **Connecticut Health Investigative Team:** "Close calls in Connecticut Skies: NASA Data Highlights Air-Safety Problems" (http://ow.ly/5pSai).
- **InvestigateWest:** "Reports Reveal Close Calls in the Skies Over Washington" (http://ow.ly/5pSf1). News partner KIRO 7, the NBC affiliate in Seattle, also produced video and text versions of its stories (http://ow.ly/5pSip).
- **NPR:** "Investigation Scrutinizes Safety of Flight Automation" and related stories (http://ow.ly/5pSlh).
- **New England Center for Investigative Reporting:** "Close Calls, Narrow Escapes" (http://ow.ly/5pSoX)
- **Rocky Mountain Investigative News Network:** "Colorado Air Traffic Safety Concerns Soar" (http://ow.ly/5pSrt)
- **The Watchdog Institute:** "Anonymous Reports of Close Calls in the Air and on the Ground are Meant to Prevent Calamities" (http://ow.ly/5pStG)
- **Wisconsin Watch:** "Deer, Coyotes and Turkeys, Oh My" (http://ow.ly/5pSwd)

The NASA system offers anyone who spots a safety breach – or commits one – to report the misstep confidentially. The system actually offers some protection from FAA disciplinary action for those reporting the breaches. For this reason, some critics of the data say it's all a big cover-your-butt system.

All reports of certain incidents, such as near mid-air collisions, make it into the data set, but only representative reports of less severe errors are made public.

In any case, NASA can point to more than 2,600 safety alerts issued as a result of the system. These are worth a look, too, because they show what the NASA experts considered to be the biggest correctable problems.

We FOIA'd these records and because they've already been released under FOIA, you should have no trouble getting alerts that pertain to your area. However, be aware that a great number of these alerts related not to specific airports but to specific types of aircraft. Aviation reporters might do well to peruse these safety alerts for story ideas. The safety alerts we analyzed are available online at www.watchdoginstitute.org/2011/07/26/nasa-asr-alerts.

When we did the story for the network in February 2011, 62 percent of the reports came from commercial pilots. Private pilots filed 26 percent, and air-traffic controllers filed 10 percent.

The beauty of the ASRS database is that it gives you an up-close-and-personal look at pilots' and controllers' flubs *in their own words*. For example, a pilot who OK'd an inaccurate heading leaving Seattle – which could have lead to a midair collision – wrote: "This is another fatigue-related incident that occurs because of the total disregard of irregular cycles in building crew schedules … My brain felt locked up."

Under Houston's leadership, the journalists unearthed thousands of reports of near-misses, bad communications, equipment failures, and other dangerous or potentially dangerous situations. As our overview story explained:

"A six-month examination of more than 150,000 reports filed by pilots and others in the aviation industry over the past 20 years reveals surprising and sometimes shocking safety breaches and close calls at local, regional and major airports throughout the country.

". . . This review of the little-explored NASA records shows that the wide variety of problems translates into more than 130 near-mishaps and lapses reported on an average day, most happening unbeknownst to the flying public or those living near the airports.

"And that's just what's publicly revealed; the actual number of reports is about five times as much, but budget constraints limit what NASA can explore in depth and some of the reports are not considered substantial enough to include….."

"Nearly two-thirds of the reports list 'human factors' as the root cause, according to an analysis by one of the nonprofit journalism centers, The Watchdog Institute in San Diego."

A helpful and really key element of the reporting of this story – and its ultimate display – was the collaborative nature of the project. Example: On a conference call with ASRS director Linda Connell, we had at least six different news organizations. There was nothing unusual about the number.

But there was a different vibe to the press conference because the journalists on the line were not competing with one another. Instead, we were all working on specific regional stories that would appear in different parts of the country or, in the case of NPR, nationwide. This meant that we had a band of reporters working in concert to cover all the questions and to come up with ones that a single reporter might miss.

Data strategies

Although the data is available publicly and for free in sections at http://asrs.arc.nasa.gov/search/database.html, we obtained it from NICAR because the database goes back more than 20 years and allows a broad look at the information. You should make sure to grab the latest data off the Web to supplement NICAR's data if you want to make sure you have the latest possible reports.

One of the challenges in tackling this database is its confidential nature. Journalists are at the mercy of the person who filed the report, who may choose to go on at length, providing many details, or who may give just a brief synopsis of what occurred.

There are ways to make this all come to life, though. You can find real live examples of incidents that indeed did go too far, resulting in an accident that triggered involvement of the National Transportation Safety Board. If you check the NTSB database, there is often contact information, or at least a name and hometown is available for the pilot or pilots involved. The same goes for the aircraft owner.

In addition, the data are released in a way that may obscure the three-letter code identifying an airport, e.g., LAX for Los Angeles International Airport. Sometimes these come out as ZZZ in the NASA data, although each report is classified as having occurred in a particular state. It's often possible to deduce the airport involved from other material in the description of the incident.

The reports are replete with aviation jargon. "GAR" is "go around," when a landing is aborted; that's one of the most serious situations. "FAC" is "final approach course," "ILS" is "instrument landing system," "WX" is weather, and so forth. We found it pretty easy to discover the meanings behind these acronyms using a website we know called Google, and the documentation provided by NASA.

One frustrating aspect of the ASRS database is NASA's insistence that it not be used quantitatively. Connell and ASRS spokeswoman Beth Dickey emphasized that because the reports available to the public represent only what ASRS officials select to pass on to the public, they are not a random sampling of all the events reported. Therefore, they argued, numerical analysis is inappropriate.

All reports of certain incidents, such as near mid-air collisions, make it into the data set, but only representative reports of less severe errors are made public.

However, as our overview story pointed out, we found an FAA-funded study in which the National Academy of Public Administration recommended NASA process at least 40 percent of the reports for presentation to the public, and argued that 100 percent would be better. The reason the reports are not all processed? The budget.

The data are voluminous – NASA receives more than 50,000 a year, and that number is on the rise. "We're hitting records every day in terms of volume," Connell said during a conference call.

An argument can be made for analyzing the data numerically, of course. Even without that, though, these thousands of reports of trouble in the skies are a valuable source of anecdotes, patterns and insight into the air-safety system that can make for important public-service journalism. As NASA noted on the 30th anniversary of the system in 2006: "Through its website the ASRS has provided public access to a wide variety of aviation safety information, publications, database reports, and the confidential incident report forms. The ASRS has become a model for safety reporting systems worldwide and spawned the creation of the Patient Reporting System, among others."

Robert McClure is a co-founder of InvestigateWest, a Seattle-based nonprofit journalism center covering the Pacific Northwest. Prior to that, he spent two decades on the environment beat at newspapers in Florida and Washington state. Kevin Crowe is a reporter and database specialist for the Watchdog Institute at San Diego State University. Before joining the institute in 2009, he was a reporter for the St. Louis Post-Dispatch.

Sam Hodgson | voiceofsandiego.org

Carolyn Y. Smith, former president of the Southeastern Economic Development Corp., is arraigned in San Diego Superior Court on charges of embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds.

ROLLING INVESTIGATION

Lessons learned from a long, bumpy ride

By Will Carless and Andrew Donohue
voiceofsandiego.org

There was one rule about the Southeastern Economic Development Corp.'s clandestine bonus system: You couldn't talk about it. Employees were told they'd be fired if they did.

Perhaps that's why it took us so long to figure it out.

But investigative reporting can take time. Justice, too, moves slowly.

And sometimes patience pays off.

When the sheriff's deputies clasped the handcuffs around SEDC's former top two officials' wrists this May, taking them into custody on felony embezzlement and misappropriation of public funds charges, it marked a major step in an investigation we'd begun five years earlier.

Over that time – nearly the entire life of our organization – we had examined questionable land deals, broken promises and shattered dreams. We had found trusted officials paying themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars in secret bonuses. We had found consultants who lied about the work they did and billed the taxpayer for meetings that never happened.

Change and impact were slow coming. Public officials promised audits. Overseers shrugged off questions and ignored concerns. But we stuck with our instincts that something was clearly wrong and kept going until we found a story they couldn't ignore.

We had found trusted officials paying themselves hundreds of thousands of dollars in secret bonuses.

Still, in the wake of the ensuing outcry, firings and investigations, the other shoe never dropped. It didn't look like it ever would. Then, one sunny May morning, nearly three years after our big story, we got word: Prosecutors were filing criminal charges.

Now, the organization responsible for government-sponsored urban revitalization in some of San Diego's most blighted neighborhoods has been thoroughly scrubbed and reformed. SEDC's leaders, attorneys and board members have been replaced. Its basic rules renovated. And now a criminal case looms.

Beyond simple patience, we learned a number of important lessons along the way:

1. Don't be afraid to stand alone

We're not dealing with the Pentagon or the White House. In the case of so many local governments and public agencies, there are no pro-

Sam Hodgson | voiceofsandiego.org

Dante Dayacap, former finance director of the Southeastern Economic Development Corp., has filed for personal bankruptcy three times.

Sam Hodgson | voiceofsandiego.org

San Diego Mayor Jerry Sanders, right, and other officials announce results of an SEDC audit.

> We relied on appraisers and accountants, land-use lawyers and zoning experts. ... These people spent hours talking us through complicated issues and volunteered their time and resources to help us crack the case.

fessional watchdogs or GAOs keeping tabs. There's just you. And you're the only hope.

Become the expert and know the issues better than anyone. In this case, the organization received little media coverage throughout its lifespan and encouraged little public participation. Everything from its name, the Southeastern Economic Development Corp., to its office, with fountains and artwork, gave off the appearance of a private company. There was almost no oversight.

Its leader was powerful and politically connected. The people who were paying attention to the organization were those who were directly involved and interested in it. All the layers of government that were supposed to catch these things ignored or didn't take the time to understand the problems.

It's not easy to be the lone outsider. Don't expect anyone to back you up publicly.

2. Don't just make sources, make allies

Sure, sources are great. They talk to you and send you tips. They watch you chew with your mouth open at a lunch.

But for stories like these, you need more than sources. You need the kinds of people who are absolute experts in the field, who are willing to go way beyond the 15-minute phone interview. You need people who will sit down with you for two hours and pore through complicated documents that only a few people understand.

We relied on appraisers and accountants, land-use lawyers and zoning experts. We drew these sources into our reporting. We shared our suspicions and anger with them and made them as excited about getting to the bottom of the story as we were. These people spent hours talking us through complicated issues and volunteered their time and resources to help us crack the case. And in the end they shared in our successes and the fruits of our labor.

A lot of people out there respect investigative reporters and are fascinated by what we do. Get them involved. We remain in touch with the same sources we cultivated during the SEDC investigations, and they continue to help us on current projects.

3. Ignore the Mud (That's Thrown at You or Others)

The agency's primary method of defense was to ignore and obfuscate. The agency stopped taking our calls. We were told that SEDC President Carolyn Y. Smith was "unavailable," "in a meeting" or "on a call."

So Will camped out in the SEDC office lobby.

Smith left out the back door the first day, so he came back the following morning. Once, Will caught a glimpse of her down the corridor and called out to her: "Please answer my questions."

After that, SEDC's lawyer called our office, saying Smith wanted to take out a restraining order against Will.

But Will wasn't being threatening. He was insistent, but polite and respectful.

So he spent another day in the lobby. The next day, SEDC's lawyer called again and offered a meeting with Smith. The facts Will discovered in that meeting crystallized his prior reporting and, eventually, led to the story that was the genesis of Smith's ouster.

Likewise, we had disgusting personal rumors spread about us. We were fed unflattering information about our whistleblower. We ignored all of that and kept our nose down, sticking to the story.

4. If they won't respond, name 'em and shame 'em

For SEDC's lawyer, Regina Petty, we had to employ a whole new tactic.

We'd received a tip about her billing. But she repeatedly refused to produce documents that were clearly public.

If voiceofsandiego.org was a large organization, with a cadre of powerful lawyers, we would have sued for the record. But we're not, so we blogged.

Petty Watch was born.

Blogs are powerful tools, and we harangued Petty with daily – sometimes hourly – updates. A secretary's response to one of our calls became a blog post, "Petty Watch: Update One." Various conversations Will had with lawyers and politicians became fodder for the blog.

Soon, readers began to chime in with their own calls and emails to politicians and to Petty's office. Public indignation began to simmer, then boil.

After two months of Petty Watch and more than 20 blog posts, we received the bills. Petty left her post at SEDC soon after. Since Petty Watch triumphed, we've put several public officials on "Watch" status when they refuse to answer our questions or respond to our requests.

5. Keep getting creative when stonewalled

We couldn't figure out where hidden money was going. The agency stonewalled us. But there had to be another way to find out. Turns out, since SEDC is structured as a nonprofit, it has to file 990 tax returns with the IRS. As soon as we got those, we were able to see a wide disparity between Smith's reported salary in budget documents and what she actually told the IRS she made.

