THE IRE JOURNAL

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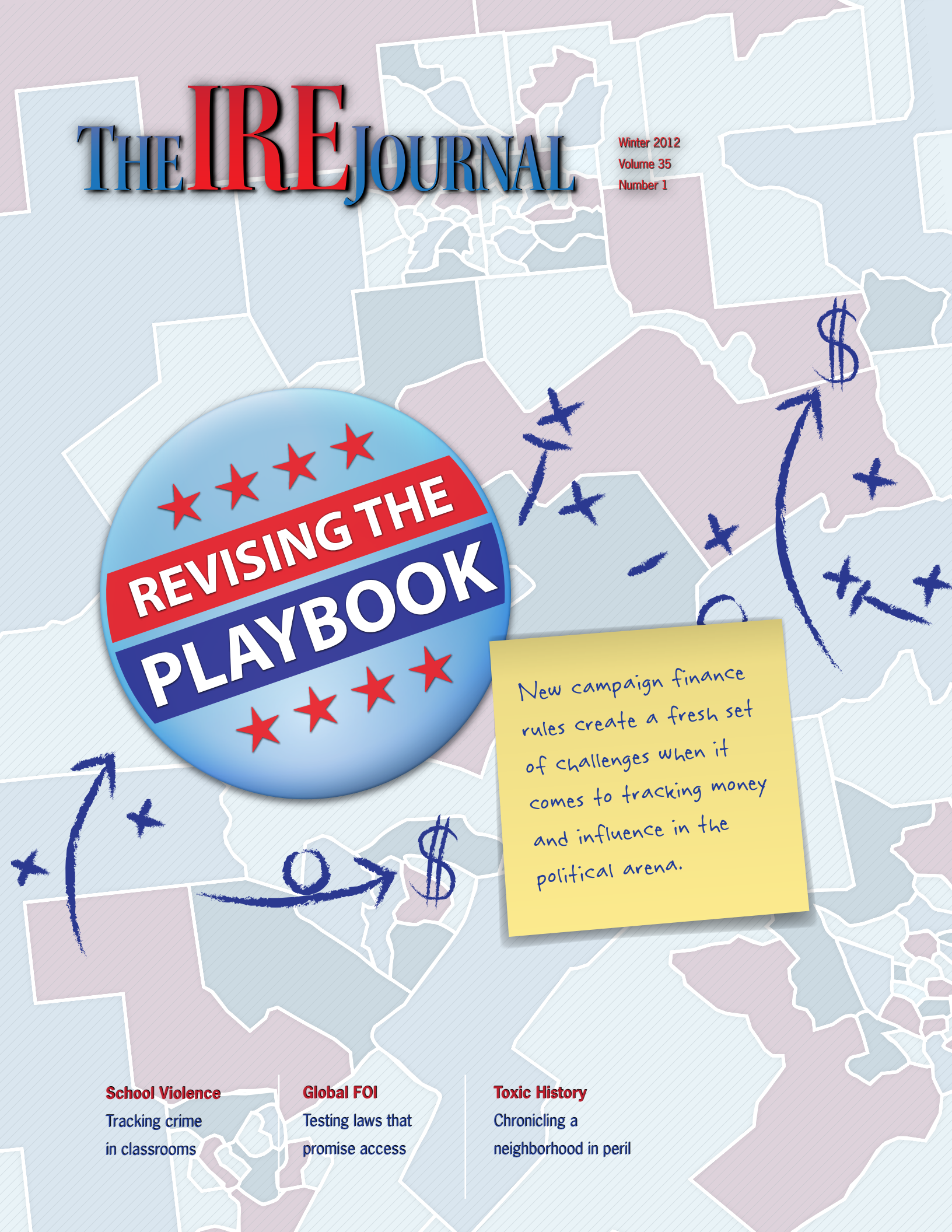

New campaign finance rules create a fresh set of challenges when it comes to tracking money and influence in the political arena.

School Violence
Tracking crime in classrooms

Global FOI
Testing laws that promise access

Toxic History
Chronicling a neighborhood in peril

Don't miss out.

Join members of Investigative Reporters and Editors in Boston this June for four days that will change the way you find and report the news.

We'll offer more than 100 panels and hands-on sessions that will help you:

- Get exclusive stories
- Work faster and dig deeper
- Provide your audience with info they can't get anywhere else

Sessions will help you cover a dizzying array of subjects, from the 2012 elections and the economy to law enforcement, business, health care, education and much, much more.

Keynote speaker Jill Abramson, executive editor of *The New York Times*, will lead a stellar line-up of speakers. Look for regular updates at www.ire.org and reserve the dates now.

IRE® INVESTIGATIVE REPORTERS & EDITORS

Boston Harbor Association

IRE 2012
Boston
June 14-17, 2012

Lodging and Travel

The conference will be held at the Boston Marriott Copley Place. The discounted room rate is available until Friday, May 18, or until our room block is full (whichever comes first).

Don't wait until the last minute to reserve your room, as our room block in previous years has sold out prior to the final day to make reservations.

Hotel Details

Boston Marriott Copley Place
110 Huntington Avenue
Boston, MA 02116

Conference room rate is $199 plus tax.

If you have hotel or general conference questions, please contact Stephanie Sinn at 573-882-8969 or email stephanie@ire.org.

Conference Registration

Pre-registration ends May 25. Fees increase for on-site registration.

Be sure to register separately for CAR, criminal justice and other pre-day panels held on June 14.

Register now at http://ire.org/conferences/ire-2012/registration.

If you have questions about registration, please contact Amy Johnston at amy@ire.org or 573-884-1444.

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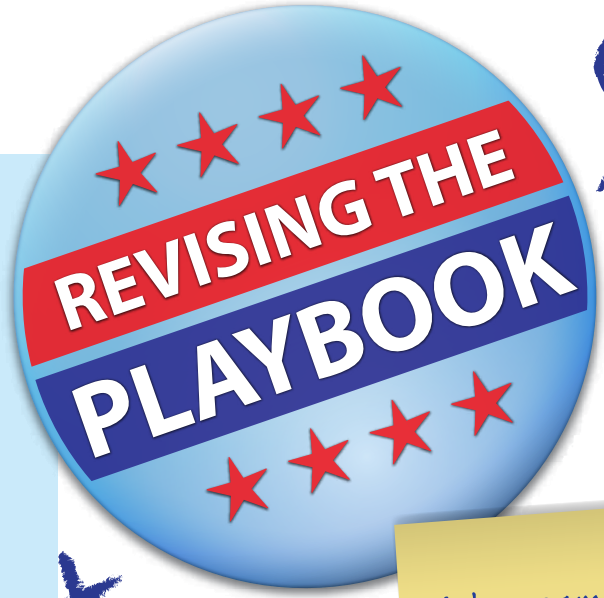

Pages 16-25

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FROM THE IRE OFFICE

Catching on to CAR

BY MARK HORVIT
IRE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

I spent a week in Bangladesh recently.

While there were many remarkable aspects of the trip for me – it was my first visit to that part of the world – the thing many people seem to see as most remarkable was the reason for the trip itself.

IRE Training Director Jaimi Dowdell and I were asked to hold a computer-assisted reporting boot camp for local journalists, many of whom cover business and finance beats. (The trip was organized and arranged by IRE member Ralph Frammolino, who has spent the past couple of years working with journalists in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh.) Most folks who learn about the trip have been surprised when I tell them why we went.

They shouldn't be.

CAR boot camps have been offered since 1989, first by the Missouri Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, which evolved into the national organization, NICAR, that is part of IRE.

For many of the intervening years, CAR was looked upon by a lot of journalists as something of a cult. Most editors didn't know what to make of it, and most reporters ran screaming in the other direction when they learned that actual math might be involved.

CAR's pioneers produced some of the most important, exclusive and award-winning journalism in the world. Laws were changed, bad guys caught and lives improved by the work they did. The number of journalists dedicated to CAR work grew, but many in the industry were slow to catch on.

It's gotten much more popular in the past few years. It's rare for a week to go by that I don't hear from someone who wants to talk data – an editor looking for a journalist with CAR skills, a news organization seeking CAR training, a reporter asking when our next boot camp will be. And IRE's past two CAR conferences – the latest was held in St. Louis in February – drew some of the biggest crowds in a decade.

Increasingly, the powers that be in the industry have come to understand the value of data and data analysis, thanks largely to the Web.

There are a lot of reasons for that. Online, data can be displayed visually in dynamic ways and presents opportunities for audience interaction, so its value is more readily apparent.

Data analysis provides a competitive edge, a way to stand out from the competition, because journalists who can crunch numbers can generate exclusive stories that competitors can't touch. As the playing field has morphed online, it's one key way news organizations can stand out and draw eyeballs.

And the Web has made it easier to get a lot of important government data, though we're not nearly as far along as we should be.

The journalists we worked with in Dhaka, Bangladesh, understand all that. Most of them cover business and finance beats, and they learned how to use spreadsheets to crunch, order and analyze the data they report on every day. Except now, instead of simply asking government and business officials what the numbers mean, they can decide for themselves.

They face roadblocks that their American counterparts do not, chief among them the difficulty in prying data loose from government officials, even with a new right-to-information law. But within a couple of weeks of the training session, we'd already received an email from one attendee, and attached was an exclusive story he'd done that relied on data he had analyzed.

But in the quest to bring data-based journalism to the masses, we've still got work to do. I think one of the reasons people are surprised that we went half way around the world for a CAR training is that they still view data analysis skills as highly specialized, meant for that expert CAR reporter on staff, who has magical powers that most of us couldn't fathom.

That hasn't been true for years, and it's even more off-base today. Basic CAR skills aren't a luxury – they're a necessary part of any reporter's toolbox. Every journalist should, at a minimum, be comfortable using a spreadsheet. And for those willing to expand their skill set, better stories, better jobs and vast riches await. (OK, maybe not riches.)

So if you've been waiting to take the plunge, now's a good time. Contact the IRE office or visit our website to look for upcoming training through our local workshops, intensive boot camps or national conferences.

And you don't have to travel to Bangladesh to get it.

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.

Philip Meyer Journalism Awards winners announced

Three major investigative reports that used social science research methods to expose serial killings, shine a light on school cheating, and reveal truths about the home-foreclosure crisis were named winners of the 2011 Philip Meyer Award.

First place was awarded to "Murder Mysteries" by Thomas Hargrove of Scripps Howard News Service. The series resulted in what experts say is the most complete database available of unsolved murders. Hargrove developed a unique algorithm to identify the likely traces of serial murders. Police in at least eight cities have acknowledged that the clusters Hargrove found are either confirmed or likely serial cases.

Second place was awarded to "Testing the System," by Marisol Bello, Jack Gillum, Linda Mathews, Greg Toppo, Jodi Upton and Dennis Cauchon of *USA Today*; Denise Amos of the *Cincinnati Enquirer*; Chastity Pratt Dawsey, Peggy Walsh-Sarnecki and Kristi Tanner of the *Detroit Free Press*; and Anne Ryman of *The Arizona Republic*. Taking their analysis to a national level, the project examined the chronic problem of schools that cheat on standardized tests. The series has prompted a Department of Education investigation into the testing practices of Washington, D.C., schools and a tightening of the security around testing.

Third place was awarded to "Tale of Three Cities: Foreclosures Don't Always Follow the Script" by Sanjay Bhatt of *The Seattle Times* and Jennifer LaFleur of ProPublica. The project challenged common stereotypes about home mortgage foreclosures by analyzing demographic and financial patterns of foreclosures in three cities.

The Philip Meyer Award recognizes the best uses of social science methods in journalism. The awards were presented at the 2012 Computer-Assisted Reporting Conference on Feb. 24 in St. Louis. The first-place winner received $500; second- and third-place winners received $300 and $200, respectively.

The award is administered by the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting, a joint program of Investigative Reporters and Editors, the Missouri School of Journalism and the Knight Chair in Journalism at the Walter Cronkite School of Journalism and Mass Communication at Arizona State University.