From there, we were able to crack the clandestine bonus system.

In other instances, we found different ways to get documents. We CC'd attorneys and politicians on emails we sent. We became de-facto lawyers ourselves, studying the case law and mimicking legalese so that our letters sounded like they were written by lawyers.

In other cases, when our records requests were getting answered by expensive document dumps, we just set up shop inside the organization and went through their entire files ourselves. That enabled us to find documents we didn't even know existed, like a handwritten note from the agency's chairman, proving a financial connection between him and a developer doing business with the agency.

6. Trust your hackles

While the mayor of San Diego was housed in a drooping, Soviet-era building with patchy carpets and sagging furniture, one of his lieutenants worked in a pristine office with beautiful sculptures and art. Something was fishy.

The agency used what felt like expensive resume paper for basic communications. It used an AOL email address for formal communications that needed to be public and searchable.

Blocking, lying, insulting and threatening are classic defense tactics. They're employed by subjects of investigations when they know they've been caught, or are about to be. You should know how to recognize those traits. The hairs on the back of your neck and your basic human understanding of another person's body language will often tell you more than hundreds of hours of interviews, research or pontificating.

7. Write with authority and evangelize when necessary

In these kinds of stories, you're likely writing about people and agencies that people know little about. And, in our case, we were conducting rolling investigations, breaking new stories as more information became available. We needed desperately to bring people along with us, to keep them wrapped up in the narrative.

To do that, you need to become the authoritative experts. Own the story. We learned to work with partners in television, radio and elsewhere to get the word out.

By doing that, we maximized our impact. And our patience ended up paying off.

Carless is an investigative reporter with voiceofsandiego.org. Donohue is editor of voiceofsandiego.org and an IRE board member.

IRE Census Toolkit

Investigative Reporters and Editors has produced, gathered and organized a wealth of resources for mining census data. New Census 2010 data data has been released on a rolling basis through the summer. American Community Survey census data comes out every year now, down to the tract level. Here's a sample of the tools to help IRE members with background, story ideas, data and more:

Get data fast and free

Census.IRE.org, our new online tool, allows you to quickly and easily view and download data for a specific location, compare two or more locations, and compare change from 2000 to 2010. Check out this slick new site created by journalists for journalists.

Webinars

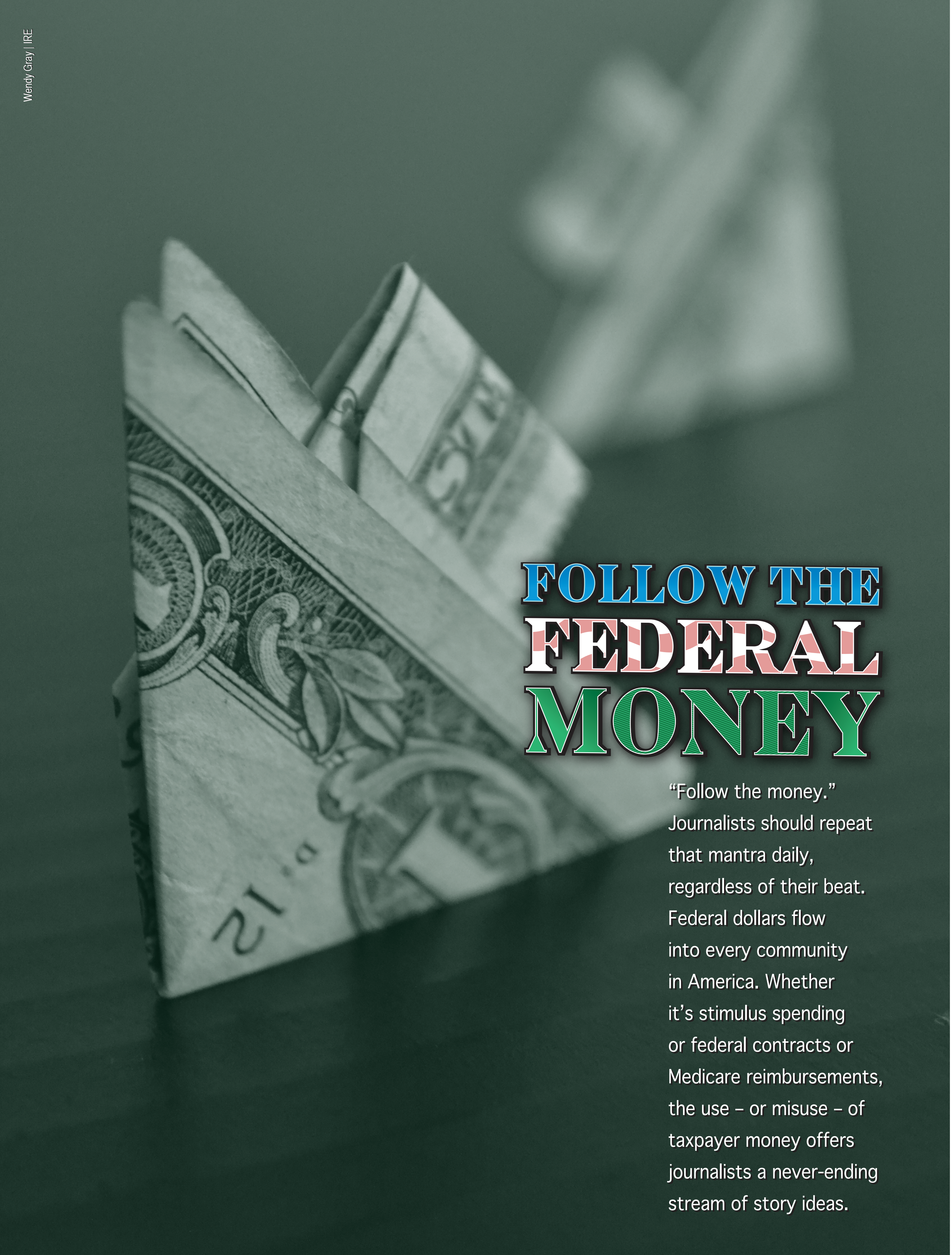
Need a focused overview with loads of census story ideas, data tips and a detailed timetable of data releases? IRE has produced two half-hour webinars to help you gear up: one for Census 2010 and the other for the American Community Survey. Download them at http://ow.ly/3PaSf. Each half-hour webinar costs $5 (IRE members) or $10 (nonmembers). Each is a single PDF file with built-in audio.

Online Resources

Visit our one-stop site: www.ire.org/census. There, you'll find other training opportunities, links to think tanks and other online resources, IRE census tipsheets, IRE Journal stories about census coverage, and official documents and guides from the U.S. Census Bureau. New resources are added regularly.

Census Listserv

IRE maintains various listservs, including one dedicated to the census. Members can search the list serv archives, post new questions seeking advice and contribute their census expertise to the greater IRE community. With each data release, activity picks up on the census listserv as members share knowledge, point out potential problems and help find solutions. Details are online at www.ire.org/join/listserv.html.



Wendy Gray | IRE

FOLLOW THE FEDERAL MONEY

"Follow the money." Journalists should repeat that mantra daily, regardless of their beat. Federal dollars flow into every community in America. Whether it's stimulus spending or federal contracts or Medicare reimbursements, the use – or misuse – of taxpayer money offers journalists a never-ending stream of story ideas.

STIMULUS SPENDING

ProPublica cleaned, crunched data to track federal recovery aid

By Jennifer LaFleur
ProPublica

Long before the bridges were built or the roads were repaired with federal stimulus money, Andrea Bernstein of WNYC radio came to ProPublica with an idea: that we begin tracking where the money would be spent. At that time, late 2008, there was no Recovery.gov where we could scoop up national data. But with the help of interns from the New England Center for Investigative Reporting, we began building our own database of infrastructure projects one state at a time.

Since then, the data has been easier to compile – though not without flaws. And ProPublica has continued to track the stimulus for our own stories and as a resource for reporters around the country.

And even after the stimulus money has been spent, the work we've done to track recovery spending will help us – and hopefully other reporters – better analyze government contracting in the future.

We made stimulus data available through our Recovery Tracker and built other tools to report on the stimulus. One of them was our Stimulus Speed Chart, which showed how fast agencies were spending money. And I'm sure that many former ProPublica interns will fondly remember the joys of cleaning stimulus data or calling agencies to update our Stimulus Progress Bar.

In addition to building online tools, ProPublica used stimulus data to report dozens of stories.

We reported that infrastructure money would not go to the states with the highest unemployment, that contractors with problems in their pasts received recovery money and that more than $100 million was going to airports with fewer than one flight per hour.

An October 2009 story by ProPublica stimulus reporter Michael Grabell revealed that stimulus contracts were going to companies under criminal investigation – including a company owned by an Alaska Native Corporation. That prompted a series of stories about ANC contracting, which showed how ANCs were shifting work – including work for stimulus projects – to outside, non-native subcontractors.

Other news organizations also produced important investigations on stimulus spending:

- The Associated Press reported that money to repair the country's bridges was not going to the structures in the greatest need of repairs.
- The Investigative Reporting Workshop at American University showed that much of the money for renewable energy was going to overseas companies.
- The *Washington Post* found that companies that received stimulus money for nuclear cleanup had been cited previously for safety violations.

But many other news organizations used ProPublica's data to report on where funds were going in local communities. Since we began tracking stimulus data, we have received more than 900 requests for our data; more than 100 news organizations have used it for local stories.

Our data was unique because it pulled spending information from multiple sources -- Recovery.gov and USAspending.gov. Recovery.gov includes projects of more than $25,000 and projects intended to generate jobs. That accounted for only about half of the stimulus spending recorded each quarter. So we added data from USAspending.gov, which included data not reported on Recovery.gov, such as spending on small business loans and PELL grants.

Our Recovery Tracker, built by developer Dan Nguyen, allowed local reporters and readers to see how much money was going to their county. To build the database behind our Recovery Tracker, we combined data reported on Recovery.gov and USAspending.gov. We also did our best to make sure the data was clean. We removed duplicate records, filled in missing information, and corrected data entry errors when we found them and could verify the information.

Among the holes we filled was missing company information. Each quarter's data included several hundred cases where companies were listed only by their DUNS number: a unique nine-digit code to identify a company issued by Dun & Bradstreet. Government contractors are required to have a DUNS number. To find company names, we used a service from Amazon called Mechanical Turk, which uses more than 100,000 workers in 200 countries to do simple data entry and research tasks. (For more about Mechanical Turk, see our online guide at www.propublica.org/article/propublicas-guide-to-mechanical-turk.)

Because the online DUNS database uses a CAPTCHA prior to searching, we could not "scrape" or automatically download the information. So we had multiple "turkers" search for each DUNS number. By having multiple workers search for each DUNS, we could verify that it was correct.

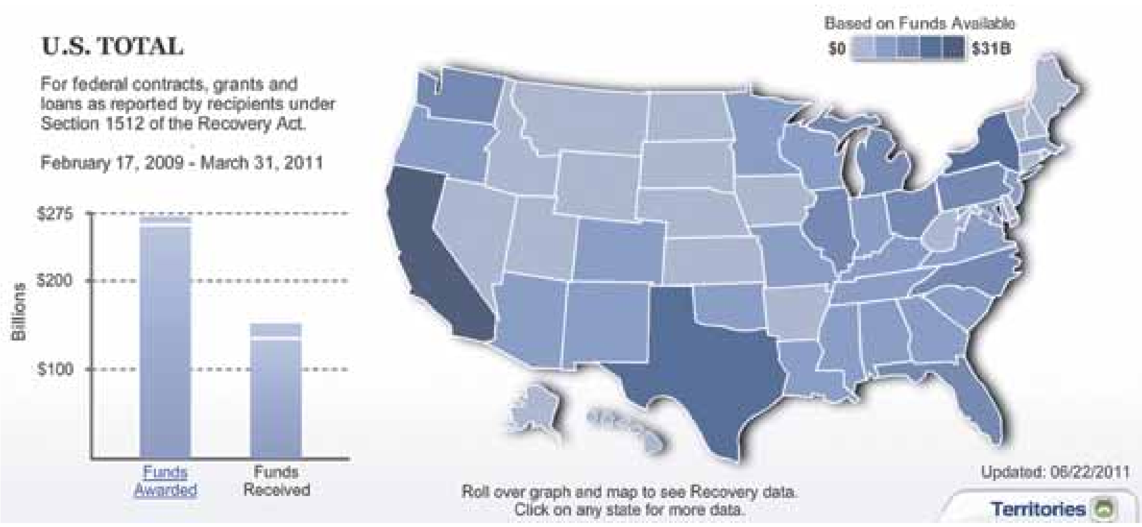
Since then, we've used Mechanical Turk for several other projects.

We had to fill other holes in the data as well. Data from Recovery.gov did not include county information. We added counties by matching the ZIP code where the funded projected was located.

But even that meant that the data did not perfectly show distribution in a state. The counties where state agencies were located

Michael Grabell | ProPublica

A totem pole stands in front of the Cape Fox Lodge in Ketchikan, Alaska. A ProPublica investigation found allegations of fraud and self-dealing in five of the seven companies the Cape Fox Corp. had in a small-business contracting program.



Recovery.gov

Agency	Spent (Thousands)	In Process (Thousands)	Left to Spend (Thousands)	Total (Thousands)	Spent (%)	Progress
Army Corps of Engineers	$2,428,517	$2,273,936	-$102,453	$4,600,000	52.79%	
Corporation for National and Community Service	$147,360	$44,568	$9,073	$201,000	73.31%	
Department of Agriculture	$17,536,616	$5,344,893	$5,144,430	$28,025,940	62.57%	
Department of Commerce	$1,671,582	$5,150,646	$1,093,772	$7,916,000	21.12%	
Department of Defense	$3,297,404	$3,253,415	$884,180	$7,435,000	44.35%	
Department of Education	$63,649,011	$33,615,913	$973,077	$98,238,000	64.79%	
Department of Energy	$8,682,066	$24,548,457	-$470,524	$32,739,999	26.48%	
Department of Homeland Security	$534,098	$1,640,067	$585,836	$2,760,000	19.35%	

ProPublica

always had the highest amount of money – that's because for many types of award, a federal agency granted money to a state, which then granted money to local recipients. To account for that, we backed the money going to sub-recipients from the prime recipient to better reflect the local amount of funds. Recovery.gov later employed a similar methodology.

Not all funding was traceable to the county level; for example, Medicaid figures were reported only at the state level.

We found hundreds of cases where the total amount awarded to all sub-recipients added up to more than the total award amount. In cases where there is one sub-recipient, we adjusted the amount to the original award amount listed for the prime recipient. We identified other cases where there was a duplicate record for a sub-recipient. In those cases, we've backed out the amount for the duplicate sub-recipient record. In other cases, we've set the adjusted prime amount to zero.

We also found cases in which the awards contained no report by the prime recipient. According to folks at the Recovery Board, every award should have a prime recipient. That meant that either the prime recipient did not report or a prime recipient was mistakenly classified as a sub recipient. In those cases, we added "dummy" prime recipient record.

We noticed when we pulled data from USASpending.gov that the number of Pell Grants doubled or tripled. So we did some checking with OMB, which is in charge of USASpending.gov, and with the U.S. Department of Education, which submits the information. We found out that many of the records were revisions to existing records (but previous totals still added correctly).

To correct this problem, we calculated the total federal award amount for each award over time after consulting with the U.S. Department of Education. We assigned the totals to the most recent version of the record.

But wait, there's more.

The stimulus is not over – spending on green energy, high-speed rail and broadband are in the early stages and are important projects to be monitored.

As with many previous stimulus stories, several factors should be examined:

- Is the money going to the appropriate recipients or sub-recipients?
- Is the money going where it is needed geographically?
- Are the projects doing what was laid out in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act?

These lessons can be applied to spending beyond the stimulus. For the first time, the federal government has started to require some subcontracting information be reported on USAspending.gov.

Here at ProPublica, we'll continue to update our recovery data and make it available for download.

And for an in-depth look at the stimulus from communities around the country, watch for a new book from ProPublica stimulus reporter Michael Grabell, "Money Well Spent: What Really Happened to the Trillion-Dollar Stimulus Plan." The book is scheduled to be released in January.

Jennifer LaFleur is the director of computer-assisted reporting for ProPublica, a nonprofit investigative newsroom that does journalism in the public interest.

FOLLOW THE FEDERAL MONEY

FEDERALCONTRACTS

Online databases contain treasure chest of information

By Neil Gordon and Scott Amey
Project On Government Oversight

In January, the Department of Defense released a bombshell: It had awarded hundreds of billions of dollars in contracts to companies that had previously committed contract fraud. The numbers cited in the report were astonishing. Between fiscal years 2007 and 2009, the Pentagon awarded $270 billion to contractors found liable in civil fraud cases, $682 million to contractors convicted of criminal fraud and $5.4 million to contractors banned from federal contracting.

The government uses a motley collection of databases to keep track of more than $530 billion spent on goods and services each year. Although most contracting databases are posted online and can be accessed for free, they can be tricky to use. The following is a brief description of the major contracting databases, as well as of the Federal Contractor Misconduct Database – a contractor accountability Web resource created by the Project On Government Oversight (POGO) – which should help guide you when investigating the spending of taxpayer dollars.

Central Contractor Registration (CCR)

www.bpn.gov/CCRSearch/Search.aspx

CCR is a great place to start to obtain basic information about a contractor, including its Dun and Bradstreet (DUNS) number, address, socio-economic factors, and a general description about the goods or services that the contractor sells. CCR also provides contractor point of contact information.

Federal Business Opportunities (FBO), aka FedBizOpps

www.fbo.gov

The FBO database allows users to locate contract solicitations and awards over $25,000. Advanced searches can sort data by place of performance, agency, product or service codes and, in the case of sole-source contracts, the justification for the non-competitive contract award.

Users also can find the solicitation notice, amendments, and subsequent award notices that will provide summary information about the agency awarding the contract, the scope of work, the contractor, the goods or services being procured, and the total contract dollar amount. Don't forget to use the keywords feature, and to search the active and archived records (click on the "both" criteria) so that you don't miss anything.

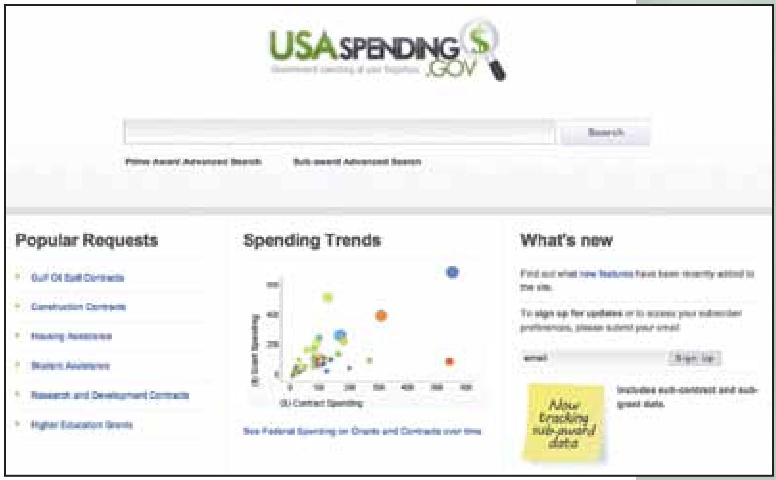
USAspending.gov

www.usaspending.gov

Thanks to the bipartisan leadership of then-Sen. Barack Obama and Sen. Tom Coburn, USAspending.gov replaced the often criticized and non-user-friendly Federal Procurement Data System (FPDS). Maintained by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), USAspending.gov contains information on federal contracts, grants and other federal assistance payments of more than $25,000. A versatile interface allows users to search, sort, collate and export spending data from as far back as fiscal year 2000 according to the awarding agency, recipient, geographic location (including place of performance and congressional district), goods and services codes, transactions and the extent of competition. Recently, the government added subcontracting data, making it a little easier to obtain information about the companies actually working on the contract – a world that had long been concealed.

USAspending.gov only contains coded summary data, so don't expect to find copies of actual contracts or grants. There has been considerable criticism about the accuracy, completeness and timeliness of the data in USAspending.gov. Occasionally, contract or grant amounts will be off by a decimal place or two. Recipients may be listed more than once in the system due to multiple spellings or because entities are not recognized as subsidiaries or affiliates of a parent corporation.

Even with these weaknesses, USAspending.gov is still a useful resource, especially when coupled with a search of the FBO database.



Federal Funding Accountability and Transparency Act (FFATA) Portal

http://ffata.org/ffata

This lesser-known database allows users to obtain raw data on specific contracts. For example, type the name of a contractor into the search feature and you are likely to see hundreds of transactions. The department and agency tags in the left column and the "sort" options in the right column allow the user to pinpoint transaction data. This database is unique because it allows the user to finds transactions, including modifications, under a given contract. Clicking on a link in those transactions allows the user to obtain more details about the amount of the award, the socio-economic factors of the company, Each contractor has its own profile page containing useful background information and links to that contractor's website, financial filings, PAC contributions, lobbying expenditures and federal contracting history.

the codes for the goods or services, and the level of competition. This data should mirror the records found in USAspending.gov, but the FFATA portal is more user-friendly.

Additional features to look for are the "search criteria" in the upper right column and the "Award ID (Mod#)" and "(View)" links that are provided on the top of each transaction. The "search criteria" allows you to view the various levels of information that you have entered and can be changed easily by clicking the "X" button(s) to delete criteria. The "Award ID (Mod#)" and "(View)" links on the top of each transaction allow the user to find all transactions under a specific contract and link back to FPDS to see the summary details about each transaction. By limiting a search to specific contracts, an investigator can sort the data and obtain spending totals that would otherwise be difficult to obtain.

This data is exportable, so placing it in a spreadsheet for improved readability and sorting is relatively simple.

The Excluded Parties List System (EPLS)

www.epls.gov

Responsibility of federal contractors is a hot topic. Numerous stories have been written about contractors with criminal and civil misconduct rap sheets, or a history of poor performance. The EPLS is maintained by the General Services Administration (GSA) and functions as the central, government-wide repository of companies and individuals that have been excluded (suspended or debarred) from receiving future contracts and other kinds of federal assistance and benefits. The EPLS includes the full name, address and DUNS number of the excluded party; the type, scope and start/end dates of the suspension or debarment; the federal agency that imposed the exclusion; and an agency point of contact.

In 2009, the Government Accountability Office found that various weaknesses and glitches in the system caused contracting officials to award new contracts to suspended and debarred businesses and individuals. Users of the EPLS are probably familiar with one particular glitch – a finicky search engine that will not locate records unless the name of the company or person is spelled exactly, so be prepared to search under several variations, including spelling out corporate designations.

Most users are probably unaware that records of expired suspensions and debarments are stored in the system's archive, which must be searched separately. The archive is where you'll find information about IBM's eight-day suspension in 2008 and the one-month suspension of L-3 Communications in 2010.

The Federal Awardee Performance and Integrity Information System (FAPIIS)

https://fapiis.ppirs.gov

FAPIIS, which is also maintained by the GSA, tracks the integrity and performance of federal contractors and grantees. It brings together information collected in other government databases, including EPLS, along with a growing array of new data. FAPIIS became operational in April 2010 and most of the information is now publicly available.

The public FAPIIS site includes:

- Civil, criminal, and administrative proceedings in connection with the award or performance of federal or state contracts or grants resulting in a conviction or a finding or admission of fault or liability that results in the payment of a fine, penalty, reimbursement, restitution, or damages above a threshold dollar amount.
- Federal or state contracts or grants terminated for default, cause, or material failure to comply.
- Federal or state suspensions and debarments.
- Federal or state administrative agreements resolving a suspension or debarment proceeding.
- Findings that a contractor is not responsible or that a grantee is not qualified.
- Defective pricing determinations.
- Determinations by the Secretary of Defense that a contractor not subject to U.S. court jurisdiction caused the serious bodily injury or death of U.S. government civilian or military personnel.

Records are retained in FAPIIS for five years after the date the action occurred.

The public does not get to see past performance reviews, as these have been deemed to be exempt from release under under the Freedom of Information Act. Information contractors and grantees entered into FAPIIS before April 15, 2011, must be requested through FOIA. However, contractors and grantees required to provide semi-annual updates to FAPIIS will have to re-post information entered prior to April 15, 2011.

Initial reviews of the public FAPIIS site (including POGO's own review) were pretty harsh. Users complain about its bland, user-unfriendly layout, clunky search interface, and sparse data content. However, there are signs that FAPIIS is improving as it gradually begins to fill up with data.

Federal Contractor Misconduct Database (FCMD)

www.contractormisconduct.org

In 2002, POGO developed the FCMD, a free Web-based data resource that tracks the civil, criminal, and administrative misconduct histories of the federal government's largest contractors. A major overhaul of the FCMD in 2007 brought a more user-friendly graphical layout, an assortment of tools that enable users to search and sort the data, quick access to primary source documents, and links to other useful contractor accountability resources. The FCMD won't tell you which contractors are "good" or "bad," but it is extremely helpful in researching the top federal contractors, an assortment of some of the world's largest military hardware manufacturers, information technology consultants, construction firms, education institutions and energy companies.