The award honors Philip Meyer, professor emeritus and former Knight Chair in Journalism at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Meyer is the author of "Precision Journalism," the seminal 1973 book that encouraged journalists to incorporate social science methods in the pursuit of better journalism. As a reporter, he also pioneered the use of survey research for Knight-Ridder newspapers while exploring the causes of race riots in the 1960s.

Seven seats up for election on IRE board. Be sure to vote.

The filing period has begun for those planning to run for the IRE board of directors. Seven seats on the 13-member board are up for election. The election will be held June 16 at the IRE annual conference in Boston.

The IRE board serves as the governing body of IRE and generally meets in person twice a year to discuss and vote on IRE business. One meeting is at the annual conference in June. The board periodically has conference calls. Directors serve on committees and task forces made up of board members and appointed non-board IRE members.

The seats are for two-year terms, and incumbents may seek re-election. A board position is unpaid; board members and their news organizations are expected to pay all, or a substantial amount, of travel expenses to board meetings. IRE will provide limited help in cases of need. Candidates must be IRE members in the professional or academic category. Board members are expected to help raise funds and contribute financial or other resources to the organization. In addition, they lose eligibility to enter the IRE Awards contest for entries in which they have a significant role.

Here is the schedule of this year's elections. Details about the process are available at ire.org. Full information about election procedures is available at http://ire.org/about/board-directors/elections.

April 27 – Deadline for candidates to file and appear on absentee ballot.
OPENING DAY for absentee ballot request!
May 4 – Candidates' statements posted online.
May 22 – Last day to request absentee ballot.
May 30 – Deadline for candidates to be listed on the website.
June 8 – Deadline for absentee ballots to reach IRE.
June 15, 12 noon (Eastern time) – Final deadline to declare candidacy.
June 16 – Board elections at annual membership meeting.

Submit your declaration of candidacy to IRE membership coordinator John Green at jgreen@ire.org. Requests for absentee ballots should be submitted to ballots@ire.org.

In addition to selecting new board members, those attending the June meeting will select two members for the Contest Committee, which judges the IRE Awards. Anyone interested in those positions may contact the IRE office for details.

MEMBER NEWS

Three IRE members won 2012 Alfred I. duPont-Columbia University Awards. The awards, which have been given for 70 years, recognize the best in broadcast and digital journalism. These members were the reporters on winning teams:
Byron Harris of WFAA-TV, Dallas, for "Bitter Lessons"
Jodie Fleischer of WSB-TV, Atlanta, for "Stealing Houses"
Phil Williams of WTVF-TV, Nashville, for "Policing for Profit"

Tony Kovaleski, **Stephen Stock** and **Jenna Susko** have joined a new 15-member unit led by **Matt Goldberg** at NBC Bay Area KNTV.

Kovaleski is chief investigative reporter after 10 years at KMGH-TV, Denver. Stock is investigative reporter after more than four years at WFOR-TV, Miami. Susko joins as watchdog reporter after four years at WPMI-TV, Mobile, Alabama. Goldberg is newsroom managing editor and special projects producer.

In addition to KNTV, NBC Universal has set up new investigative/consumer units at four other corporate-owned stations and added resources to three more since last fall, according to Shawn Feddeman, a spokesperson.

Mark Greenblatt, formerly of KHOU-TV, Houston, has moved on to ABC News as a correspondent in New York. Greenblatt worked for seven years as an investigative reporter at KHOU, winning awards including the duPont-Columbia, Peabody, National Headliner, National Emmy and two National Murrows.

Please submit Member News items at http://ire.org/publications/ire-journal/member-news/submit-membernews. Read updates online at http://ire.org/publications/ire-journal/member-news.

2011 Investigative Reporting Book List

By Steve Weinberg

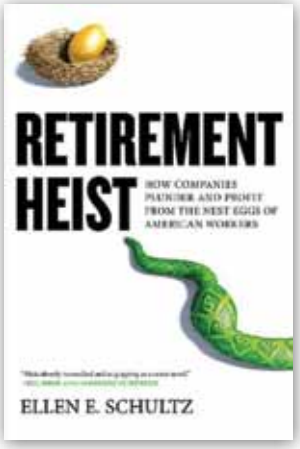
Check out the list of more than 200 books at www.IRE.org.

Discovering every investigative/explanatory book by American journalists published during a given year has always been an unattainable goal, no matter how hard we try. The relative fullness of the list becomes even harder to guarantee in an era of self-publishing, because self-published books are more difficult to track than books distributed by trade publishers such as W.W. Norton, Simon & Schuster, university presses, etc. So please examine this list of books published during 2011 (at IRE.org) as an advanced starting point, but not the finish line. If you know of an investigative/explanatory book written by an American journalist published last year for public sale and fail to see it listed, please contact Steve Weinberg, weinbergs@missouri.edu.

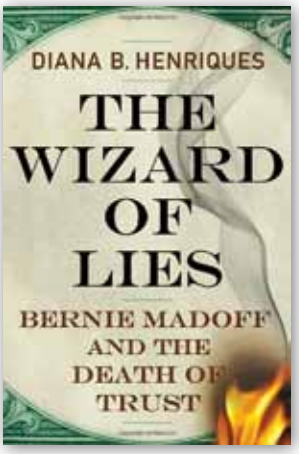
It is no surprise that a significant percentage of books on the 2011 list involve so-called terrorism from a variety of angles. Books about environmental degradation also appear in significant numbers.

Some of the books on the list were entered in the annual IRE Awards competition. I have read the entry forms accompanying the books, forms meant to offer insight into the origins of the book, the information-gathering techniques, the writing magic. Here are a few of the many insights I gained from reading the entry forms:

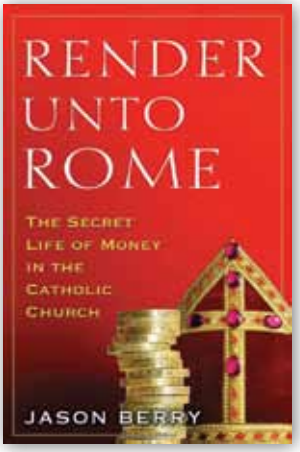
Retirement Heist: How Companies Plunder and Profit From the Nest Eggs of American Workers, by Ellen E. Schultz, Penguin/Portfolio. The embedded lesson in Schultz's entry form, and the book itself, is how journalists must be prepared to question the morality of what is technically legal. As Schultz learned: "Though pension plans had vast surpluses just 12 years ago, over the past decade employers have drained billions from the pension plans and used the money to pay for restructuring. Others used the assets to pay for executive pensions and parachutes, or sold the pension assets in merger deals. Thanks to these practices, there was no cushion in the plans when the markets cratered, and the pensions are now underfunded." New accounting rules made the plundering technically legal. It is also legal for employers to buy life insurance policies on their workers and then collect the death benefits tax free. The proceeds from the insurance pay for the pensions of top executives. Schultz documents how numerous companies "kept many of these practices hidden, and deliberately deceived workers, lawmakers, shareholders and the media." One resource used by Schultz: "transcripts of actuarial consulting conferences that took place in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s, because the consultants spoke candidly about some of their strategies."



The Wizard of Lies: Bernie Madoff and the Death of Trust, by Diana B. Henriques, Times Books/Holt. The author suggests "looking for the big universal themes, drawn from the common folklore we all share, reflected in your story to expand your audience. A Ponzi scheme story isn't just about financial fraud, with which a few people are familiar. It's about the betrayal of trust, something familiar to everyone. So look for those big themes as you go."



Render Unto Rome: The Secret Life of Money in the Catholic Church, by Jason Berry, Crown Publishers. Berry has been documenting sexual assaults by priests for many years. His new book expands the scandals by showing how local parishes are being milked by Catholic bishops to pay for awards in clergy abuse lawsuits, among other destinations for the money. One resource used by Berry – Chapter 11 bankruptcy filings by dioceses. Berry says: "Dioceses, as religious organizations, are under no legal obligation to file statements like ordinary nonprofits. Many do post financial statements of a sort." Like so many wise journalists, Berry found an expert on a university campus, an accounting professor at Western Michigan University who has been researching the topic of Berry's book for a long, long time.



A Hole at the Bottom of the Sea: The Race to Kill the BP Oil Gusher, by Joel Achenbach, Simon & Schuster. Achenbach notes that the most difficult task was understanding the engineering behind the attempt to cap the oil contaminating vast water resources. "Every morning, first thing, I read petroleum engineering handbooks," he says, "not so that I would fully understand what is involved but so that I would be capable of discussing the technology with experts and interpreting the testimony about what went wrong." Achenbach realized he needed to rely less on government officials "trying to exaggerate the effectiveness of their efforts." In tandem, he realized statements from the private companies involved were sometimes "simply incorrect." As a result, Achenbach began placing more emphasis on the testimony of people "with direct knowledge of what happened, such as the witnesses at the Marine Board of Investigation hearings."

Steve Weinberg is a former executive director of Investigative Reporters and Editors.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Former WTVT-FOX
Photojournalist
Jim Leusner
Former Orlando Sentinel
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Former St. Petersburg Times
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EMERGENCY FUND

Stories uncover questionable Medicare payments for private ambulances

By Terri Langford
Houston Chronicle

Houston is no stranger to Medicare and Medicaid fraud.

The nation's fourth largest city was created without zoning regulations and is home to the world's largest medical complex, making it a great place to locate a shady health care business.

Drive through any of Houston's low-income neighborhoods, and you'll see dozens of strip malls and store fronts with chiropractic clinics, pain clinics, medical supply companies, pharmacies, dentists' offices and doctors' offices, all advertising that Medicare or Medicaid is accepted.

One type of Medicare business has flown under the radar here for decades: private ambulances.

Typically, I'm bored by Medicare stories, paralyzed like many readers by all the wonky language and the endless list of big dollar numbers and bureaucratic pronouncements that, after a while, fail to outrage.

But if you focus on how Medicare dollars are used locally, a trend I see more and more, the conversation opens up and engages your readers/viewers. It makes Medicare relatable, and the reaction it produced is like no other reaction I've ever had to anything I've written.

In October we published three stories over two days detailing how Houston was the nation's private-ambulance capital and how some companies had received questionable Medicare payments and were connected to unregulated for-profit mental health clinics.

More private EMS companies and ambulances operate in Houston's Harris County than anywhere else in the United States. At last count, there were 397, with about 50 applications awaiting state approval.

By our count, nearly $500 million in Medicare dollars flew into the hands of private EMS operators in Harris County over six years – $62 million in 2009, the latest year with available data.

Compare that to the private-ambulance bill to Medicare in New York City: $7 million.

When I started looking into the private EMS business, I knew nothing about it or Medicare, other than Medicare was the nation's largest insurer for the elderly. Plus, there were no previous stories to serve as a template.

And for the first time in my career, I found no tip sheets in the IRE vault to guide me. Add to this the fact that virtually no one in the EMS business wanted to talk candidly about what was going on in Houston, for fear of retribution, and you get an idea of the information vacuum.

Now, looking back at the experience, I see that the vacuum gave me tremendous freedom. Whatever I found would be new.

Nationwide, non-emergency EMS transports is at least a $2 billion-a-year Medicare industry. It's also a health care area criticized in government audits for having a high number of Medicare "overpayments," a leading indicator of fraud.

I also learned that Harris County is No. 1 in Medicare payments to private ambulances and in the number of companies and vehicles. More than 1,000 private ambulances operate here. Only two city health inspectors watch them.

But before I was armed with data, I spent an enormous amount of time tracking one of their biggest destinations**:** mental health clinics, another high volume Medicare vendor that had absolutely no regulation in Texas. These clinics are able to bill Medicare as either Partial Hospitalization Programs or Community Mental Health Centers (CMHCs).