The FCMD classifies misconduct into 18 categories, including antitrust, contract fraud, environment, ethics, health, human rights and labor. Most instances in the database have downloadable supporting documents such as court filings, press releases and government reports. Each contractor has its own profile page containing useful background information and links to that contractor's website, financial filings, PAC contributions, lobbying expenditures and federal contracting history.

Misconduct instances included in the FCMD date back to the mid-1990s. The FCMD, which POGO updates every year with the previous fiscal year's top 100 ranking, currently includes profiles of 150 contractors and more than 1,000 instances of civil, criminal and administrative misconduct.

Wading through the federal contracting system isn't easy, but hopefully these resources will assist an investigation into the agencies, contractors, and hundreds of billions of taxpayer dollars that are spent each year on goods and services.

Neil Gordon, investigator, and Scott Amey, general counsel, handle contract oversight investigations at POGO. Founded in 1981, POGO is a nonpartisan independent watchdog that champions good government reforms.

HOSPITAL PROBLEMS

Track potential Medicare fraud, patient harm with public records

By Miles Moffeit, Reese Dunklin, Brooks Egerton and Sue Goetinck Ambrose
The Dallas Morning News

Digging deeply into the inner workings of Dallas' most prominent public hospital and academic medical center often seems like a detour into Plato's Cave, where reality is hidden and you only see its shadows.

The paper trail is darkened by privacy laws that restrict access to patient information and by broadly written medical committee and peer review statutes that cloak almost all internal investigations. Getting responsive answers from officials – who insist they are entitled to keep most of their medical practices, even performance statistics, secret – is virtually impossible. Insiders often are too fearful of retaliation to act as guides.

Shining a light inside this world, in any community with a teaching hospital, requires patience and endurance.

Our yearlong rolling investigation into patient harm and allegations of billing fraud at Parkland Memorial Hospital and the University of Texas Southwestern Medical Center was built on more than 100 open record requests, reviews of thousands of government records, and steady nurturing of sources.

The key findings:

- Patients at Parkland, Dallas County's safety net hospital for the poor and uninsured, have been seriously hurt – on average two people a day, by Parkland's own estimate.
- The hospital and medical center created a patient care system largely dependent on doctors in residency training, working with little or no supervision by faculty physicians, according to Parkland's own documents.
- Patients have effectively been deceived by consent forms, which failed to disclose that veteran doctors might not be the ones performing their surgery, federal investigators found.
- The institutions are being investigated on allegations that they have charged federal insurance programs for care that was provided by residents but billed as if it had been delivered by faculty doctors.
- No government safety regulations exist for resident supervision standards, only for Medicare-Medicaid billing.

Such practices aren't isolated to Parkland – they have occurred in teaching hospitals across the country. And the cash-flush medical lobby has repeatedly defeated efforts by Congress and state legislatures to enact rules for supervising residents.

Our team – led by deputy managing editor Maud Beelman and supported by CAR editor Ryan McNeill – began examining these problems early last year following a series of tips and the filing of a state whistleblower lawsuit by one doctor.

The implications were huge. Parkland, most famous as the hospital that treated a mortally wounded President John F. Kennedy, has trained generations of doctors. It is the last refuge for the most vulnerable patient population – the poor, disabled and uninsured. If investigators find that Medicare had been falsely billed for services provided by doctors in training rather than by faculty physicians, the hospital system could be putting patients at risk, as well as cheating the federal government and Dallas County taxpayers, whose property tax bills help fund hospital operations.

Because patient harm is so intertwined with billing fraud, it's a public service to pursue this inquiry in any community with a teaching hospital. If abuses exist, then revealing them can enhance fiscal management and improve patient care.

We started by breaking out our research along broad themes: the nature of resident supervision; the propriety of billing practices; the extent of patient harm; and whether such allegations were unique to Parkland and UTSW.

The key strategy: Aggressively file open records requests with the medical complex and every government agency in its orbit. Thoroughly search for publicly available data. Daisy chain our way through sources whose names we culled through court documents and the hospital's roster of employees. Search for patterns and hope for breakthroughs, including sloppy redactions in released records. Use our DMN Investigates blog to reach out to potential sources and to report incremental developments in the investigation.

Identifying health-care fraud is trickier than other frauds.

Take fraudulent public construction projects, for example. You can show whether taxpayers were cheated by tape-measuring the concrete or other structures, then comparing your dimensions with what contractors claimed in their bills to public agencies. It's not difficult to show whether they overcharged – those records are clearly open.

Not so with medical billing. Of course, the surgery room is not open to the public. But virtually all the activity, from the patients' treatment to the submission of their bills, is deemed confidential under Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, a 2001 law that protects the medical privacy of patients.

Hospitals and medical schools also interpret the law broadly to withhold information that should be clearly releasable – such as

Mona Reeder | The Dallas Morning News

Jessie Mae Ned, a former housekeeper for 28 years at Parkland Hospital in Dallas, went in for knee replacement surgery but was injured during the operation. Nearly 18 months later, her left leg was amputated.

Tucked inside our mountain of records were enough clues to identify some patients. When combined with other records, we were able to track them down. As our coverage continued, other patients contacted us with stories of harm that they or loved ones suffered – a benefit of the rolling investigation.

statistics pertaining to labor and deliveries or photos of patients used in their publicity campaigns in print and online. Even basic statistical benchmarking reports are placed in the category of "medical committee records" and off limits, they contend.

Such maneuvers forced us to hire our own records attorney. We have filed four lawsuits to compel the hospital and medical center to comply with the Texas open records law; they have countered with lawsuits against the Texas Attorney General to overturn records rulings in our favor.

Given the roadblocks to obtaining documents specific to the question of resident supervision and whether faculty doctors were actually present during key procedures for which the federal government was billed, we sought out other accessible records that pointed to problems.

Here are several of the sources we used:

- The hospital's annual financial statements. A standard footnote under the liability section is "litigation," where public entities are required to disclose basic information about whether they face investigations or lawsuits. In Parkland's footnotes, we found references to "investigations and allegations concerning possible violations of fraud and abuse statutes." We later chased down corroborating sources to confirm the existence of a U.S. Department of Justice probe that had identified millions of dollars in potentially fraudulent billings for resident supervision. The investigation is ongoing.
- Internal and external audits. These are typically considered open records, particularly audits done on financial statements and billing compliance. Expect heavy redactions where auditors cite individual bills. But auditors sometimes will flag improper billings. Look for accounting terms such as "significant findings." We obtained past audits involving the two institutions that showed a history of billing irregularities tied to resident supervision stretching back decades. In some states, the "working papers" or notes of auditors might be obtainable.
- Court records. Federal whistleblower actions, also known as False Claims Act suits, can be found on the U.S. government's PACER court-record retrieval system. But pulling the documents is often a hit-and-miss proposition because many suits can remain fully or partially sealed for years. Plug a hospital name into the defendant search field, along with the "890" code for FCA cases. Using PACER we got some hits. One former billing officer for UTSW had filed a whistleblower suit in the late 1990s making strikingly similar fraud allegations to those in the recent suit. He was willing to talk.
- The U.S. Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS). The agency regulates all hospitals receiving federal insurance funds. While regulators don't directly police supervision practices – unless they are in New York, the only state imposing safety standards – they do investigate patient complaints that can be related to supervision issues, such as patient-right violations and improper disclosure of doctors' roles in patient consent forms.
- The Inspector General for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. For decades, it has investigated false billing related to resident supervision across the country. File open records requests with the agency as well as the hospital to recover any reports and correspondence between them. We obtained hospital documents showing that Parkland once estimated it could owe the federal government up to $50 million for overcharges but withheld related information from its own auditors. It later repaid just $1.4 million, records show.

After we amassed documentation pointing to a history of improper billing, the foundation was laid for exploring the human toll of lax supervision.

A combination of breakthroughs allowed us to do that. Tucked inside our mountain of records were enough clues to identify some patients. When combined with other records, we were able to track them down. As our coverage continued, other patients contacted us with stories of harm that they or loved ones suffered – a benefit of the rolling investigation.

Two patients, Sara Limon and Jessie Mae Ned, put a face on the problem. Both were injured at the hands of trainees. Limon had her bile duct accidentally severed by a resident, leading to years of pain and nausea. Ned's leg had to be amputated after a surgeon-in-training botched a knee-replacement operation and she went three days without seeing a faculty doctor.

Both women turned over hundreds of pages of their patient medical file to us and helped us seek more records from the hospital. The names of doctors and other staffers contained in those records laid the groundwork for obtaining their personnel files under open records law.

Of course, it would not be fair to focus on a few unfortunate cases, if they were atypical and said nothing important about the hospital. To provide proper context to these and other stories, we pursued and found additional documents, including:

- An internal report by Parkland's own patient safety officer. It noted, "We harm two patients a day in a significant way," in summarizing 14 months of research in 2008-2009. The report was attached to a 2010 meeting agenda of the hospital's board of managers and posted on Parkland's website.
- Charts of resident surgical privileges. The charts showed that, as of at least spring 2009, residents at Parkland could perform a wide range of operations – from appendectomies to removals of cancerous breast tumors – with little or no supervision from UTSW faculty physicians.
- Comparative performance statistics. We obtained a benchmarking report that showed Parkland lagged its peer institutions in several areas. We also tapped federal and state data of risk-adjusted patient outcomes. We found that Parkland, which calls itself one of the nation's best hospitals, was, in statistical terms, not even above average. These statistical studies were particularly important because of Parkland's refusal to share any of the benchmarking studies it regularly receives from organizations like the University HealthSystem Consortium.
- Internal studies conducted by Parkland and UTSW of the cases we cited. Parkland had taken no special notice of Jessie Mae Ned's case until we wrote about it. But, having been advised

of it, they were obligated to provide her with a statement of how they had improved their practices after her knee surgery. In the letter, which she shared with us, Parkland said it had adopted new procedures to prevent surgical infections and respond to surgical complications. It added that residents were to notify faculty physicians when a patient's condition worsened.

The next nagging question: how pervasive are these problems in America's teaching hospitals?

In the process of researching Parkland, the team found articles in academic medical research journals suggesting the "see one, do one, teach one'' training approach in use at Parkland was common. One Johns Hopkins study said it was the prevalent apprenticeship model at the nation's teaching hospitals, despite a growing body of evidence that it was not the best way to train new doctors because it perpetuated mistakes and risked patient harm.

According to the elder statesman of efforts to reform supervision practices, the "see-one'' training model required an extra clause: "sometimes kill one.''

Searches of court records through Findlaw.com and Nexis.com offered up more evidence of a widespread problem. We found malpractice lawsuits against some 50 medical centers alleging lax supervision. We interviewed experts across the country.

We showed through records from the Association of American Medical Colleges and HHS inspector general's office that federal regulators had identified false billing for supervision at dozens of hospitals across the country since the mid 1990s.

The federal government never investigated whether patients had been harmed, even though instances of such harm were easy to find.

Part of the back story is that the medical industry has lobbied hard to kill legislation that would have limited residents' ability to work with little supervision. Also, teaching hospitals are often points of civic pride. They perform a valuable public service, and they build powerful political constituencies resistant to change.

Even so, our reporting has led to several government investigations of patient harm at Parkland. The CMS inquiry of Jesse Mae Ned's case found that her rights were violated and that her amputation revealed systemic problems, including lax resident supervision.

Another story of ours prompted the agency to investigate the death of a Parkland psychiatric patient, which the hospital had not reported to state and federal authorities, as required. Government regulators found widespread failures in oversight related to the man's death.

Meanwhile, from within the hospital, we hear reports of reforms occurring merely because we've written an open records request for documents about a potential problem.

CMS investigators recently announced plans for a sweeping review of Parkland's operations. One of our latest stories shows that they will face some of the same challenges as we have in getting past the shadows.

The hospital delivered internal memos to its staff instructing them to cloak records in "attorney-client privilege," to never leave staff members alone with inspectors and to keep them away from "known problems.''

Moffeit, Dunklin, Egerton and Goetinck are members of the Projects team at The Dallas Morning News.