I started to look at these programs in the spring of 2010 and found that one had recently turned in its "substance abuse" license to the Texas Department of State Health Services and was now classified as a CMHC. In Texas, a substance abuse clinic must have a state license. A CMHC, which is a Medicare classification, does not. That meant the state no longer regulated it.

For months the clinic story was on my backburner. Then in June, I received a call from a woman who lived near that same clinic. She told me it was a frequent destination for private ambulances and suggested I come up and see the EMS traffic in her neighborhood.

From her house, I watched EMS vehicles from different companies pick up able-bodied men and women from another house (later described by billing clinics as a "hospital" or "clinic") and transport them home.

Then I started firing off FOIAs and open records requests to the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and state and city agencies.

Medicare was not exactly in my wheelhouse. I had to learn fast, and I learned tons through trial and error. Here's my list of things to know before going after Medicare payment data and investigating the health care industry.

Dealing with the $760 billion CMS is a marathon, not a sprint. It can take weeks or months before you get what you want. Fine-tune your FOIAs from the start so you won't waste time going back and forth with CMS in its FOIA process.

Nationwide, non-emergency EMS transports is at least a $2 billion-a-year Medicare industry. It's also a health care area criticized in government audits for having a high number of Medicare "overpayments," a leading indicator of fraud.

Find an industry spirit guide. Locate someone who can help you understand the claims process and how billing works for the particular health care industry you're interested in. I found one spirit guide after someone emailed along his terrific Powerpoint about the industry. Another was a former EMS executive who had successfully filed a Qui Tam (whistleblower) suit about kickbacks in the Texas EMS industry. He taught me how billing worked and told me about "origin/destination" data EMS companies had to file with CMS, which shows the date a trip is billed and where a patient is picked up.

Know the location of your regional CMS office. FOIAs to Medicare are typically filed here first, with the regional FOIA officer.

Understand the FOIA process at CMS. In my case, my FOIAs went from the Dallas regional office to the contractor (TrailBlazer Health Enterprises in Dallas) which collected my requested data. Once the data was located and parsed, it was forwarded to the FOIA office in Baltimore. From Baltimore, it was sent to me. Get a phone number and an email address for everyone involved.

Use Google Alerts like your own real-time private research service. When I found no past articles on the private-ambulance business, I created alerts such as "Houston and EMS," "Houston and ambulance," "Medicare and ambulances," "Wall Street Journal and Medicare," "partial hospitalization program," etc. Each day I could check the returns to see if the ambulance and/or clinic business had made news.

Follow up. Make your first call to Baltimore or the regional office a week or two after you send the FOIA, and stay on it. If you don't, you will be forgotten.

Before you file that FOIA, look at the federal audits regarding the health care area you're examining. They'll help you frame a better FOIA. They're chock full of trends you can use to get what you want the first time. Find them at the websites for the Government Accountability Office (gao.gov) and the Office of Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services (oig.hhs.gov).

Speak Medicare's language. My first FOIAs were very general. But in later ones, I tossed around terms like "a0428" (ambulance billing code) and "origin/destination data" like a veteran claims adjuster. Using their language gives them little wiggle room.

Understand Medicare billing codes. If you dig, you can find them on cms.gov in a zip file. But it's easier to just Google them. Here's one place: http://bit.ly/AcR0Cb, which shows the definition of a0428, the code used the most often by non-emergency or private ambulances. The code is for "BLS" or basic life support service. It's this one billing code that is driving the phenomenal rise of EMS Medicare payments. Put the billing code and "Medicare" in Google and you'll find it.

Figure out which private company is the billing contractor for your health care area. Google is best for finding them. Go to the company's site and search for alerts and memos to their vendors regarding billing overpayments and other irregularities. Sign up for emailed alerts and newsletter mailing lists. CMS tends to write releases about contractor alerts days and weeks after they are first filed on the contractor's site.

When asking for payment data, ask for several years of claims and payments made by company, by year. A regret I had was that at the start I asked for one six-year total of claims and payments made to each Texas EMS company. So it looked like:

Texas EMS Inc. … 4,341 claims … $10,431,000 payments (from Jan.1, 2006 through Dec. 30, 2010).

I went for the totals because I thought they would be the easiest and quickest to get. But by the time I got CMS to understand what I wanted, months had passed, and once I got it this way, I felt it was too late to go back and ask for total payments by company by year.

Run a FOIA test. Before I asked for all trip (origin/destination) data for all Texas EMS companies, I asked for trip data for seven companies I had personally seen picking up patients at one clinic. This documented what I was seeing, and because CMS included trip dates, I could follow it over time.

Spell out everything in your FOIA. I spent a lot of time getting CMS to redo incomplete data. After my test, I asked for trip data for ALL Texas EMS companies. But they forgot to put the trip dates in.

Even incomplete CMS data shows you something. Two months after my series was published, two mental health clinic owners were arrested for Medicare billing fraud. Although the indictment didn't mention ambulances, I dug out my dateless trip data and supplemented that breaking news story with details of how Medicare paid at least $19 million for ambulances to transport patients to clinics owned by the two defendants.

Read your FOIA replies carefully. They may contain a surprising admission about what CMS does not know. On Feb. 16, 2011, I received a reply that CMS didn't have what I was looking for (physician forms stating a patient needed an EMS trip). But in that response they admitted that while the forms are collected by private EMS companies, CMS does not require them to be forwarded to the billing contractor to receive payment. This was a stunning weakness in the billing chain that I highlighted in the story.

To date, CMS has never publicly discussed a billing problem with private ambulances in Texas and particularly, in Houston. In the end, it didn't matter that they would not talk to me about this issue. I had their billing data and their own billing contractor's published notices revealing the problem.

Since our series was published in October, I've received more tips than I know what to do with. I have enough story ideas about health care and waste to get me through at least most of 2012. Not a week has gone by without a reader comment or suggestion or photo of potential fraud. And because of this story, I can now dig out the better stories from federal health care fraud indictments. Now that I know the players, I am starting to make connections between them that cross over to other health care industries.

In short, write about Medicare and it will be the news gift that keeps on giving.

Terri Langford is on the enterprise and projects team of the Houston Chronicle. *She can be reached at terri.langford@chron.com.*

Not a week has gone by without a reader comment or suggestion or photo of potential fraud. And because of this story, I can now dig out the better stories from federal health care fraud indictments.

Tyson Trish | The Record

EPA contractors, wearing safety gear, test the contents of drums stored at the E.C. Electroplating property on Oct. 19, 2011. A leak at the company in 1983 is suspected of polluting the ground water of Garfield, N.J.

TOXIC HISTORY

Public records show three decades of neglect at waste site

By Scott Fallon
The Record

Today, chromium is seeping into homes at levels so high that federal officials declared a public health emergency for the first time nationally in 12 years.

Sometime late on the night of Dec. 14, 1983, a flange on a rusty chemical tank broke at the E.C. Electroplating plant in Garfield, N.J., spilling almost three tons of cancer-causing hexavalent chromium into the ground.

Less than two years later, with only 30 percent of the chromium recovered and despite evidence that it had migrated under the surrounding neighborhood, the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection allowed E.C. to suspend all cleanup efforts.

"The expense of such an effort might not be justified by the result," the department's Principal Environmental Specialist John DeFina wrote to E.C.'s attorney in 1985. He concluded, "There is no threat to the public health."

Today, chromium is seeping into homes at levels so high that federal officials declared a public health emergency for the first time nationally in 12 years. Residents fear that their families could get cancer and that their property values have been destroyed. In September, this neighborhood of 600 homes and businesses was named a Superfund site.

How Garfield was allowed to get this way over the course of 28 years is a story of an environmental oversight system that failed the people it was supposed to protect.

The Record's three-part series, "Toxic Landscape: A Neighborhood in Peril," chronicles three decades of poor decisions, lax enforcement and bureaucratic indifference that has jeopardized the lives of thousands.

Garfield was an environmental disaster that was treated like a routine gasoline spill. Even after chromium began to be discovered in basements in the early 1990s, the NJDEP never realized the threat to public health. There was no sense of urgency despite the fact that one of the most deadly industrial chemicals was lying under an entire neighborhood.

New Jersey may well be the most polluted state, but investigating toxic sites is a universal topic that reporters anywhere can tackle. There are polluted properties in every corner of the U.S. that present a threat to the people who live near them.

As in Garfield's case, there is a good chance that the real history has been kept secret in warehouses and file cabinets for decades.

The Record was able to piece Garfield's history together by relying heavily on New Jersey's public records law to obtain everything from engineering reports to fire department logs. We also used FOIA to get U.S. Environmental Protection Agency documents when that agency took over the site 10 years ago.

The newspaper spent months combing through hundreds of pages of often technical material to reconstruct the spill and re-examine the timid response.

We knew of the '83 spill. We knew that a neighborhood firehouse had become contaminated in 1993. And we knew 13 homes and businesses tested positive for high levels of chromium in 2008. What we didn't know was what happened in between those years.

I knew this was something we had to do when the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry found 2,500 times the safety standard for chromium at one property in 2010. The agency announced a public health emergency and advised everyone to stay out of their basements.

The first thing I did was obtain the NJDEP case file on E.C. Electroplating. The mere size of it was telling. While it contained more than 400 pages of memos, engineering reports and site investigations, it also had major gaps lasting years. I soon learned that it wasn't a case of missing documents. No one was paying attention to this site. (An NJDEP file on the removal of a leaky tank at a nearby gas station contained about six times the amount of documents that E.C. had.)

There is one significant advantage we have in New Jersey that you may not have in your state. Because the documents kept by NJDEP are so voluminous (there are 16,000 current toxic sites), the agency doesn't have the manpower to redact information. That usually means every name, address, phone number, etc. is still in there.

The documents were a start, and they helped piece together the untold story of how this Superfund site came to be. Under the direction of my editors Debra Vial and Tim Nostrand, I was able to craft a narrative starting with the founding of E.C. during the Great Depression to the present day where men in hazmat gear are a common site in the neighborhood.

Tyson Trish | The Record

The New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection allowed E.C. Electroplating (above) to suspend its cleanup less than two years after the spill. The NJDEP didn't recognize the threat to public health, even as chromium was discovered in basements in the early 1990s.

Here are some key documents that were invaluable to me and could also help your investigation.

Engineer reports

These documents, often submitted to regulators, are a mixed bag. The good ones are essential. The bad ones are a waste of time. Chances are you'll come across both for the very same site.

The best tend to be very thorough. They show up-to-date contamination levels and how they compare to ones taken in the past. They also give the history of the site as far back as possible. You can glean invaluable information like transfer of ownership, what chemicals were used and when, even the geology of the area.

The bad ones contain little to no new information. Sometimes polluters turn these in because they are required, not because there is something new to report. Double check the facts with regulators. Remember, this is not an independent review. The authors are working for the polluter in most cases.

Correspondence between a polluter's contractors

In the Garfield case, E.C. had its engineers report nearly every significant finding during the initial investigation to its attorney, who would then turn it over to NJDEP. The letters from the engineers revealed significant findings that were never acted upon by the state. One reported that chromium in the ground was migrating offsite. Another said that chromium was seeping into the plant's basement during heavy rains – something that would eventually plague the neighborhood. No red flags were raised by NJDEP.

Correspondence between polluter and regulator

Letters and emails tend to offer some of the best reporting material. In Garfield it ranged from complete indifference by regulators to strongly worded throw downs (accusations, counter-accusations). In one case, E.C.'s engineer wrote a screed on the state of New Jersey's economy as a reason for the company not testing its monitoring wells regularly.

One letter reported that chromium in the ground was migrating offsite. Another said that chromium was seeping into the plant's basement during heavy rains – something that would eventually plague the neighborhood.

Usually contained in engineer reports, maps are a great reference tool when you're piecing together how everything happened. Geologic maps are also helpful to show which way groundwater travels or how deep an aquifer is.