RESOURCES

Stories

Story No. 24603: Maggie Mulvihill, Joe Bergantino, Andrea LePain, Sydney Lupkin, Sarah Favot, Jason Marder, Andrew McFarland and Jonathan Kim, New England Center for Investigative Reporting. "Public Works, Hidden Violations," revealed how construction companies were given tens of millions in federal stimulus contracts, even though they violated several laws and regulations. A few had been convicted of defrauding taxpayers on previous projects. (2009)

Story No: 21515: Michael Scherer, *Mother Jones*. "Contracts with America" showed how the lack of government oversight is decreasing competition among contractors. For instance, in 2002, nearly 52 percent of the contract dollars were awarded without competition, attracted only one bidder, or used multiple-award contracts or federal purchase cards – practices that auditors say are often used to skirt federal requirements. (2004)

Story 22509: Scott Higham and Robert O'Harrow Jr., *The Washington Post*. "The High Price of Homeland Security" reported how the Department of Homeland Security has failed to supervise billions of dollars worth of contracts for security systems to prevent another terrorist attack. The reporters found that the costs are climbing far above the original estimates, and some of the systems are not performing as promised. (2005)

Tipsheets

No: 3365: "Following the Stimulus Money," Ben Poston, *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel.* This tipsheet gives links to and information on several sites that can assist you in reporting on and tracking stimulus funds.

No: 2823: "Federal Databases You Need," Jeff Porter, IRE. Porter shows which federal databases can be helpful, such as the Federal Assistance Awards Data System and sites on transportation, public safety and campaign finance.

No: 2709: "Investigating the Aftermath of Disasters," Sally Kestin, *South Florida Sun-Sentinel.* Kestin explains how she and other reporters at the South Florida Sun-Sentinel discovered and revealed $530 million in fraud and waste in FEMA disaster aid nationwide. She provides an overview of FEMA and tells reporters covering disaster stories what things they should be looking for. Kestin also provides a list of sources for these types of stories.

Extra! Extra!

"Small Business Administration failed hurricane victims in Gulf," The Associated Press. The yearlong investigation by Mitch Weiss, Michael Kunzelman, Holbrook Mohr and Cain Burdeau looked at how the Small Business Administration responded to the hurricanes of 2005. Loan officers rejected loans they should have approved, deleted loan applications for no valid reason, manufactured impossible to meet deadlines to clear a backlog of cases and made the loan process so difficult and chaotic that thousands just gave up. As a result, many people along the Gulf Coast are still struggling five years after the storms. (Business, Disasters, Government, Aug. 24, 2010)

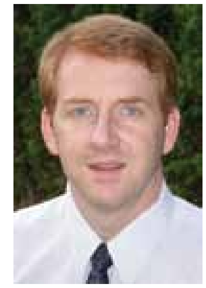
"Federal stimulus contracts favor large firms," *Missoulian*. Michael Jamison showed how large corporations are favored when the federal government awards stimulus contracts. In an effort to speed up the bidding process, the federal government is using a sort of long-term, all-purpose contract, which critics argue is anti-competitive, because only a handful of large firms can afford to engage on such undefined and unrestricted terms. (Business, Government, June 9, 2009)

IRE members have learned invaluable lessons during years of refining their investigative skills. They generously share their wisdom so others may benefit.

Collected WISDOM

Flex your writing muscles

By David Heath
The Center for Public Integrity



Most investigative reporters struggle as writers, a seasoned editor once told me. A bit harsh, perhaps. But the nature of our jobs gives our reporting muscles a more strenuous workout than our writing muscles.

It's easy to spend weeks burrowing into documents and interview notes, waiting until the last minute to emerge from the pile to write. Ever done this? I'll confess.

Making matters worse are the special challenges that investigative reporting brings. People who won't talk. People who will talk but whose claims have to be verified. And above all else, the threat of lawsuits.

So unlike those writers who can immerse themselves in the lives of their subjects, we're often faced with bringing to life documents, data and terse interviews. There's also a strong temptation, especially if we have anxious editors or cautious lawyers, to play it safe.

The sad consequence is that too many investigative pieces squander dogged reporting with lackluster writing. Even if the facts are compelling, poorly written stories can be confusing, dry, even dull.

Here are a few suggestions for how to prevent this:

Make writing a priority

Trying to write a story will quickly reveal any gaps in your reporting. If you wait too long, it may be too late, forcing you to write around the holes. But if you start thinking about how you're going to write the story early on, it can dramatically alter your reporting. Ask yourself from the start and as you progress: What is this story really about? What's the nut graph?

The key is finding the best way to engage your audience.

Tell a story

We've all seen investigative pieces that read like a Government Accountability Office report. They offer a catalog of bullet points that fall flat.

Even if the problems exposed are serious, readers will find it hard to get outraged unless they can relate. One way of making that connection is to pose the problem as someone's personal struggle. Another is to tell the story of the villain.

Whenever possible, tell at least parts of your story as a narrative. Think about what your piece would look like if you made it into a movie. To write narrative, you'll need to start gathering all sorts of descriptive detail that may not occur to you at first.

Is there a critical moment that changed everything? Go to the place where it happened and soak in the atmosphere. Check to see what the weather was like that day. Find out what other relevant events were happening at the same time. Get minute-by-minute accounts from the people involved.

Here's how we started a story about a failed medical experiment, a lead for which I can take no credit.

At a kitchen table in a noisy apartment in the Flatbush neighborhood of Brooklyn N.Y.:

David Blech, a 24-year-old songwriter and entrepreneur, sits with his brother and father. Like expectant parents choosing a baby name, they bark ideas for what to call their just invented company: "DNA Techniques." "Hybrodoma Service Center." "Genetic Systems."

"That's it!" Bleck calls out, rising excitedly. "Genetic Systems Company..."

At a kitchen table in a quiet house in rural Heflin, Ala., five years later.

Becky Wright, a 36-year-old housewife and mother of three, sits with her husband, Pete, owner of the local drugstore. Their talk is not about dreams, but a nightmare. Becky has leukemia.

Wright unwittingly enrolled in a failing clinical trial testing Genetic Systems' drugs, and died of causes directly attributable to this experiment. Three of her doctors owned founder shares in the company.

Don't rely on writing as a crutch

Just as beautiful penmanship won't keep you from noticing a misspelled word, lyrical prose won't disguise thin reporting.

Especially now with mounting pressure to churn out investigative pieces, I've seen more "gotcha" stories. They may be easy to read, with lots of suggestive attitude, but these stories fail to answer glaring questions.

Skeptical readers will pick these stories apart in the online comments. And in a worse case, gotcha stories may prompt a backlash from competing media. The ultimate test of any good investigative piece is whether the reporting backs up the writing.

Don't pull punches

The gift we get as investigative reporters is the ability to expose the truth. Don't waste it.

So many routine stories give opposing accounts of a story, leaving it up to readers to sort it out. But our job is to do enough reporting to reach a finding, to say what really happened.

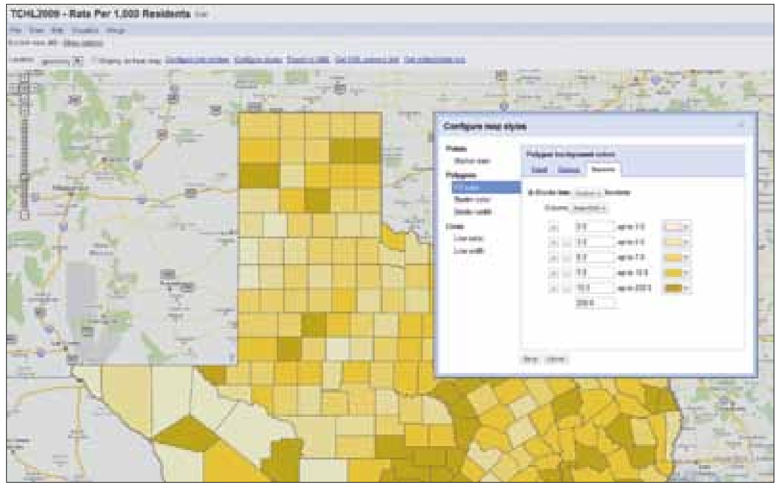
If you can prove that a business is cheating customers, say that. If you can prove that someone is lying, expose it. Write with authority.

David Heath is a senior reporter for the Center for Public Integrity.

You're reading a featured story from Uplink, IRE and NICAR's online publication devoted to computer-assisted reporting – available by subscription at http://data.nicar.org/uplink.

Visualize data

By Matt Stiles
The Texas Tribune



Editor's note: This is an excerpt from Uplink. The full story and additional visuals are available to Uplink subscribers.

The Web now offers numerous free tools that give non-programmers the ability to create data-driven applications. Among those with the most promise, especially for journalists, is Google Fusion Tables.

Fusion Tables essentially is a free database manager in the cloud, allowing anyone to upload large data sets, merge them with other tables and create visualizations. It's much more, though. The service has a detailed application programming interface (API), and basically can serve as a free back end to serve data and mapping applications. The service also is customizable while simple, with extra capabilities for more experienced users.

Of course, the Web already has many free tools available to journalists, including Many Eyes and Tableau Public, both of which offer free ways to visualize records in creative ways. But Fusion Tables has specific advantages for journalism.

First, it's a Google product that recently was upgraded from "labs" status, so the user interface is fast and intuitive – and reporters and editors can be comfortable that the service will scale to meet high traffic volumes. It also uses visualization tools – the ubiquitous Google Maps API, for example – that are not only powerful but also familiar to readers and viewers.

Second, Fusion Tables offers privacy settings and customization that other free data visualization sites do not. Users can keep their tables private, if they choose, or only allow specific people to see them. They can also choose to make only portions of their data available by creating views – or narrow slices – of their larger databases.

In a practical sense, a reporter might first upload a spreadsheet and tinker privately until an application is ready to share with colleagues or editors, who can then make changes or add comments (individual data cells can be flagged for questions). Once the application is approved, it can be made completely public.

Third, the volume of data already available in the service makes it valuable. There are thousands of public tables – everything from Brazilian monthly tax collections to worldwide coffee production. In addition, it has numerous KML (Keyhole Markup Language) files, which can be used easily to plot points or overlay polygons (like counties, legislative districts or voting precincts) and merge the geography in Google Earth and other mapping programs.

The Texas Tribune has used the service for several applications, including our GovTracker, a Google Maps mashup we use to visualize locations of events attended by gubernatorial candidates this past fall.

To start, we created a data table with the fields we wanted to display and use for visuals within the app, including each event's description, location, address, etc. We populated the table, and the service automatically recognized each address as a location.

Next we used the "visualize" tool to plot the points on the map, and then used its "configure info window" and "configure styles" to customize features. That included adding a specific color to reflect political party (red points for Republicans; blue for Democrats), and a mug shot for each candidate inside the info window.

Fusion Tables then allows an iframe embed, which can be customized if you wish to alter with the map's zoom level, height, width and starting longitude/latitude location. With some basic JavaScript and the FusionTablesLayer class in the Google Maps API, you can also make the map more interactive, using Structured Query Language queries to change points. For example, we have a filter function that allows readers to display on the Democratic candidate, or zoom into specific cities, for example.

We used the service to display a thematic map of concealed handgun license purchases last year by county, with darker polygons representing higher per-capita sales. We obtained license data from the Texas Department of Public Safety, and uploaded it to the service. We then merged the records with a KML file of Texas' 254 counties. We discovered that Fusion Tables allows polygon shading based on values inside specific fields.

In addition to maps, Fusion Tables allows you to visualize large data sets in charts (bar, line, pie and scatter) and embed them online. There's also an interesting timeline feature that transforms data with dates. Some of these visualizations, however, are tricky to master, and the colors generally aren't customizable. The mapping features also have occasional quirks that can be frustrating. The iframe embed has an 8 pixel margin, for example.

Even if you never desire to visualize records, Fusion Tables is also quite handy as a simple database manager. You can join or "merge" data, but also query it without having to master SQL syntax. A reporter could, for example, upload a list of government employee salaries and crimes by type over time. The tables can then by queried using a filter feature, similar to the feature offered in Microsoft Excel. You can also aggregate data, summing or averaging thousands on records within seconds. And, of course, you can search, copy and download others' databases.

Matt Stiles is a reporter and data applications editor at The Texas Tribune, a nonprofit news organization in Austin. He covers government and politics and oversees the Tribune's library of Web applications and interactives.

Journalists around the globe are producing high-quality investigative stories that make a difference. Their experiences offer lessons as well as inspiration.

Haiti Grassroots Watch

A student journalist questions a man about his son's case of cholera at a clinic in Mirebalais for "Behind the Cholera Epidemic."

HAITI'S AFTERSHOCKS

Collaborative watchdog group follows the funds for rebuilding

By Jane Regan

When a massive earthquake killed some 200,000 people and devastated Haiti, billions of aid dollars poured in from around the globe. Groups such as "God's Pit Crew" and "Drops of Hope" descended on the island, ostensibly to help people rebuild their lives.

Although many of us in Haiti had lost friends, family, homes and offices, a group of Haitian journalists banded together soon after the disaster to follow the money to make sure it really was offering hope.

We were all part of the Haitian alternative media movement, a nonprofit effort producing public service journalism. Most commercial media are run by their owners, focusing on breaking news and politics. Reports can be biased to reflect the owner's politics. Propaganda and puff pieces abound, and there is little in-depth reporting.