Correspondence between regulators

Internal memos and emails can reveal a lot, including frustration on the part of case workers. Those documents also showed what wasn't being discussed. The first time the possibility of public health threat was brought up by the NJDEP came in an interoffice email in 2000 – 17 years after the spill.

Inter-agency letters can also be a goldmine. One of the most revealing documents in the Garfield series was a memo to the EPA from NJDEP asking them take over the site 19 years after the spill. An NJDEP official wrote that her agency dropped the ball. "The slow progress of the case is perceived as a reluctance and failure on the part of NJDEP," the letter read. "Should the case continue down the present track, this perception shall only grow."

Maps

Even a small operation like E.C. Electroplating had several buildings, tanks and eventually monitoring wells at its plant. Usually contained in engineer reports, maps are a great reference tool when you're piecing together how everything happened. Geologic maps are also helpful to show which way groundwater travels or how deep an aquifer is.

Documents from other agencies

Most large-scale pollution begins at a workplace. That means there is usually a trove of safety inspections and possible violations somewhere. Start with your local Occupational Safety and Health Administration Office. Ask to see all inspections and violations for a company.

Another area that might yield some good information – publicly-owned utilities. In New Jersey, sewer commissions have the power to inspect and fine businesses for literally flushing pollution down the drain.

If your city or county has a hazmat team, it's likely they responded if there was a spill, explosion, etc. Like most first responders, they will have an incident report. They may also have an investigative arm, which may produce even more revealing documents.

Tyson Trish | The Record

This tank was the source of the 1983 leak, according to the EPA. The site was named a Superfund site in September 2011.

A few other tips:

Find a Rosetta Stone

Most of these documents are chock full of agency jargon, acronyms and scientific terms you probably left behind in your middle school notebook. To its credit, the NJDEP has a page on its website defining all its bureaucratic terms. The EPA has pages that attempt to do the same, but they are spread out on its site. If stumped, ask a scientist.

Quantify the problem

Exactly how bad is 1,000 ppb of chromium in groundwater? What does "1,000 ppb" even mean? Your state environmental agency will likely have a list of groundwater safety standards (and probably soil too) that will use these terms. For example, PPB is a unit of concentration standing for parts per billion. And at the time of the spill, New Jersey's groundwater standard for chromium was 100 ppb, meaning 1,000 ppb is 10 times the state's safety standard.

Learn the health effects of pollutants

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry has a pretty straightforward, up-to-date, online description of almost every toxic chemical and what it can do to humans. "ToxFAQs" can be accessed via the agency's homepage.

Lastly, never forget about the people living with this pollution. Part two of our series focused exclusively on the lives altered by three decades of chromium.

Scores of residents suspect it may have caused or at least contributed to their loved ones' getting cancer. They're convinced they are stuck in homes they will never be able to sell.

A few weeks after the series ran, the EPA told me that things may be getting worse. The plume appears to be spreading after high levels of hexavalent chromium were found recently in monitoring wells just outside the neighborhood's boundaries.

That's the bad news. The good news is there finally appears to be action taking place in the neighborhood. Basements are being tested and cleaned. The E.C. plant will be demolished by the end of 2012. The EPA will likely pump the chromium out of the ground and treat it in the years to come.

The people of Garfield can only hope that this time it's done right.

Scott Fallon has been an environmental reporter at The Record *since 2008. He can be reached at fallon@northjersey.com. The Garfield series can be read at http://bit.ly/bOXSDO.*

Tyson Trish | The Record

An EPA representative looks inside the E.C. plant on Oct. 12, 2011.

Tyson Trish | The Record

Bernice Riccio lives on the second floor of 163 Lincoln Place in Garfield, where the basement tested positive for chromium. Her husband Michael Riccio, who died of leukemia in 2008, spent a significant amount of time in his basement workshop, Riccio said. The EPA has installed a sump pump to help control flooding, which brings in the chromium.

The good news is there finally appears to be action taking place in the neighborhood. Basements are being tested and cleaned. The E.C. plant will be demolished by the end of 2012. The EPA will likely pump the chromium out of the ground and treat it in the years to come.

DIGITAL FOOTPRINT

Reporter uses websites to trace politician's misdeeds

By Russ Ptacek
WUSA-TV Washington, D.C.

To conduct an investigation like this, you can use inexpensive subscription services such as BeenVerified, Spokeo or Intelius; a browser add-on that allows you to view EXIF data; and your state open-records law.

Never before I began looking into Missouri politician William Norris had I comprehended the power of cheap databases to conduct a full-scale forensic Internet investigation.

They helped us expose troubling social network activities, exhibition and distribution of nude personal photos, a felony conviction and ultimately, the private life of a public official that led to his resignation and criminal charges.

The irony was that the tip that started our investigation came from the very politician who, if convicted, would face up to five years in prison.

Norris has pleaded not guilty to all charges. He was arraigned Feb. 15 on two felony counts and is scheduled for a trial by jury Oct. 9.

I conducted the investigation as an investigative reporter at KSHB-TV Kansas City.

To conduct an investigation like this yourself, you can use inexpensive subscription services such as BeenVerified, Spokeo or Intelius; a browser add-on that allows you to view EXIF data; and your state open-records law.

The data services cost between $2.95 and $19.95 per month. Often one will have data the other doesn't, but for our purposes they were very similar in overall performance.

The 28-year-old Norris, the auditor of Clay County, Mo., contacted us in June saying he had evidence that the incumbent he had defeated in the general election had wrongly filed for unemployment after losing office.

While checking into the background of Norris' opponent, we kept running into Internet chatter questioning the credentials and background of the newly elected auditor himself.

While running for office, the Republican claimed he was a certified public accountant, a graduate of our local William Jewell College and the comptroller of a large corporation.

Our investigation determined Norris did attend William Jewell but never graduated and had a GPA of 1.825; never even took a CPA test, according to state officials; and never served as a comptroller, according to the corporation he identified as his employer during the campaign.

But it was what we uncovered in Norris' digital footprint that shocked voters and led to criminal charges of computer tampering.

Multiple persons identified during our investigation claimed that the politician had harassed them online. Norris denied these claims.

When responding to us, instead of his county account, Norris used a personal email address.

When we used Spokeo to check the address against profiles on social networks, the data service linked his email address to a MySpace profile for a woman from Norris' hometown, Trenton, Mo. Spokeo, like several other tools we used, allows searches by names, social networks, user names, phone numbers and email addresses. I used it more regularly than LexisNexis and have found it especially helpful in finding people who don't have traditional credit or landlines.

When contacted, the woman said she had no idea a MySpace account was registered under her name, but that she did know Norris.

We then used the data service Intelius to find an additional email address linked to Norris.

The email address identified by Intelius led to his shirtless dating-site profile, nude photos at an online photo-storage-and-sharing account and ultimately, a police raid on his home and his arrest.

We used Spokeo, Intelius and BeenVerified to run the new email linked to Norris to check for online profiles, photos/videos, blog posts, social networks and online user names.

Repeatedly, the address came back to Norris, and the data services uncovered his PhotoBucket account, which was not password-protected.

On that site, which allows users to store photos, Norris had a collection showing multiple women, a picture from the day he was sworn into office, a photograph of him on the toilet, photos from his days as a limousine driver and two nude photos of a woman identified only as "Amanda."

We used a browser add-on called an EXIF viewer (available for free at multiple

Ptacek used Spokeo to link an email address to a MySpace page. Spokeo is especially helpful in finding persons without traditional credit or a landline, Ptacek found.

software sites – just search "EXIF"), which allowed us to see if the photographs contained original data captured when a digital photo is taken, but most often scrubbed before it is published or reproduced.

The invisible data showed the exact time the photographs were taken, the type of camera used and even the aperture of the lens, so we knew it was likely that they were originals or exact duplicates.

Because other persons identified during our investigation accused Norris of distributing their nude photos, we felt there was a risk this woman could be a new victim. (Norris denied these allegations, also.)

We posted a cropped photograph of the woman on Facebook, asking for help identifying her (without explaining why).

Within a week, we were introduced to the woman's father.

That's when we learned the woman's nude photos had been posted on the national scandal website TheDirty.com, along with unsubstantiated allegations the woman was cheating on her husband.

When we searched Amanda's name on Google, the photos and allegations showed as the second result.

It turned out Amanda was from the same hometown as Norris, and her late brother and Norris had been childhood friends.

She called police shortly after our conversation with her father.

She told us she had no idea how the poster on TheDirty.com obtained the nude photos, which she had taken for her husband and stored on her phone.

She said Norris had had access to her phone when they met for dinner with friends months earlier.

In response to our questions about the nude photos, Norris replied via an e-mail that they were "possibly from a forwarded text message or multimedia message. I do not know that person personally."

We filed an open-records request at the Clay County Courthouse for every website visited on Norris' county computer while he was serving in public office.

The records indicated Norris' computer had been active on a dating site, Facebook, poker sites and a site for "big and beautiful singles" and that he had made unsuccessful attempts to access adult sites that were blocked by his employer.

Four of those blocked adult-site visits were to TheDirty.com, the same website where Amanda's nude pictures had been anonymously posted.

Several of the alleged victims told us Norris had been convicted of felony stalking in 2005, but the felony didn't show on computer databases, and court officials said the case was sealed.

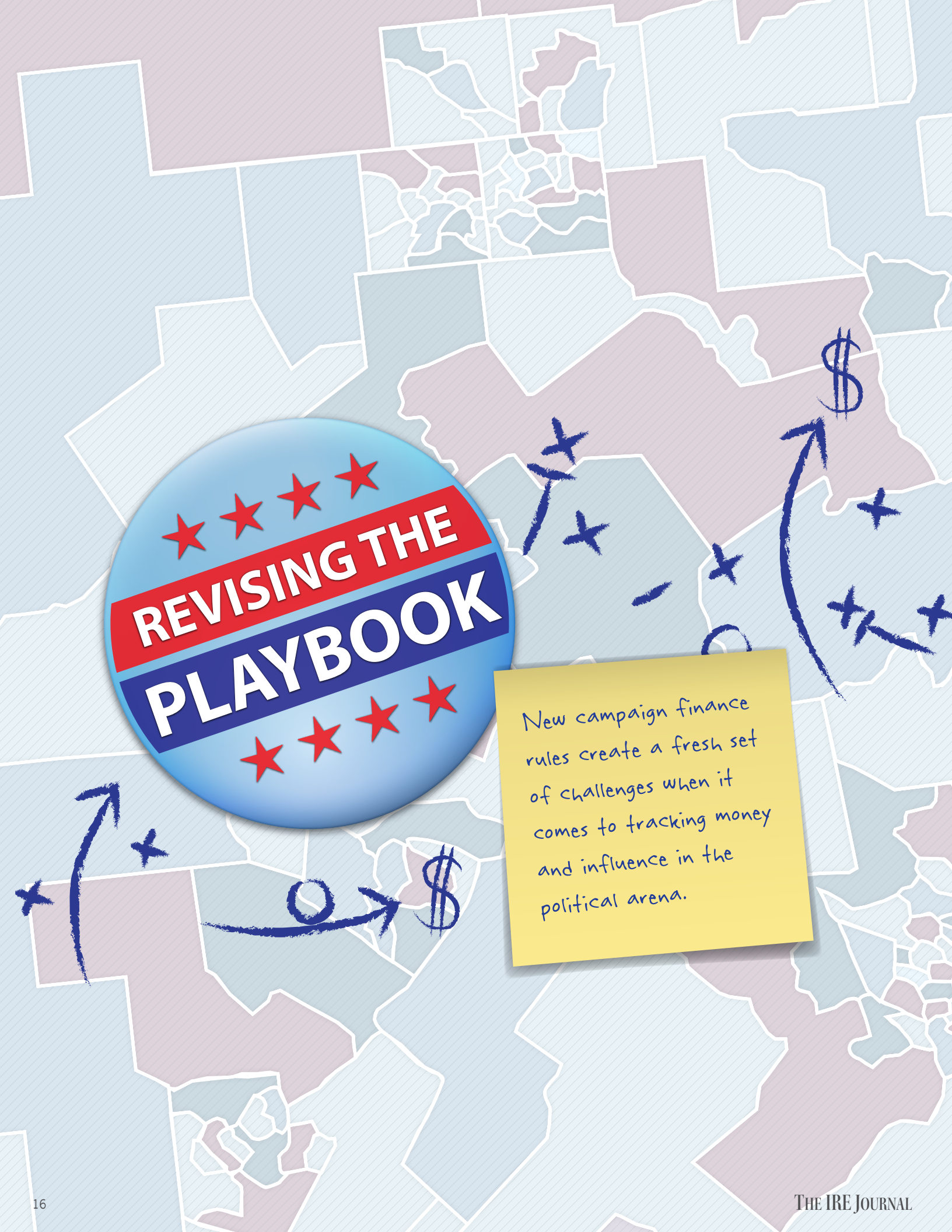
We placed an open records request for all financial transactions between the court and Norris and identified a payment to the Missouri Felony Compensation Fund in 2005.