Haiti stories online

www.haitigrassrootswatch.org – Website for Haiti Grassroots Watch
http://bit.ly/haitimonsant – Series on distribution of Monsanto and other seeds
http://bit.ly/haitirecon – Port-au-Prince reconstruction stories
http://bit.ly/haiticash4 – Cash for Work stories

"There are a lot of challenges in the Haitian media scene today. A lot is lacking – in how they choose sources, how to do their analysis… and many journalists lack training and background that enables them to do analysis at all." – Professor Ary Régis, State University of Haiti

We didn't know how we could pull it off. All three institutional partners – AlterPresse online news agency, SAKS (which works with community radios) and the Network of Women Community Radio Broadcasters – had lost their offices, equipment and most of their archives. The professor was living in a tent. As for me – the sole foreigner in that group, who has worked on and off with the groups for 20 years – I had a job in Washington, D.C.

We also didn't know how we could fund it. As months rolled by, we learned that most donors prefer supporting things they can see, like a temporary school building, a drainage canal, and brandable things like tents, T-shirts and knapsacks.

But we were convinced it had to happen. As soon as foreign technocrats and officials began pumping out reconstruction plans, it became clear there had been little participation from Haitian experts and citizens. One more reason, we thought, to launch a "reconstruction watchdog" collaborative.

"[W]e think media like ours can… make sure that this reconstruction leads to the kind of society we all dream about: a just society, one that includes people, that doesn't exclude; a society that takes into account the needs of the human being. A society that addresses the needs of the victims – not just from the recent earthquake, but also of the invisible earthquake our society has been experiencing for dozens of years" – Gotson Pierre, director, AlterPresse, March 2010.

'Eyes peeled' on Haiti

Eventually we rounded up funding from International Media Support in Denmark and an anonymous U.S. donor and launched "Haiti Grassroots Watch" ("*Ayiti Kale Je*" or "Haiti Eyes Peeled" in Haitian Creole). Since then, we also have received grants from the several U.S.-based foundations.

We vowed to "*fouyo zo nan kalalou*" – "stick our fingers into the okra," as the Haitian saying goes. And we decided to produce text, video and audio in Haitian Creole and French (Haiti's two official languages) as well as in English and Spanish, because want to reach everybody from Haitian community radio listeners who don't necessarily have any formal education to Haitian and foreign politicians, consultants, aid groups and citizens.

Our distribution networks are varied: commercial and community radio in Haiti and the United States, online services and sites, Haitian newspapers, commercial television in Haiti and U.S. community television.

Despite our ambitious goals, Haiti Grassroots Watch is lean. We

Accesomedias | Beethoven Plaisimond

Jane Regan teaches an investigative journalism course in a temporary classroom – plywood walls and sheet metal roof. The room has no electricity or sound insulation.

operate with volunteers from five community radios, the part-time efforts of journalists and producers at SAKS and AlterPresse, and three part-time interns who receive small stipends. Student reporting also plays a role. There is no office and were no "new hires" except for the interns and my position – coordinator/trainer.

Pretty early on, I realized that we needed to "grow" our own journalists, so I do skills workshops at radio stations and in the capital. Last January, I started teaching Haiti's first-ever university-level investigative journalism course. With support from IRE, we translated one chapter of the *Investigative Reporter's Handbook* and several chapters of an African investigative reporting manual.

"The course was more than useful. What I really liked is that you go out and report. When you speak to an authority, and then you go out and do research, you find out he was not telling the whole truth. I realized that there were real gaps in my learning." – Esther Labonté, fourth year student, State University of Haiti. Her final project is part of a report on Port-au-Prince reconstruction (http://bit.ly/haitirecon).

Story ideas and reporting come from the journalists at SAKS and AlterPresse and "the crowd" – the students and community radio members. Reporting done by radio stations is sent to the capital on paper and audio cassette or CD, where we vet and verify it. Then, the best radio reports are re-done on video, with the radio member serving as "talent." Finally, all reporting is combined for the final text, videos and radio documentary.

"Haiti Grassroots Watch helps a lot of people realize what rights they have. It listens to the people living under the tents... Now I can go and talk to the authorities and NGOs and make them respond to questions. I have to walk several hours from my land… but I do it so I can help my brothers and sisters rise above the misery in which we live." – Jean-Maxot Guerrier, 48, father of six, farmer with elementary school education, member of Clofa Pierre Community Radio in La Vallue.

Road blocks to progress

But it's not all good news. Not surprisingly, more than just lack of training stands in the way. Most media owners pay pittances (most journalists end up in public relations jobs). Radio reporters are expected to turn in three or four reports a day. On top of that, few journalists have their own cars or computers, nor do they have access to the Internet outside of work. Some don't even have much electricity outside of the newsroom.

... few journalists have their own cars or computers, nor do they have access to the Internet outside of work.

But lack of materials, time and experience are – in many ways – the least of the challenges.

Many commercial media owners are very wary of stories that might endanger their revenue streams – the Haitian and foreign government agencies, the NGOs, and the private sector. Until 2000, there was an exception: Radio Haïti Inter. Owned and run by journalist Jean Leopold Dominique, its reporters used to dig into prickly dossiers and face what Dominique said were near-complete advertising boycotts.. In the 2003 documentary "The Agronomist," Dominique told filmmaker Jonathan Demme: "I tried to introduce information… risky business. I know I am attacked because I'm doing my job the way it should be done."

On April 3, 2000, Dominique faced his last attack. As he headed into the station to begin that day's newscast, the 69-year-old and a guard were gunned down. Dominique died from four bullets in the head and chest.

Haiti Grassroots Watch

Journalists and community radio members gather in Haiti's capital for a story idea session for the pilot reporting project. They overcame numerous obstacles in their collaboration.

... there are no laws in Haiti, and few in foreign countries, that require government contractors and NGOs to publish their budgets.

In addition to the dangers, Haiti has no laws that give reporters access to authorities and documents. There is also no access to government tax, zoning, budget, land ownership, baptism, birth, death or other records. (Even if there were access, record-keeping is scandalously deficient. And then there's the earthquake that destroyed most of the government buildings in the capital and four other cities.)

Because Haiti is practically occupied by multilateral, U.S. government and non-governmental humanitarian and development agencies, a great deal of important information rests with them – in Haiti as well as at their home countries. But there are no laws in Haiti, and few in foreign countries, that require government contractors and NGOs to publish their budgets.

"[A] journalist is trying to do a report… I ask you to be very vigilant and, if the case presents itself, do not respond to any question, no matter how simple it seems… It is important to advise us immediately of all incidents, or requests, in order to help us better respond. – Email sent to employees of a U.S. Agency for International Development-funded project during the months HGW was requesting an interview via email, telephone call and letter. Despite repeated requests, no interview was granted.

Finally, there is distribution. Most commercial radio and television stations in Haiti are not interested in free content, especially if it might hurt their businesses. They are "pay to play" only.

Overcoming obstacles

We have a long way to go, but we've come up with work-arounds:

- **Logistics:** Because transportation is so difficult and expensive, there are few meetings where all journalists are present. We communicate via email, cell phone and text message. But most journalists have no Internet at home, and community radio members have none. The radios send cassettes or CDs with sound files into the capital on the back of a motorcycle or with a bus driver. If rains flood a river, meaning one of the stations is completely cut off, we shift our schedules, adjust our deadlines and change the calendar. In the capital, text messages and motorcycle couriers keep everyone coordinated.
- **Danger:** We do not investigate certain subjects (drug trade, for example). Articles – which are all collaborative – are not signed, and they are in at least two languages, meaning that we are more visibly attached to the outside world. This does not mean that we are immune to possible dangers, but it does provide a bit more protection.
- **Lack of access to authorities:** Sometimes I make the calls or send the emails requesting interviews. Sadly, Haitian and foreign officials, and NGO employees of all nationalities, tend to react more favorably to a foreign reporter's request. I secure the interview, and a Haitian team member follows up.

Haiti Grassroots Watch partners and the State University hope to work with other media organizations to promote new, open records laws. We are exploring permanent partnership possibilities with a few Port-au-Prince commercial radio and television stations. Little by little, we are expanding our reach among Haitian diaspora and U.S. alternative media. Last spring, a student at American University's Investigative Reporting Workshop helped Haitian reporters learn more about a U.S. government contractor. Maybe U.S. reporters and journalism students can team up with Haitian reporters on long-term investigations into U.S.-funded reconstruction projects, acting as both mentors and researchers? Perhaps kicked off by international, bilingual workshops?

"The reconstruction is hidden from everyone, behind a curtain, and that keeps actors from playing their roles. We are 'constructing' a media project that will assure citizens, and the media, can take part." – Professor Ary Régis

Jane Regan is an investigative journalist, communications scholar and documentary filmmaker who has worked in Haiti for most of the past two decades. Her work has been featured in the Miami Herald, the Christian Science Monitor, Interpress Service, Associated Press Television News, the BBC, the Public Broadcasting System and numerous other outlets.

ITEMIZED BILL

Kent State students dissect fees, find hidden charges for athletics

By Karl Idsvoog
Kent State University

We all know the primary purpose of a university: to be a cost-free training ground for the NFL and the NBA. That's why the highest-paid university employees usually are coaches and the department spending the most on student recruitment and full scholarships is the athletic department. There are a tiny handful of universities where, thanks to TV and promotional contracts, the athletic department actually makes money. But at most universities, athletics is a multimillion dollar budget hole that gets plugged by the academic students.

Parents and students often don't realize that. At many universities, there's no indication of the athletic charge on the bill. It just says "tuition and fees."

There are lots of fees.

At Kent State University in Ohio, there's a per-credit charge (capped for full-time students at 11 credits) for the rec center ($9.82/credit), the student center ($9.03/credit), the campus bus service ($4.35/credit), the health center ($6/credit) the theater (15 cents/credit). But the largest fee at Kent goes to athletics. Students pay $24 per credit to the athletic department. In other words, even a part-time student taking a three-credit course pays $72 to the athletic department.

Kent State attracts many first-generation college students, and nearly all are working night, weekend and summer jobs to help pay for school. When I show them the breakdown of student fees, some are surprised, some are angry. I've failed to find a student yet who didn't think there should be more detail on the university bill.

Is Kent unique in its billing practices? That became the crux of our Student Fee Reporting Project (http://et.kent.edu/jmc40004/fees).

We chose to examine the universities in our conference, the Mid-American Conference. Each student in the class was assigned a university, while grad students got two.

We needed a breakdown of student fees. We wanted to know if such a breakdown is provided on the bill sent to the student. In order to compute the percentage of the athletic department budget coming from student fees, we had to get a copy of the athletic department's budget. Were these public records? One school (Temple) is private, so does that make a difference? And we were dealing with universities in Ohio, Illinois, Michigan, Pennsylvania, New York and Michigan, and the public records law in each state is different.

Next, we played telephone. The student was the reporter, and I was the university. "What can I help you with?" In trying to respond to that one simple question, students realized they weren't ready to make phone calls.

If there's one piece of advice I have for any reporting class, it is this: Have students make calls during class so you can hear them and help them. For too many student projects, they're calling totally friendly people more than willing to chat. That's not the world of reporting. Journalism students don't learn to play hardball by playing softball.

Before making a single call, students had to check the public records law and have a properly prepared email public records request ready to send with a click. The exercise taught them preparation, and the execution gave them confidence:

- "Before (this project), I would get really irritated and nasty over the phone if I didn't get what I wanted. I learned that you have to be patient and persistent. When people get mean, that's when you get nicer." – Michael Holden
- "Prior to doing this project, I was just "OK" on the phone. I would just accept whatever they told me and move on. After doing this project, I know what I want." – Macy McMaster
- "It helped me realize I need to ask the right questions the first time. I also learned you just have to call, call, call back." – Courtney Thomas

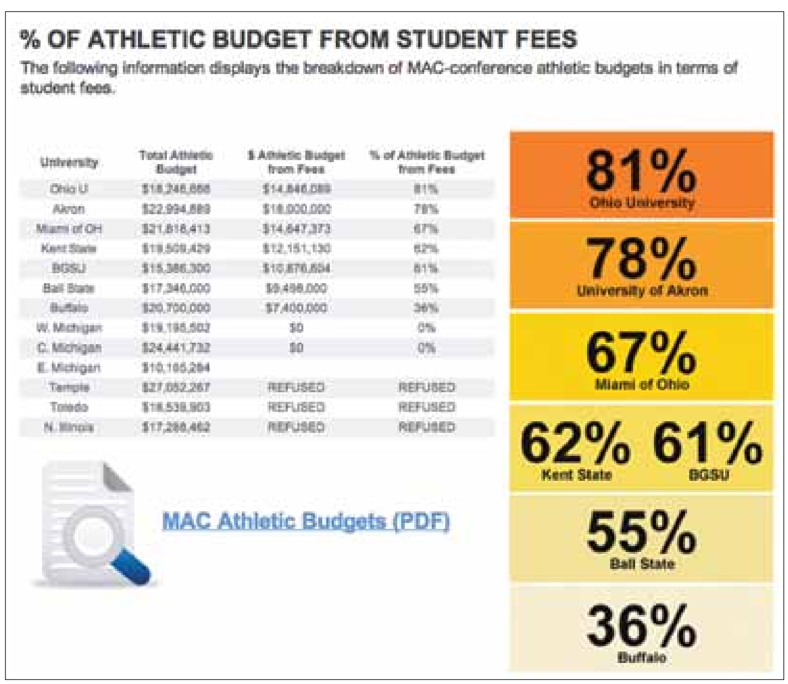
Knowing the public records law helped students recognize immediately when they were getting jerked around. When student reporter Lauren Forthofer requested the athletic department's budget from the University of Toledo, the response may have deterred many student reporters. The university official told her: "I'm not sure you understand how complicated and difficult it's going to be for us to even get that information."

Lauren explained she'd already gotten the same information from Bowling Green State University and that it was public record and had to be made readily available as required by Ohio law. She got the records.

To clarify the public records request, students learned the importance of providing specific examples. Instead of sending attachments (PDF, Excel, Word files) that might not open or be stripped by an email server, students retyped the information for Kent Student Fees and Kent Athletic Budget into a Word document that they could quickly copy and paste into an email. They could send it while they were still on the phone. "Here's the type of breakdown I need for YOUR university."

"Prior to this project, I was never very comfortable calling anyone to ask for data," student Bethany Vietmeier said. "However, during this project, I learned it is very beneficial to plan a phone

Knowing the public records law helped students recognize immediately when they were getting jerked around.



% OF ATHLETIC BUDGET FROM STUDENT FEES

The following information displays the breakdown of MAC-conference athletic budgets in terms of student fees.

University	Total Athletic Budget	$ Athletic Budget from Fees	% of Athletic Budget from Fees
Ohio U	$18,246,668	$14,846,089	81%
Akron	$22,994,889	$18,000,000	78%
Miami of OH	$21,818,413	$14,647,373	67%
Kent State	$19,509,429	$12,151,130	62%
BGSU	$15,386,300	$10,876,654	61%
Ball State	$17,346,000	$9,498,000	55%
Buffalo	$20,700,000	$7,400,000	36%
W. Michigan	$19,195,502	$0	0%
C. Michigan	$24,441,732	$0	0%
E. Michigan	$10,165,264		
Temple	$27,052,267	REFUSED	REFUSED
Toledo	$18,538,903	REFUSED	REFUSED
N. Illinois	$17,288,462	REFUSED	REFUSED

> The power of the Web project is its extended life and usability.

call before you actually make it." To listen to her effective polite persistence, go to http://vimeo.com/20246428. She's interviewing the associate provost for academic budget and planning at Ohio University and asking why there isn't detail on the bill. He tells her the student fee information is online. Bethany doesn't stop with that answer. She asks him to pinpoint precisely where the information is. The answer demonstrates just how deeply buried it is.

For this project, the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (www.knightcommission.org) helped provide national context. It's done a national analysis of academic vs. athletic expenditures. In class, we reviewed some of the findings. Overall, per-student spending per athlete is $70,000 more than spending per academic student. But the MAC conference doesn't come close to those figures. Still, MAC universities spend four times as much on athletes as it spends on academic students. The Knight Commission found while universities are facing budget cuts across academic departments, athletic spending continues to rise.

For the student stories, we pooled the data. Each student was asked to produce a multimedia Web project with impact. The first versions were wonderfully awful. Students ignored the Knight data, they didn't hyperlink. For the most part, they thought like a print journalist from 1980. They wrote words on paper. Fixing that was relatively simple.

Students were told anyone failing to utilize the Knight data and some of the Knight Commission's powerful graphs would be given an F. Any student failing to use video would receive an F. The revisions showed instant, significant improvement.

Students did not have to design the page. They did have to include all hyperlinks and videos they wanted to use. Designer Ben Hollis transformed that into a design the class reviewed and refined by asking one key question: What does the user want?

You can go online and take our poll. It asks a simple question: Should universities provide a line-item breakdown of all charges on the bill it sends to students? There are three options: Yes, No, and I'm Too Confused to Answer. The inspiration for that came from an official at Miami University who said putting line-item detail on a student bill would be "way too confusing." I'm not making this up. You can listen to what the guy says at http://vimeo.com/20215643. If that detail were provided on the bill for Miami University students, they'd discover that they pay $41 per credit hour to the athletic department, quite a bit more than Kent's rate of $24 per credit hour but still under the athletic charge champion: Ohio University. Students at OU pay $48 per credit hour to the athletic department.

Thanks to Vimeo.com, this project lives online and on the iPad. Vimeo automatically encodes for both, making life a lot easier for the Web designer who can quickly embed for either platform.

Video, audio, charts, a poll, and suddenly, students are doing a multimedia online project. Some student reactions:

- "I think it's important to look at your work as a viewer. I know when I go online, I'm way more attracted to an article with videos and photos than just straight copy." – Michel Holden
- "After this project, I now look around and see so many more opportunities for stories." – Alexandra Dellas
- "Just like any broadcast story, you want it to be visually interesting." – James Starks

And students saw the impact of their work. It was featured on Patch.com. It was featured on the website for the Center for College Affordability and Productivity. It was featured on the IRE website. Cleveland NBC affiliate WKYC did a story on the project and the students. The best part: It's still there. The power of the Web project is its extended life and usability. Months after the project was launched, users still can read the stories, watch the videos and take the poll.

This is a fabulous time to be a journalist, and there's never been a more exciting time for today's journalism students. They can produce work that makes a difference.

Karl Idsvoog, an associate professor at Kent State University, has done multimedia training missions for Radio Free Asia, IREX, the International Center for Journalists and the U.S. State Department.

FAIR AND BALANCED?

Fox News buzzwords play role in TV ads for Ohio Supreme Court

By Jeff Hirsh
WKRC-Cincinnati

Everything you need to know about political advertising since the *Citizens United* decision by the U.S. Supreme Court can be summed up in 30 seconds. Make that one minute. That's how long it takes to watch a couple of television ads from the most recent race for the Ohio Supreme Court.

The ads caught my attention in the weeks leading up to the November 2010 election for three reasons. First, they seemed to be on every 15 minutes. (A $1.5 million ad budget does that.) Second, they made an end run around Ohio's limits for judicial campaign contributions. And third, they were brilliant.

Political parties nominate candidates for judicial races in Ohio (and 13 other states), but party affiliations do not appear on the ballot. So how can you let voters know that your judicial candidate is a Republican without saying GOP? Well, if you are a deep-pocketed "independent" group, you blanket the state with ads that link your chosen candidates to a couple of buzzwords seared into the national consciousness as synonymous with the Republican Party and conservatism: "fair" and "balanced."

Yes, "fair and balanced," the trademarked slogan and mantra of Fox News. And the use of that slogan, by an independent group backed by powerful business interests, raises questions about big money in politics, and makes a mockery of rules designed to minimize the influence of mile-high piles of cash in races for judge.

The ads were financed by The Partnership for Ohio's Future, an arm of the Ohio Chamber of Commerce. Thanks to the recent 5-4 ruling in *Citizens United*, the U.S. Supreme Court has allowed corporations and labor unions to funnel unlimited and untraceable dollars through independent organizations called 527 groups.

The Partnership's 2010 ads backed Republican Justice Maureen O'Connor for chief justice against a seated Democrat, and GOP Justice Judith Lanzinger against a non-incumbent Democratic foe. The word "Republican" is neither seen nor heard, so the ads seem as if they're from a neutral, nonpartisan, "good government" organization.

One spot starts with pictures of each judge, and a baritone-voiced announcer proclaiming "She's tough. She's experienced. Together, they're a team you can trust on the Ohio Supreme Court." It continues with standard judicial claims – tough on drunk drivers, protects your kids, and so on. But then: "As chief justice, Maureen O'Connor will make sure the Supreme Court is fair. And Justice Judy Lanzinger will make sure the system is balanced." "FAIR" stands out in capital letters under a picture of O'Connor, and also in caps, under Lanzinger, it proclaims "BALANCED."

Another Partnership commercial, for Lanzinger alone, hammers the point home as well. "Judge Judy Lanzinger understands hard work, how FAIR AND BALANCED justice can affect our lives."

You can watch the ads on YouTube: http://ow.ly/5pycZ and http://ow.ly/5pyiG.

Of course, it's virtually impossible for a TV viewer to realize that the organization behind the ads is neither the candidate nor a political party, but an "independent" group flush with untraceable cash. The words "Partnership for Ohio's Future.org" appear for four seconds at the end of the commercials. And there is fine print that reads "not affiliated with a candidate or candidate committee." But good luck reading that if your TV is more than an inch or two away.

I decided to follow the fine print anyway, and the money as much as I could. After *Citizens United,* the Ohio Secretary of State's office asked 527 groups to voluntarily file campaign expenditure reports. To its credit, the Partnership for Ohio's Future did just that. That's where I discovered the $1.5 million for Supreme Court ads.

But the Partnership did *not* voluntarily show who gave how much. A list of "supporting" organizations on the Partnership's website listed major insurance companies, oil and gas interests, and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce among others. But it did not reveal how much each company and trade association contributed toward getting business-friendly judges elected.

However, based on what I was able to trace, it is reasonable to assume that the U.S. Chamber of Commerce was the largest individual source. The Partnership was established in 2006. Back then, third-party groups could engage only in indirect "electioneering communication," not specific "vote for Joe Blow" advocacy. When you saw an ad saying "Call Judge Smith and tell her to keep working against drunk drivers," that was this legally-finessed, wink-wink, nod-nod political ad without truly being a political ad.

Before *Citizens United* opened the floodgates and closed the fact-gates, Ohio required groups doing this type of advertising to disclose total money raised and who gave how much. According to figures from the Secretary of State, the Partnership spent nearly $1.8 million on such communication in 2006 and 2008 combined. About $1.1 million of that, more than all other donors added up, came from the U.S. Chamber.

Before *Citizens United* opened the floodgates and closed the fact-gates, Ohio required groups doing this type of advertising to disclose total money raised and who gave how much.

TV ads for Ohio Supreme Court judicial candidates Maureen O'Connor and Judith Lanziger prominently featured "FAIR" and "BALANCED," the trademarked slogan of Fox News.

Groups like the Partnership for Ohio's Future and the Association for Justice can take in as much as they want, and spend like crazy.

Of course, it's not like the Democratic candidates lacked independent support. But it was dwarfed by the deep corporate pockets of the Partnership. The Ohio Association for Justice, formerly the Ohio Academy of Trial Lawyers, says it spent about $400,000 on ads for the two Democratic Supreme Court candidates in 2010.

However, besides the amount, there was another difference. The trial lawyers utilized a political action committee, or PAC. And rules for PACs in Ohio are different than for 527 groups. PACS must disclose *both* spending totals and specific dollar amounts from contributors.

The association's chief operating officer, Jason Porter, says his group "wanted to be transparent," and not hide the sources of its ad money. As for the Partnership's Supreme Court commercials, Porter adds "clearly it was not a mistake they used 'fair and balanced.' They were trying to reach out to a political base and were successful doing it." Otherwise, Porter says, it was an "awfully convenient coincidence."

A spokesperson for Justices O'Connor and Lanzinger even concedes the ads' message "sounds like Fox News." But, Amy Sabath says, "fair and balanced are the buzzwords of judicial candidates. I look at it more like that."

As does the Partnership. Vice President Linda Woggon told me judges are supposed to be fair and balanced. It was "not the intent," Woggon says, to use the Fox News slogan to indicate their candidates were Republicans.

As for the home of "fair and balanced," Fox News spokesperson Dana Klinghoffer told me Fox trademarked the slogan in 1998. She said she would check to see if anyone asked Fox for permission to use the phrase in political ads, but never called back, and did not respond to other questions emailed to her.

But whether an independent group leans Republican or Democrat, the very existence of such groups undermines the code of ethics that judicial candidates are supposed to apply, and, in fact, provides a huge loophole to get around judicial fundraising limits.

The Ohio Supreme Court has Canons of Ethics, rules for judicial behavior. Those canons restrict how much an individual or group can give to someone running for judge. The idea is to prevent big money from exerting big influence. For Supreme Court, the limits are $3,450 per individual contributor and $6,325 per organization in a general election. (Political parties can contribute larger but also limited amounts.)