Legal experts said the records indicated the payer (Norris in this case) would have been convicted of a felony and ordered by the court to pay into the fund.

The day after our first story aired, Norris acknowledged the 2005 felony plea to *The Kansas City Star*.

Russ Ptacek was an investigative reporter with KSHB-TV in Kansas City and is now an investigative reporter at WUSA-TV in Washington, D.C.

The invisible data showed the exact time the photographs were taken, the type of camera used and even the aperture of the lens, so we knew it was likely that they were originals or exact duplicates.


REVISING THE
PLAYBOOK
New campaign finance rules create a fresh set of challenges when it comes to tracking money and influence in the political arena.

2012 elections call for new reporting tactics

By Derek Willis
The New York Times

In many newsrooms, the heart of the presidential primary season is time to pull the election-coverage playbook down from the shelf, dust it off and put it into action for the fall.

But consider how the game has changed since 2008, the last time a national campaign captured our attention. We have to contend with redrawn congressional districts, new campaign-finance rules and new ways of campaigning. There are different kinds of primary elections, a new electoral calendar and the growth of micro-targeting to consider.

As much as election coverage is one of the fundamental duties of news organizations, it's also something of a habit. It's a good idea to revisit our habits to see if they're still suited for the task at hand.

To give you an idea of how elections have changed, consider the headline that appeared in *The Raleigh* (N.C.) *News & Observer* October 22: "GOP boss blames school election on Obama." Surely, in the midst of a global economic downturn, with a revolution consuming Libya and Congress battling the White House over spending and taxes, President Barack Obama's re-election campaign had more important things to do than involve itself in a North Carolina county school board race. Five years ago the thought would have been ludicrous. Not now.

In a test of its mobilization ability, Obama's campaign activated a network of volunteers first drafted in 2008 to go from door to door in Wake County and other parts of North Carolina to campaign for Democratic candidates. Rather than blanket the airwaves with advertisements or bring high-profile politicians for public appearances, the campaign was aimed at creating a model ground game that could be refined and replicated across the nation. Most of it occurred without drawing the notice of local Republicans, to say nothing of the local media.

"Over the course of the coming year, our goal is to build a campaign infrastructure led by more than 20,000 trained and tested volunteer neighborhood teams," wrote Obama for America National Field Director Jeremy Bird. "Our year out events have mobilized these groups in key states while at the same time supporting important local and statewide elections."

The presidential election will draw much more scrutiny than a school board race, and most campaigns aren't as well-funded as an incumbent president's. But that doesn't mean that races up and down the ballot won't be affected by, or borrow tactics from, higher-profile contests. The spillover effects of these tactics, combined with new rules about independent spending at the federal level, will be felt all over. That's why it's important to build your campaign coverage toolbox now, so that you're able to react during the election, not after it ends.

Some Key Types of Political Organizations

Candidate committees – the primary campaign organizations of candidates for national, state or local office.

Party committees – national, state and local branches of the Democratic, Republican and other parties.

PACs – political action committees, groupings of like-minded individuals around issues, businesses or labor unions. They can give money to candidates and parties or spend money independently of them.

Super PACs – at the federal level, PACs that can raise money in unlimited amounts for use in independent expenditures that cannot be coordinated with a candidate for the House, Senate or presidency. They are active in the presidential campaigns and in House and Senate races.

501(c)(4) – not-for-profit organizations billed as advancing "social welfare," they tend to be oriented toward issues, such as the environment or gun rights. They can raise unlimited donations and make very little disclosure.

Section 527 committees – many of these committees are active only at the state and local level. For example, the two governors associations are 527 committees. They can raise donations in unlimited amounts and must report to the Internal Revenue Service.

The Playing Field

A presidential campaign, combined with 435 House races, 33 Senate contests and thousands of races further down the ballot, makes for a crowded field in 2012. It's important to start with the political geography because in many cases that's changed, too. The redistricting process, which follows each census, added seats to some states (both at the congressional and state legislative levels) and removed existing ones. If you haven't grabbed the new maps that define electoral boundaries for your state, county, city and neighborhoods, you should do so. These maps, as ProPublica's reporting on California's congressional redistricting process showed (http://bit.ly/v6iJrS), aren't the result of chance but of political calculation.

So it's important to know who lives within districts, and who doesn't. Using mapping software, it's possible to examine historical voting patterns within newly drawn districts, and to compare new districts with old ones. Combined with voter registration data, which many jurisdictions update on a monthly basis, this can help you better understand the new landscape. So can the past performances of particular candidates, even if they're not running in 2012. That's why it's important to collect as much information as you can about voting patterns in your areas. Even in places with rapid population change, it's usually possible to identify fundamental political currents.

One way to do this is to assemble precinct-level results and maps from previous elections – usually the results are available from local or state election authorities and the maps from planning departments. The newest maps usually come from state legislatures or in some cases, from independent commissions charged with drawing up the new lines. In either case, local planning departments need these maps, as do political parties and independent political groups.

The 2010 Census Bureau figures can also help in this task. Rhodes Cook, a veteran political writer, likes to classify areas based on their demographic characteristics and voting histories, which can help explain their importance (or lack thereof) to particular candidates. Constructing detailed voting profiles of towns, cities and counties is something that modern campaigns need to do; newsrooms have just as much reason to in the quest to help explain how elections are won and lost.

Finding Voters

Some elections can be comfortably won before large-scale advertising campaigns even begin; if you start with a favorable electorate, as many incumbents do, then it's hard for even well-funded challengers to make a dent. But the tactic used to be pretty simple: hit the airwaves, usually in large, expensive campaigns, to reach the largest audience possible with the same message. If enough of them responded to that effort, a candidate had a fighting chance.

There are so many ways to wage an effective campaign now that it's difficult to keep up. The methods available to campaigns for identifying and contacting potential supporters have dramatically increased, and with them so has the sophistication of political campaigns. The Internet, of course, is a big factor: email, Facebook and other methods that enable campaigns to reach individuals offer more precise possibilities than the mass-media campaigns we're used to seeing.

But in order to take advantage of these new delivery methods, campaigns need to be able to gather, process and make sense of large amounts of information. Most candidates running for local or even most state offices won't be able to mount their own data-mining operations. But that doesn't mean they can't benefit from efforts up the political food chain. The Republican National Committee, for example, has decided to put its voter database, dubbed "Voter Vault," in the hands of an outside firm so that candidates and like-minded independent groups can use (and improve) the information contained in it. Thus, what started as a national effort may wind up benefiting candidates at the local level. Obama's campaign posted job listings during 2011 looking for data scientists who could help craft voter contact strategies.

News organizations are at a competitive disadvantage here for two reasons. First, political organizations and candidates can get access to commercial data that remain beyond the reach of public records laws. Second, they have the resources to invest in harvesting and analyzing data to help guide political activity, including advertising campaigns, email messaging and direct outreach.

But that doesn't mean that newsrooms are without options. We may not be able see the information that campaigns and organizations are acting on, but we can see the results in the form of mailing pieces, television and radio ads and more. This new world of narrow targeting means that many voters, even in the same state, can have different experiences of the same election. And that means that reporters need to recognize all the ways that modern campaigns have to contact potential voters and to raise money.

The Money Chase

The money that makes all of these activities possible is a perennial area to watch. Campaign-finance reporters have been dealt a dizzying series of court decisions, regulatory rulings and changes in practices during the past few years, but all of them tend to underlie a single point: if the campaign-finance system was ever a simple, monolithic thing, it sure is not now.

These days, it's helpful to view campaign finance as an environment in which the players choose the right tool for the right situation. At the federal level, that could mean a candidate's committee, or one of the new independent "super PACs," or maybe a 501(c)(4) organization. State elections could see spending by 501(c)(4)s, so-called 527 committees and other types of entities. At all levels, the new techniques tend toward providing the most flexibility in what you can say, how you can pay for it and what needs to be disclosed.

For example, in late 2011, a 501(c)(4) wing of the Republican Governors Association paid for television advertisements linking West Virginia's then-acting governor, Earl Ray Tomblin, a Democrat running for a full term in a special election, to President Obama, who was unpopular in the state, and his health care policies. The RGA could have paid for the ads from its traditional 527 committee, which reports to the Internal Revenue Service. But in choosing to use its not-for-profit "social welfare" wing, the governors association avoided disclosing the donors who paid for the advertisements.

The RGA ads exemplified a common theme of political ads during the past two years. We've seen national themes influence state and local elections, which suggests that attempting to distinguish between federal elections and those at the state and local level is an exercise in futility. Every major state political party raises and spends money via state and federal accounts, and some county parties do the same. Independent groups know that spending on local races may help lay the ground for success in "bigger" elections down the road, and national organizations use mayoral, state and various special elections as proving grounds for their fundraising and organizational techniques. All of which makes following the money a more complicated affair, but hardly less important.

Which brings us back to Wake County, N.C., and the importance of keeping tabs on the local political activities. By monitoring the money, the demographics, the tactics at play in elections, journalists can keep with the changing nature of our political campaigns, making election night not a night not of surprise, but of confirmation of all the reporting and analysis of the months leading up to it.

Derek Willis is a member of the Interactive News Technology team at The New York Times. *He works on web applications using election and legislative data and can be reached at dwillis@nytimes.com.*

Educated voters

Online data transforms campaign coverage

By Ross Ramsey and Ryan Murphy
The Texas Tribune

REVISING THE PLAYBOOK

Covering campaigns, from our perspective, requires two things: news (obviously) and information (which ought to be obvious). News – the stuff that happens day to day, which consists of events and revelations – has always been the main course. Information – the stuff behind the news – hasn't been readily available, largely because we weren't able to put our libraries, our newsroom morgues and our files in front of our readers, viewers and listeners.

Now we can, and the transformation is enormous. That previously unavailable ball of string that includes news archives, databases, interactive applications and reference materials can now be included along with the news of the day, giving consumers a range of information as small as a tweet and as big as a database of salaries of public employees in Texas.

A quick example: To get campaign finance information in Texas, reporters and citizens used to have to be in Austin, to go to the relatively small office of the Texas Ethics Commission in the Sam Houston State Office Building and to fill out a form for each campaign finance report they wanted to see. The clerk would pull the file and hand it over, and the recipient would go to a table and go through the paper report – sometimes with only one to three contributions or expenditures per page – one page at a time. Copies were a dime a page, if memory serves. And since we generally did this at the campaign-finance reporting deadlines, it was a mob scene of reporters and candidates and campaign workers and political consultants.

Now you go online and look through sortable documents any time you want.

Look at the length of the last two paragraphs; see how much simpler things have become?

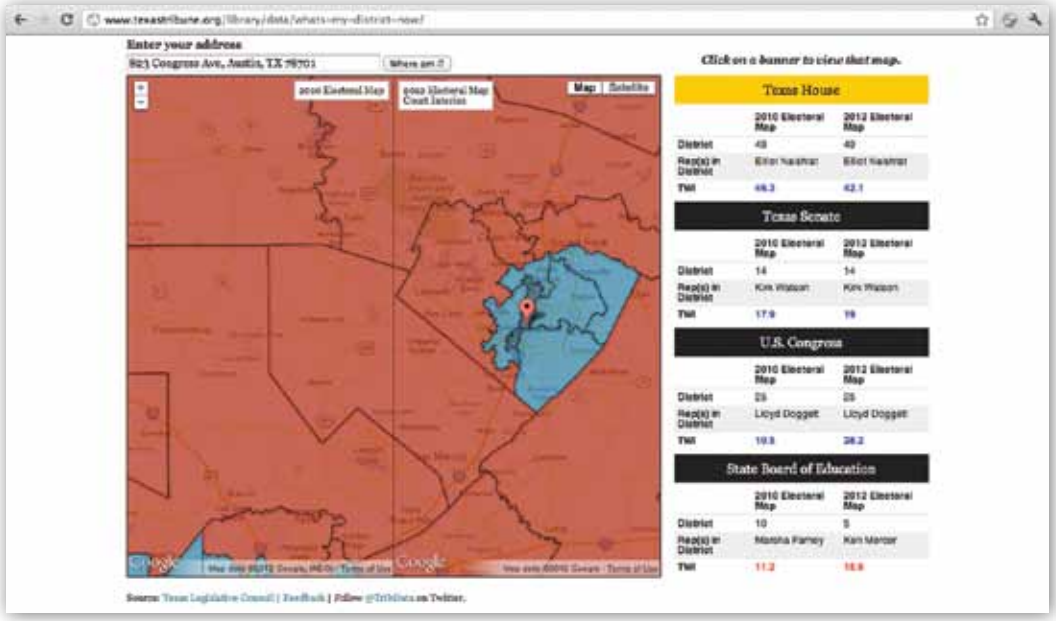
Checking candidate filings was the same, except that the data was held by the political parties in several locations. Election data? The Texas Secretary of State, unless you wanted local data held by the clerk in one of the state's 254 counties.

Our goal today is to bring that information together in one place and to make it easier to use and to understand.

Some examples:

- Our election brackets – shamelessly stolen from the sports pages and March Madness – for tracking candidates and results through the primaries, the runoffs and the general elections. This is an ongoing assembly line that starts with lists of candidates and that gradually accumulates more information about them (photos, biographical information, campaign-finance and other reports, stories about the campaign as it develops) and the

The Texas Tribune



The Texas Tribune built an interactive application that lets users plug in their address and see their district. Users can compare 2010 election maps with map proposals for 2012.

To help voters all over the state keep up with this, we created a redistricting viewer, which makes it simple to compare old and new maps visually.

races (district lines and demographics, the political atmosphere and so on). Information about the winners will then feed into our directory of officeholders, a central piece of our legislative coverage.

- That previously mentioned database of public employee salaries, which includes state and local governments, school districts and counties, colleges and universities. We update this database by periodically asking each government entity for a then-current electronic file of all employees, gross salaries, titles and departments, all of which is public information in Texas. It's an indication of how the candidates run their offices once they're elected, and there's another link: Lots of Texas officeholders supplement the salaries of top aides on the state payroll with money from their campaign accounts. The only way to see that is to compare the two sets of data – the state employee database over here and the campaign finance reports over there.
- Helping people get their heads around redistricting and what it means in Texas. There were a number of questions we wanted to help voters answer: "What district am I in? Who represents me? Am I in a new district now? Do I have a new representative, and who is this person? Who are the candidates over here for the 2012 elections?"

It's been a remarkably messy redistricting cycle, with Texas congressional and legislative plans hung up in litigation in three federal venues, including the United States Supreme Court.

Fortunately, it is relatively easy here to obtain the data needed to make sense of it all. The Texas Legislative Council draws maps according to lawmakers' specifications, and it does a great job of making the "shapefiles" and underlying data available online for reporters and researchers to download and pull apart. Every iteration of each map is made available, making it possible to watch the drawing of a map from beginning to end.

Even better, the TLC breaks down voter demographics and previous election results for each map, making it easy to compare and analyze and contrast it with other versions.

To help voters all over the state keep up with this, we created a redistricting viewer, which makes it simple to compare old and new maps visually.

There have been multiple iterations of the viewer, and the most up-to-date version of it is currently simply called, "What's My District Now?" This tool makes it possible for a reader to enter any address to see who represents a district now and who would represent it under new maps for the 2012 elections.. And by using the historical voting data provided by the TLC, we can also analyze the political inclination of each district.

We use that data ourselves, as always, to guide our work. Which districts are competitive and ought to get the most coverage? Which districts exemplify bigger changes around the state? Where are the anomalies? The best candidates and the weirdest ones? Where is the money flowing? For instance, we developed an index – based on the most recent two statewide elections – that shows the political environment of each district on the map. The map shows the actual geography, while the index shows the political layout.

The campaign data also provides opportunities to mix government-program and demographic data and to put it all into a political context. Where is unemployment highest? We've mapped that as well as which areas of the state have the heaviest concentrations of food-stamp recipients.

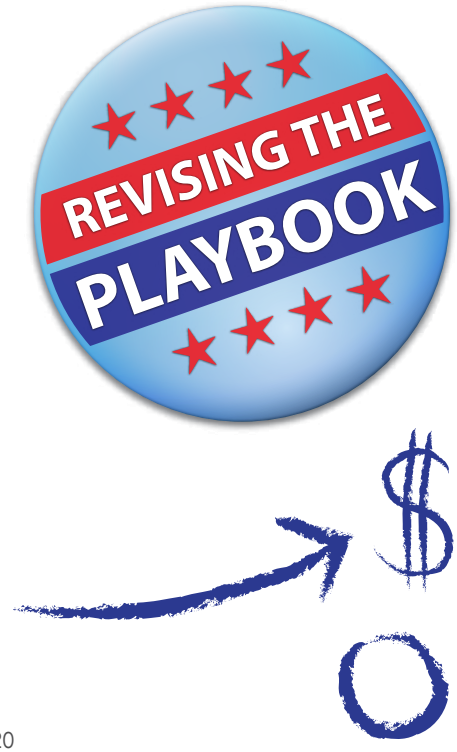
One goal is to put as much relevant information as possible in front of voters who are trying to decide which candidates to support or oppose, to lay out the full context of each election (local issues, influxes of money from outside groups, etc.), to give voters as much information as they could possibly want.

Another is to accumulate our work in a useful way, so that today's standalone database on campaign finance eventually becomes part of a larger ball of string that takes in legislation, legislative votes, lobbying databases, district demographics, and levels of government aid in various parts of the state and to particular populations or industries.

Finally, it ought to be interesting and fun. The brackets offer a shot at that, as do the addictive "Where's my district" maps, the campaign-finance applications, the partisan characteristics of the state.

Who knew civics was this interesting?

Ryan Murphy is a data reporter at The Texas Tribune. Ross Ramsey is The Tribune's executive editor and one of its co-founders.



Green light

Campaign bundlers linked to favorable Energy Department loans

By Ronnie Greene
The Center for Public Integrity

It was my first week on the job, bracing for the Washington winter after years in South Florida, and my editors at The Center for Public Integrity tapped me to employ an age-old reporting technique upon an unlikely suspect.

Follow the money, they said, at President Barack Obama's Department of Energy, where the financial spigot was flowing for innovative clean energy projects meant to aid the environment and stir the economy.

Another twist: I'd be working with a reporting partner, ABC News Investigative Producer Matthew Mosk, melding the nonprofit Center's web-based investigative reports with a broadcast network that reaches millions.

That New Year's assignment evolved into a year-long reporting quest that exposed flaws in the Energy Department's billion-dollar spending spree, revealed the significant links between Obama campaign bundlers and DOE contracts and foreshadowed the financial and political storm that later engulfed a company named Solyndra.

And the project showed the value of partnerships in this new era of collaboration. When Center Freedom of Information Act requests languished, ABC pressed officials to adhere to Obama's transparency pledge. While I scoped out documents from the Securities and Exchange Commission and elsewhere involving politically connected loan recipients, Mosk and ABC Chief Investigative Correspondent Brian Ross flew to California to conduct interviews. We pored through previously undisclosed White House emails for hours.

By year's end, we produced nearly 50,000 words on the Center's website, http://bit.ly/xc0lmC, thousands more on ABC's site, http://abcn.ws/AcDNcG, and broadcasts on "World News Tonight," "Good Morning America" and "Nightline." Beginning in March, our stories tied major Obama donors to lucrative green-energy contracts for everything from electric cars to diesel substitutes.

Many reports grew out of documents obtained through FOIA requests, several filed months before department spending became a national story. Others were produced by following our instincts – and the money. We navigated esoteric technologies, thumbed through thousands of public records and cut against the grain by digging into a program lauded for its innovative nature.

In May, we documented how the DOE cut corners, putting taxpayers at risk in approving its maiden green-energy loan guarantee to Solyndra, the California solar-panel maker whose single largest investor was a campaign-donation bundler to the president. The story – "Skipping safeguards, officials rushed benefit to a politically-connected energy company" – disclosed that the department agreed to back the fledgling firm with a half-billion dollar federal loan before it had been fully vetted.

"This is a wonderful next step towards what is beginning to feel like a larger story," my then-editor, Keith Epstein, said as we put that story to bed.

He was right. In late August, Solyndra shuttered its Fremont, Calif., plant, fired 1,100 workers and prepared bankruptcy pa-

Solyndra

At the September 2009 groundbreaking for Solyndra's new "Fab 2" plant" were Arnold Schwarzenegger (center, lighter suit) and Energy Secretary Steven Chu (to the then-governor's right). A $535 million taxpayer-backed loan helped pay for construction. The government agreed that in the event of default private investors could try to recoup losses before taxpayers.

Paul Sakuma | Associated Press

Outside Solyndra's Fremont, Calif. headquarters.

We kept coming back to the GAO report, and kept pressing the DOE to name names, arguing that the matter was in the public interest.

pers. A week later, agents from the FBI and the department's Office of Inspector General raided its headquarters in a criminal investigation that continues.

The storm had arrived, and political casualties mounted. A House Energy and Commerce subcommittee escalated its investigation of Solyndra with public hearings and White House subpoenas. The department's loan director, who had vigorously defended Solyndra's financing to us months earlier, resigned. So did Solyndra's CEO. Suddenly, the national spotlight focused on a program billed as a model of environmentally conscious innovation.

Our first report, "Green bundler with the golden touch," which published and aired March 30, 2011, focused on Steve Westly, a former California state politician who bundled more than half-a-million dollars for Obama in 2008 and who continues to fundraise for the president. By hosting fundraisers and calling on wealthy associates, bundlers like Westly, from Florida to California, raise millions for candidates in an era of escalating campaign costs. In August 2010, Obama's staff appointed Westly to a special board advising Secretary of Energy Steven Chu on policy issues.


Chris Carlson | Associated Press

Steve Westly, pictured here during his 2006 campaign for the Democratic gubernatorial nomination in California, is one of Obama's top fundraisers. Companies in The Westly Group portfolio have benefited from more than half-a-billion dollars in loans, grants or stimulus money from the Energy Department.

Westly is a Silicon Valley venture capitalist whose firm aggressively backs green-energy projects. Companies in his portfolio, we found, secured more than half-a-billion dollars in department grants and loans under Obama before he joined Chu's board. DOE said the firms won awards on merit and that no conflicts occurred. The White House said political connections do not factor in contracts. Westly declined our interview requests.

His portfolio winners landed in highly selective company: More than 90 percent of applicants for the various Energy Department funding pools had been rejected or were still awaiting word, we found.