There are no spending limits once that money comes in. But if you don't have it, you can't use it. So contribution limits should, in theory, hold down spending. But because independent groups do not specifically give to a judicial campaign, they are not covered by the canons. Groups like the Partnership for Ohio's Future and the Association for Justice can take in as much as they want, and spend like crazy.

Woggon, of the Partnership, maintains that groups like hers are not exploiting a loophole. "The premise is you have some influence over the candidate after they get elected, and I don't think that's the case," Woggon says. "In a democracy, you should be able to spend money in a political campaign."

Meantime, the Ohio Supreme Court is back in session, with the victorious Maureen O'Connor as chief justice, and "the real Judge Judy," as a Partnership ad put it, back as a justice. Both judges refused interview requests. Spokesperson Sabath said, "They would not want to create the misimpression that they had any knowledge or involvement in these third-party efforts."

But those efforts sure didn't hurt. On election night, O'Connor told a cheering GOP crowd: "I'm very grateful we can transition the court in 2011 in the direction we want to take the Ohio Supreme Court."

Jeff Hirsh, who covers Ohio politics for WKRC-TV in Cincinnati, is a three-time national IRE Awards finalist.

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2012 Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference

February 23-26, 2012 – St. Louis, Mo.

2012 IRE Conference

June 14-17, 2012 – Boston, Mass.

To keep their watchdog teeth sharp, journalists need to stay connected with the latest news and trends about public records and open meetings at the federal, state and local levels.

Police tactics for video deserve fierce resistance

By Charles N. Davis and Jonathon Peters
Missouri School of Journalism

OK. Enough already.

Enough with the arrests of American citizens videotaping police activity in public view, on public streets, in front of God and country.

Enough with legislatures cravenly seeking the votes of the law-and-order apparatchiks by criminalizing photography in the name of protecting public officials.

And enough of us in journalism sitting idly by while civil liberties are trampled and new laws make us all criminals – merely for doing our jobs. Public officials will stop overinflating their expectations of personal privacy only if the press pushes back.

Don't take my word for it: Just take a look at the news.

In June, a woman was arrested for videotaping – from her own front yard – a traffic stop in Rochester, N.Y. The officer conducting the stop asked the woman what she was doing, and she responded, "Just recording what you're doing."

The officer told her to go back inside her house, but she refused. The officer then handcuffed the woman, walking her to his cruiser. She was charged with "obstruction of governmental administration." Prosecutors dropped the charge a few days later, but the chilling message was sent: Don't record us doing our jobs, even if you're on your own property.

In downtown Fort Lauderdale, photographers attempting to take long-distance photos of a movie shoot featuring Tom Cruise, Alec Baldwin and Catherine Zeta-Jones – again, on a public street, in the middle of the day – were threatened with arrest.

Then there's the strange, sad story of Mitchell Crooks.

On Sunday night, March 20, 2011, Crooks heard police helicopters above his Las Vegas home. Police were responding to a nearby burglary call, and Crooks, after noticing several handcuffed suspects on the curb across the street, walked into his driveway with his new $3,500 digital video camera to shoot some footage.

Things get complicated after that, but suffice to say that the next thing Crooks knew, he was being rushed by an officer who was screaming at him to stop filming. Crooks was beaten, his camera was confiscated, and he was arrested – for battery on a police officer.

Fortunately, the camera was rolling.

"Can I help you, sir?" Officer Derek Colling asks from his patrol car, after parking it in front of Crooks' driveway and shining the spotlight on Crooks.

"Nope. Just observing," Crooks responds, fixing his camera on the officer.

For an hour, Crooks had been recording the scene across the street, from his home in the Parkway.

"Turn that off for me," Colling orders.

"Why do I have to turn it off?" Crooks responds. "I'm perfectly within my legal rights to be able to do this."

The officer repeats the command several times; each time Crooks reiterates his right to film.

As Crooks backs away, Colling grabs him by the shoulder and throws him down. On the ground, Crooks grabs the camera and turns it toward his face.

Colling's leg then enters the video frame. Crooks told the *Las Vegas Review Journal* he believes that was the kick that broke his nose.

The camera records the sound of Crooks screaming. He said that's when Colling was punching his face.

"Shut up!" Colling yells. "Stop resisting!"

At the Clark County Detention Center, Crooks was booked for battery on a police officer and for obstruction of justice. He was released from jail the next day. On March 26, the *Review-Journal* reported on his case. Four days later, all charges were dropped.

Crooks' predicament is an extreme example of a growing and disturbing trend. The easier it gets for citizens to scrutinize police officers (think cell phone cameras), the angrier the police get. Photojournalists are the pawns in a game they didn't start, as the police increasingly respond with force and even jail time.

All over the country, the fraternal order is dusting off decades-old wiretap statutes and is asking legislatures to pass (overbroad) laws saying that photography is the equivalent of "obstructing or interfering with law enforcement." The frustration is somewhat understandable. New smartphone technology empowers citizens to document police at work in ways never anticipated. That's no excuse, though, for criminalizing scrutiny – by the public or the press.

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These abuses are happening despite a long tradition in American law of protecting photography and videography in public places. What's more, privacy law is predicated on the notion of "reasonable expectations of privacy." What reasonable expectation of privacy does a police officer have while he's conducting a traffic stop?

Police officers have tough jobs. We commiserate with the life-and-death struggles they all too often face, for low pay and few (if any) perks. It's a calling, police work, and we have the deepest respect for the men and women who keep us safe. We mean that. These are not hollow platitudes.

But the trend toward enshrining in our laws the secret police tactics that Americans have long condemned – it's shameful. This is the stuff of banana republics.

Charles N. Davis is an associate professor at the Missouri School of Journalism. He is co-author, with David Cuillier, of "The Art of Access." Jonathon Peters is a doctoral student at the school.

New and expanded blogs on IRE's website provide tips, success stories and reporting resources. Here are excerpts from a few recent blog posts, in case you missed them or haven't explored the new online offerings.

Snapshots from our blogs

From "Training from Orlando you can take home"

More than 850 journalists, educators and other professionals learned new skills, shared ideas and discussed best practices for journalism at the 2011 IRE Conference. Whether or not you attended, you can make use of conference resources:

Tipsheets from the conference can be found online in the Resource Center by searching for "2011 IRE Conference (Orlando, Fla.)." Nearly every panel was recorded, so audio files also are available. Information is online at www.ire.org and www.ire.org/resourcecenter.

Here are some of the some of the many other resources from the conference:

- Year in review – Doug Haddix and Mark Horvit of IRE presented a rundown of the "Year in Investigative Reporting." See what your colleagues have been up to, and pick up story ideas and inspiration at the same time. Download the PDF at http://ow.ly/5JXmV.

- Hands-on training at home – Didn't make it to one of the hands-on training sessions? No problem. Tableau Public posted all of its training materials online at http://ow.ly/5JXzX, including the data and step-by-step instructions. The tutorial from the Google Fusion Tables training is available at http://ow.ly/5JXxz.

- Business stories to cover – Linda Austin, executive director of the Donald W. Reynolds National Center for Business Journalism, wrote several blog posts from the conference that are helpful for any journalist, but particularly cater to business coverage. Her posts include story ideas to tackle from athletics to art and tips from top reporters on how to get people to talk to you. You can find them all on her conference blog at http://ow.ly/5JXGw.

Wendy Gray | IRE

IRE Conference attendees before the Awards Luncheon in Orlando.

From "Tips on covering immigrants"
By Doug Haddix
IRE training director

Full immersion in local immigrant communities produces the most compelling stories, according to Kirk Semple, an immigration reporter for *The New York Times*.

"It helps to be curious. It helps to be voracious," Semple told participants at an IRE Better Watchdog Workshop in Orlando. The full-day workshop was held in conjunction with the National Association of Hispanic Journalists' annual convention.

Other speakers included Manny Garcia, executive editor of El Nuevo Herald in Miami, who recently was elected as the first Latino president of the IRE board of directors. Also speaking was Mc Nelly Torres, an IRE board member and associate director and reporter at the Florida Center for Investigative Reporting.

Semple offered several types of immigration stories that reporters in any city can tackle:

- Fallout of the Secure Communities federal-state program, which aims to deport undocumented immigrants.

- Consequences of failing to enact the Dream Act, which would provide a path to legal residency for immigrant children who graduate from high school.

- The impact on the ground of uneven immigration reform efforts and enforcement of immigration laws.

- The local effect of stories overseas, such as the Japanese earthquake and tsunami.

- The immigration angle of a big breaking news story, such as the arrest of International Monetary Fund head Dominique Strauss-Kahn, accused of sexually assaulting an immigrant woman working as a hotel maid.

- Culture and assimilation of immigrants in communities across America.

Semple shared the frustration of many journalists in the audience in dealing with officials from the U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement agency and getting reliable, specific information. "They really frustrate me, and they know exactly what they're doing," Semple said. ICE routinely reassigns its public information officers, he said, making it tough to develop sources.

From "Stories for broadcast reporters to tackle this summer"
By Kyle Deas
Graduate student, Missouri School of Journalism

With spring sweeps here and the summer fast approaching, the enterprising broadcast reporter may be on the lookout for ways to make a splash. Here are a few ideas and resources for investigative stories with high public interest and a quick turnaround.

- Boating accidents: If you live in an area where the summer means wake-boarding or fishing, then be sure to get your hands on NICAR's recently updated boat accident database at http://data.nicar.org/node/37. It's a great resource for breaking news stories – you can instantly put recent accidents in a broader context. But once you dig around in the data, you may find enough material for a stand-alone story, especially if you can figure out how your town or county stacks up against similar areas. And who knows – if you can introduce boat safety into the local conversation, you might even prevent an accident or two.

- Risky roller coasters: Do you know how safe your nearest amusement park is? If you don't, then it's likely that your readers don't, either. Request copies of the amusement park inspections from the state and make sure your local parks aren't putting their visitors at undue risk. Tisha Thompson, an Emmy-award winning investigative reporter for WTTG-Washington, D.C., wrote in a tipsheet for IRE that "you'll be stunned at some of the stuff that goes wrong on your favorite roller-coasters." Members can download it at http://ow.ly/5JYl2.

- Fishing for stories in your local government: Which department in your city has had the biggest budget increase during the last five years? Who in the city government has the largest expense account? How about the biggest cell phone bill? What are they buying with their city-issued credit cards? And are you sure – really sure – that your elected officials are paying their taxes? If you don't know, maybe you should find out.

- Crumbling bridges: Dive into NICAR's comprehensive bridge-inspection database and see if there are any in your area that are overdue for repairs or replacement. Then, sit your local elected officials down and make them tell you what – if anything – is being done about it. The database is available for purchase at http://data.nicar.org/node/2521.

- Nursing homes: Nursing homes often turn out to be shoddy or downright abusive facilities. In many areas, you won't even need to file a request for the inspection reports – they're often automatically posted online. Once you find a home with egregious or repeat offenses, figure out who owns it and get in touch with some former patients.

IRE SERVICES

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

Programs and Services:

IRE RESOURCE CENTER – A rich reserve of print and broadcast stories, tipsheets and guides to help you start and complete the best work of your career. This unique library is the starting point of any piece you're working on. You can search through abstracts of more than 20,000 investigative reporting stories through our website.
Contact: Lauren Grandestaff, lauren@ire.org, 573-882-3364

IRE AND NICAR DATABASE LIBRARY – Administered by IRE and the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting. The library has copies of many government databases, and makes them available to news organizations at or below actual cost. Analysis services are available on these databases, as is help in deciphering records you obtain yourself.
Contact: Jaimi Dowdell, jaimi@ire.org, 314-402-3281. To order data, call 573-884-7711

ON-THE-ROAD TRAINING – As a top promoter of journalism education, IRE offers loads of training opportunities throughout the year. Possibilities range from national conferences and regional workshops to weeklong boot camps and on-site newsroom training. Costs are on a sliding scale and fellowships are available to many of the events.
Contact: Jaimi Dowdell, jaimi@ire.org, 314-402-3281; or Doug Haddix, doug@ire.org, 614-205-5420

Publications:

THE IRE JOURNAL – Published four times a year. Contains journalist profiles, how-to stories, reviews, investigative ideas and backgrounding tips. The Journal also provides members with the latest news on upcoming events and training opportunities from IRE and NICAR.
Contact: Doug Haddix, doug@ire.org, 614-205-5420

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

REPORTER.ORG – A collection of Web-based resources for journalists, journalism educators and others. Discounted Web hosting and services such as mailing list management and site development are provided to other nonprofit journalism organizations.
Contact: Mark Horvit, mhorvit@ire.org, 573-882-1984

For information on:

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