The piece was built largely by tracing public records that tied companies in bundlers' portfolios to DOE funding. Lists of bundlers for political candidates can be found on websites including those maintained by Public Citizen. We filed FOIA requests, including one seeking correspondence between Westly and the department, and obtained records, including meeting minutes of the Chu advisory board.

The story expanded to include other Obama bundlers – including billionaire oil baron George Kaiser, a prime investor in Solyndra. And, it showed how the department was facing escalating scrutiny from government auditors as it spent record sums – $35 billion from the stimulus alone.

As we explored these larger trends, I kept coming back to a 2010 Government Accountability Office report chiding the DOE for showing favoritism in awarding loan guarantees. There was one problem: The GAO did not name the companies involved. The department had asked that they remain confidential.

My hunch: Solyndra was among those receiving favorable treatment.

Mosk and I followed that hunch as we explored troubling issues surrounding Solyndra, the poster child of the government's support for new technologies as the first recipient of an Obama green-energy loan. The company secured its $535 million loan guarantee in 2009 – and then, a year later, cancelled a planned initial public offering after its own auditor, PricewaterhouseCoopers, wrote in March 2010: "The Company has suffered recurring losses from operations, negative cash flows since inception and has a net stockholders' deficit that, among other factors, raise [sic] substantial doubt about its ability to continue as a going concern."

Two months later, President Obama visited Solyndra's plant and lauded the solar company as leading a wave of the future. He did not mention the auditor's words.

In heralding this 4-year-old company, we wondered, did the government cut corners? We kept coming back to the GAO report, and kept pressing the DOE to name names, arguing that the matter was in the public interest. Finally, the department confirmed Solyndra had been among the companies referred to in

the GAO report and had been granted conditional approval for hundreds of millions in public money without all due diligence in hand.

The department downplayed the matter as little more than a technical issue. All due diligence was performed by closing, which occurred later in 2009, loans chief Jonathan Silver told us, and Solyndra was poised to prosper. We included the department's view, but also that of experts, who said the shortcuts raised real questions about the government's investment. We scrutinized government audits, SEC filings and corporate and DOE documents.

Our lead from that story, May 24:

The Obama administration bypassed steps meant to protect taxpayers as it hurried to approve an energy loan guarantee to a politically connected California solar power startup, iWatch News and ABC News have learned.

Mosk and I kept peeling back the layers on contracts, filing more FOIA requests involving other bundlers and beneficiaries. These FOIAs helped us stay ahead months later when Solyndra became a household name after its collapse Aug. 31.

I filed a FOIA request for financial-disclosure records involving another Silicon Valley Obama bundler, Steven J. Spinner, who raised more than $500,000 for the president in 2008 and continues to raise funds. In April 2009, Spinner was hired in the department's loan program; his wife's law firm represented companies backed by the DOE, including Solyndra.

The FOIA produced an ethics letter telling Spinner he could not take part in discussions involving clients of his wife's firm.

Our late September takeout, "Bundlers on the inside," began:

Several of Barack Obama's top campaign supporters went from soliciting political contributions to working from within the Energy Department as it showered billions in taxpayer-backed stimulus money on alternative energy firms.

One of them was Steven J. Spinner, a high-tech consultant and investor in energy companies who raised at least $500,000 for Obama. He became one of Energy Secretary Steven Chu's key loan programs advisors while his wife's law firm represented a number of the companies that had applied for loans.

The story stated that Allison Spinner's law firm received $2.4 million in federal funds for legal fees related to the $535 million department loan guarantee to Solyndra.

A week later, Mosk obtained emails released as part of the House investigation – including several written by Spinner pressing colleagues to move quickly as Solyndra's loan readied to close. "How hard is this? What is he waiting for?" Spinner wrote in August 2009. "I have OVP [the Office of the Vice President] and WH [White House] breathing down my neck on this."

The DOE said Spinner had no role in approving Solyndra's loan. His wife's law firm said it established a wall between her and client matters involving the department while Spinner worked there.

As Solyndra's meltdown attracted escalating attention, we continued to follow the money. One report revealed that Solyndra secured a 1-2 percent government interest rate – the lowest of any green-tech loan recipient – even amid deep concerns about its viability.

Gary Malerba | Associated Press

Fisker Automotive owner Henrik Fisker with the company's electric Karma.

Our investigation expanded beyond Solyndra. On Oct. 20, 2011, we explored DOE's risky $1 billion bet in two electric-car companies backed by political heavyweights, contrasting the department's vows of big job and production numbers against more sober company SEC reports.

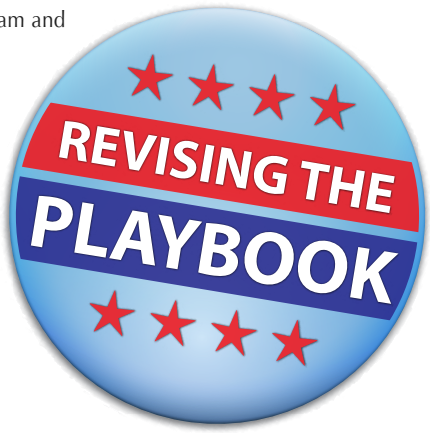
Other stories benefited from FOIA requests filed early in our reporting. One, filed in April, netted documents showing that Fitch Ratings gave Solyndra a B+ credit rating as the government pushed to close the loan. Those documents arrived Sept. 6, 2011, a week after Solyndra's shuttering. That fact was one piece of a larger takeout documenting how department officials, hungry to greenlight potential game-changing technologies, dismissed a flurry of red flags in pushing Solyndra.

The Center's 2,500-word piece – "Recurring red flags failed to slow Obama administration's race to help Solyndra" – was published Sept. 13, two weeks after the company's shutdown, as events were rapidly unfolding and batches of internal emails were being released in flurries.

The seeds for the takeout were planted, essentially, during that first week in January, when The Center and ABC committed to examining a fast-moving government program and documenting the winners of its largesse.

One report revealed that Solyndra secured a 1-2 percent government interest rate – the lowest of any green-tech loan recipient – even amid deep concerns about its viability.

Ronnie Greene, an investigative reporter with The Center for Public Integrity and IRE Medal winner, is author of Night Fire: Big Oil, Poison Air, and Margie Richard's Fight To Save Her Town *(HarperCollins/Amistad, 2008).*



Campaign cash flow

Nonprofits offer data, guidance

National: Zero in on top donors, bundlers, super PACs

By Viveca Novak
Center for Responsive Politics

The 2012 election promises to be the most expensive on record. One important way in which it differs from the 2008 contest: the presence of more outside groups, spending much more money, thanks to the Supreme Court's opinion in *Citizens United v. FEC* in 2010 and subsequent legal developments. It's now legal for these groups – ostensibly independent of any candidate – to accept, and spend, unlimited amounts of money from virtually any source, including corporations, unions and trade associations.

That makes it more important than ever for reporters to examine not just the candidates running for office, but the other entities that are spending money to help them get there. Here are some questions to keep in mind during the campaign. Visit IRE.org for the full story, including links to resources at the Center for Responsive Politics that can help your reporting:

For covering candidates

- How many donors have maxed out (giving $2,500 for the primary and $2,500 for the general election) to the candidate so far? How does that compare to the number who maxed out at this point in his or her last campaign?
- For the presidential campaign: How many of those donors have given to one or more of the candidate's rivals? How many have given to a joint fundraising committee promoting a candidate as well as his or her party, or to a super PAC?
- Who are the campaign's bundlers – who's putting together lots of checks to deliver to the candidate? These are individuals to whom candidates have reason to be grateful. Their voices are likely to speak louder than those of many other supporters, and they may reap rewards after the election. Campaigns aren't required to disclose bundlers' names, except those of federal lobbyists. So far President Barack Obama is the only presidential candidate who has volunteered to disclose all his bundlers. But prodding from the press and watchdog groups resulted in others doing so in 2008.
- How is the candidate spending his or her campaign cash? Are there lots of pricey meals or hotel stays? Is the campaign using vendors that have some tie, financial or familial, to the candidate?
- What can you tell from the candidate's personal financial disclosure statement? What are his/her assets and debts, and which side of the balance sheet is larger? Is this a candidate who seems more or less likely to be able to relate to the 99%? Have incumbents gotten richer or poorer while in office, and how? Nearly half of all members of Congress in 2010 were millionaires.
- Where (literally) are the candidate's contributions coming from? What share are coming from his/her home state versus the rest of the country? What share are coming from fundraising hotspots like New York and California?
- Does the candidate have his/her own PAC, and if so, what can you tell from the donations the PAC is making? Is it giving to other candidates whose support will be important to the donor candidate in some way? Sometimes candidates' PACs are used to fund travel and restaurant meals and the like.

For covering outside groups

Super PACs, 501(c)(4)s, 527s and so on, which are organized under different sections of the U.S. tax code, are affected differently by campaign finance laws and operate under varying disclosure rules:

- What outside groups are active in the races you're interested in? There have been super PACs dedicated to supporting all of the main Republican presidential candidates – to what degree are they popping up in congressional races? Are they supporting a candidate or going negative?
- Who's funding the groups – corporations, unions, the traditional deep-pocketed, politically active individuals? Last year, a mysterious company called W Spann LLC gave $1 million to the pro-Romney super PAC Restore Our Future. It was a shell corporation, and in the ensuing uproar, the true donor came forward. Look for more like this, and press the group on who the real donor is. Contact the largest donors and ask them why they're giving so much money.
- Are these groups pushing the envelope on prohibited coordination between candidates and independent expenditure committees? Are candidates showing up at outside groups' fundraisers and appearing in ads? Are candidates and outside groups using the same vendors?
- The FEC requires groups making independent expenditures to file notices within 24 and 48 hours of reaching certain spending levels. Review those notices and the list of new super PACs as a part of your daily routine. Who's suddenly spending money? Who's behind that super PAC with the vaguely patriotic name and whom is it organized to support or oppose?

Viveca Novak is editorial director at the Center for Responsive Politics.

Online Resources

Here are some of the resources mentioned in this story.
For all the links, please see the full story at IRE.org.

Breakdowns of Campaign Expenditures (example) (http://bit.ly/yRcVKv)

Personal Financial Disclosure Database (http://bit.ly/17QDb8))

Outside Spending by Race (http://bit.ly/bItE5y)

Super PAC Database (http://bit.ly/p2IhIO)

State: Look at contributors, ballot measures

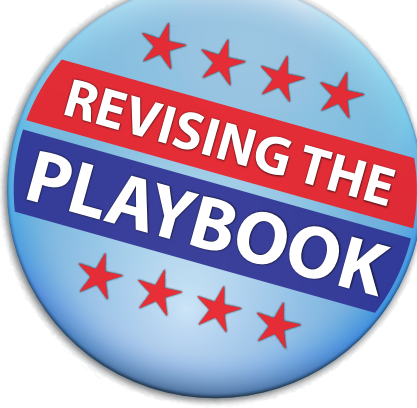
By Beverly Magley and Anne Sherwood
National Institute on Money in State Politics

For your stories about 2012 state elections, check out free campaign-finance information at The National Institute on Money in State Politics (FollowTheMoney.org), a nonpartisan not-for-profit organization. In addition to downloadable data sets, you can mine reports on trends and anomalies, as well as overviews that compare and contrast campaigns and elections in all 50 states.

Here are the trends and issues the Institute is watching this year. For links to the tools and data mentioned here, please see the full story at IRE.org:

- Independent spending is on everyone's radar since the *Citizens United v. FEC* ruling in January 2010. There are vast sums at stake here: See if your state even requires those expenditures to be reported and whether such spending has changed since the ruling went into effect.
- Most of 2012's 11 gubernatorial races will be highly competitive. As demonstrated by the recent political controversy surrounding governors in Wisconsin and Ohio, the party that wins the state's executive seat could have a major impact on the state's trajectory.
- Keep your eye on state supreme court races, more important than ever now that anyone can spend unlimited quantities of money independently advocating for or against candidates. As demonstrated in Iowa in 2010, long-time justices facing retention elections may be thrown out due to their rulings on controversial issues.
- Contentious ballot measures are also hot spots. Look for out-of-state money pouring into ballot committees, trace the history of similar measures in other states, and compare the current race by reading Institute reports about ballot measures.
- Check the top industry contributors to campaigns in multiple states. Is there a pattern, perhaps an orchestrated effort to change policies in favor of a particular economic industry? Also, look at how much was raised by candidates and partisan committees, as well as ballot-measure committees.
- When covering incumbents running for reelection, note the committees they have served on. Did lawmakers who voted for certain legislation receive contributions from the industry they might be regulating or impacting? Might it have inspired out-of-state contributions? See how officials voted on key issues affecting those industries.
- Is a candidate primarily financed by in-state or out-of-state money? Which state legislators are getting campaign money from within their districts – and who is financed from elsewhere?
- See how financially competitive past races have been in a certain district. Does one party or individual dominate the fundraising? Check if a legislative district is primarily Democrat or Republican and how and if it has shifted over the years.
- Review how much candidates for a particular office have raised in the past. Compare that with current fundraising totals as they are made available to see who's raising average amounts and who's on a fundraising roll.
- See how strong your state's campaign-finance disclosure rules are, and put on the heat for improvements in transparency.
- Stumped for ideas? Look at how other journalists are covering money in state politics.

Beverly Magley and Anne Sherwood are the National Institute on Money in State Politics' communications team. You can reach them at 406-449-2480 or information@followthemoney.org.



ONLINE RESOURCES

Here are some of the resources mentioned in the story. For all the links, please see the full story at IRE.org.

Industry Influence Tool
http://bit.ly/edKuvL

Legislative Committee Analysis Tool
http://bit.ly/hBN7y5

Independent Spending Database
http://bit.ly/pmLRsM

Point of Influence
http://bit.ly/db9euL
(contributions mapped by legislative boundaries)

IRE RESOURCES

Stories

- **No. 24766:** Alison Bath, *The (Shreveport, La.) Times*. "The Mayor and the Money" found anomalies in the campaign finances of the Shreveport mayor, including the breaking or circumvention of laws. (2010)
- **No. 24790:** Aram Roston, Reid Pillifant, Azi Paybarah, *The New York Observer* and The Investigative Fund at The Nation Institute. "Bloomberg's Offshore Millions" and "The Secret Campaign of Mayor Mike." The stories uncovered how Mayor Michael Bloomberg used a loophole to invest charitable funds in overseas tax havens and examined the questionable tactics of his campaign effort called "ballot security." (2010)
- **No. 24918:** Bill Allison, Anu Narayanswamy, Ryan Sibley, Aaron Bycoffe, Paul Blumenthal, Lindsay Young, The Sunlight Foundation. After the *Citizens United v. FEC* ruling, the Sunlight Foundation covered the spending, fundraising and other activities of the "super PACs" and created an online tool to track these organizations. (2010)

Tipsheets

- **No. 3610:** "Creative Uses of Campaign Data," Matt Stiles, NPR; Karen Yourish, *The Washington Post*. This presentation and list of links survey the various ways news organizations are presenting campaign data for the 2012 election. (2012)
- **No. 3609:** "Backgrounding Candidates," James V. Grimaldi, *The Washington Post*. Grimaldi gives advice on how to run a background investigation on this year's presidential candidates, as well as anyone else you're backgrounding. (2012)
- **No. 3400:** "Campaign Finance: Tracking the Money," Jonathan D. Salant, Bloomberg News; Bill Allison, Sunlight Foundation; Wendell Cochran, American University. The authors provide the basics of reporting on campaign finances, focusing on national elections. They give links to websites that track campaign finances and lobbyists. (2010)

The IRE Journal

- "Cash Flow: Project aims to track influence," The Center for Public Integrity. John Perry describes how the Center investigated campaign consultants and how they impact politicians. He discusses the tasks of separating consulting fees from general campaign expenditures, and identifying and following individual consultants. (July/August 2007)
- "Real-Time Watchdogs: Sunlight Foundation bloggers chip away at government secrets," Sunlight Foundation. Bill Allison talks about the organization's "Real Time Investigations" blog, which provides short entries related to the transparency of government and political campaigns; updates on investigations; and stories tracking the influence of private interests on public policies. (March/April 2008)

Extra! Extra!

- "Taking teacher attendance at the polls," WINK-Southwest Florida. With help from NICAR, data research by WINK News showed that Lee County, Fla., teachers, though vocal on education issues, tended not to vote in elections for public officeholders. (Broadcast, CAR, Education, Elections, Politics , Nov. 7, 2011)

SHOWING YOUR SOURCES

Online tool lets readers see your work

By Marshall Allen
ProPublica

I didn't want to just cite the sources. I wanted readers to see the sources. And my notes allowed them to jump to the savory details.

I don't care who knows it: I have a hearty reporter-crush on DocumentCloud.

It's peculiar for a person to find a computer program so alluring, but two years ago when I was working on a major investigation at the *Las Vegas Sun*, "Do No Harm: Hospital Care in Las Vegas" (http://bit.ly/gl9icS), I wanted to do everything I could to show readers my work. That's when a colleague introduced me to DocumentCloud, which was created by journalists from ProPublica and the *New York Times* and is now part of IRE. DocumentCloud (www.documentcloud.org) has many features, but I used it to upload source documents to the Internet, add notes to highlight key facts and link from my stories to the annotations to show readers where I got my information. I didn't want to just cite the sources. I wanted readers to see the sources. And my notes allowed them to jump to the savory details.

I annotated scores of documents for the "Do No Harm" project, which led to tens of thousands of page views by readers. Some readers skipped the stories but dove into the documents.

At ProPublica, where I now work, my colleague Al Shaw made it possible for reporters to take DocumentCloud to the next level. Shaw, a programmer/journalist on our news applications team, created a tool called "Explore Sources," which gives reporters a convenient way to annotate as many facts as desired in a story. And it gives readers a simple way to read the annotations.

He developed the tool – nicknamed "The Annotizer" – for my recent story, "Why Can't Linda Carswell Get Her Husband's Heart Back?" (http://bit.ly/vZehKj). The story told the tale of Linda Carswell, whose husband died suddenly and unexpectedly in a Houston-area hospital after being admitted for kidney stones. The hospital's autopsy was incomplete, and the widow did not find out until years after her husband died that he had been buried without his heart. The Carswell story illustrated systemic shortcomings of hospital autopsies in the United States.

The article was based on thousands of pages of court documents, and adding annotations allowed readers to see the meta layer of information that exists beneath the surface of the story, as well as read the fascinating trial testimony for themselves, if they desired. A reader can click the "Explore Sources" link at the top of the story, and phrases within the text become highlighted. When the reader clicks on a highlighted portion, the corresponding note from the document I loaded into DocumentCloud appears as a pop-up. Clicking on the note will plunge the reader into the document itself.

It's natural for journalists who see Explore Sources to wonder: "How much work did that take?" Actually, using the tool was easier than it might seem. That's mainly because of Al's programming handiwork – and ProPublica will soon offer this tool for free to other news organizations. But for me, the reporter who adds the final annotations to the story, it's also efficient because I've integrated DocumentCloud into my reporting and writing process.

Any reporter doing an in-depth story gathers reams of material – academic research, legal filings, court transcripts, government reports, etc. – that may often total thousands of pages. In the old days I printed much of the material, filled file folders and boxes with the stuff and marked the key portions with a highlighter. When it came to the writing phase, it was a real pain to index all the notes and keep the piles of pages organized.

Now I immediately upload any documents I find into DocumentCloud and my first read of each one is online. I make notes in the document on the spot. Some documents take scores of annotations. Others may have one or two. But there's no more printing reams of papers. DocumentCloud becomes my online file for each project.

By the time I was ready to write the Linda Carswell story, I had 65 documents, mostly transcripts of depositions and trial testimony, totaling 5,881 pages, distilled down to 554 notes. The DocumentCloud programmers added a key feature that helped me write the story. It allows users to print the notes from each document, instead of the whole thing, which let me print all those key passages I identified onto about 100 pages. That meant all the important details from the source documents were there before me when I was drafting the story – culled from thousands of pages. My sanity was saved, and the story was much easier to structure and fill in with key details.

Shaw made Explore Sources extremely reporter-friendly. When we had a final draft of "Why Can't Linda Carswell Have Her Husband's Heart Back?" I used the interface he created to link the relevant DocumentCloud notes to the various places they belonged in the story. It took a few hours to highlight each portion of text in the story and click on the corresponding note, to link the two together. The story contains 57 links to the source documents.

Maybe it's my document-crush talking, but I think Explore Sources is an important innovation. It helped me fact-check my article before it was published and allowed readers to check my work if they were interested, which is particularly important with controversial stories. It also highlights the depth and integrity of the work, and that's important in an era of shallow punditry and alleged media bias. And finally, it allows readers to let their curiosity run wild if they want to learn more about a topic. In sum, showing our work is a great public service that builds trust.

Marshall Allen is a reporter for ProPublica.

Tom Gralish | The Philadelphia Inquirer

School police officer Eric Cosby patrols outside Henry R. Edmunds Elementary School in Philadelphia. *The Philadelphia Inquirer* wrote about Cosby and several other school officers who had arrest records.

CRIMES IN THE CLASSROOM

Stories detail student violence, arrested cops in Philly schools

By Susan Snyder and Dylan Purcell
The Philadelphia Inquirer

A series of racial attacks at a Philadelphia high school in late 2009 – and the school district's inadequate response – prompted *The Inquirer* to launch an investigation into school violence. Its seven-part series, "Assault on Learning" (http://bit.ly/i8yFfC), and follow-up stories published throughout the past year, showed that violence was widespread and underreported in the city's schools.

The five-member reporting team looked at violence among young children, how the district's main intervention system for helping students failed and how violent acts occurred in classrooms on a regular basis, disrupting the school system's educational mission. A recent follow-up investigated school police with arrest records.

Examining a five-year period, the newspaper series found major assaults on teachers and students were rampant. Violence in the district occurred dozens of times a day, in every corner of the city, at every level of school. On an average day, 25 students, teachers or other staff members were beaten, robbed, sexually assaulted or made victims of other violent crimes. Attacks were being initiated with intensity and ferocity by students as young as 5.

The reporting team interviewed hundreds of teachers, parents, students and education experts. Reporters obtained thousands of internal district police reports of violent incidents. A database of major crimes was created, revealing for the first time the level of violence school-by-school.

In order to quantify the violence problem, the team first had to wrestle with the district for electronic copies of serious incidents and student enrollment. After several months the district turned over the records to fulfill a public records request.

Those records spelled out the exact nature of violent acts committed in classrooms, school buildings and even to students and teachers commuting to and from school. When combined with enrollment figures, those raw numbers became violent crime rates

A database of major crimes was created, revealing for the first time the level of violence school-by-school.

The personnel files were key to the investigation because they showed that most of the officers who ran afoul of the law also got into trouble on the job.

that detailed an epidemic of assaults in many of the neighborhood high schools and a surprising number of other schools that never made the news, including elementaries.

By adjusting the incident numbers for dramatic changes in enrollment over a five-year span, the database also served a different purpose. It revealed, in some schools, staggering changes in crime rates that were seemingly unexplainable. That fit with the many voices in the schools who told reporters that the reporting of incidents was discouraged or downplayed and some crimes went completely unreported.

The newspaper also commissioned an extensive, independently administered survey of school staff. Michael G. Hagen, associate professor and graduate chair in political science at Temple University, developed the survey in conjunction with *The Inquirer*. To gain access to teachers and aides, we asked the Philadelphia Federation of Teachers – the union – to notify its members that they could link to the survey through the PFT website. The union, however, had no access to the responses. More than 750 Philadelphia teachers and aides – 6 percent of the district's 13,000 teachers and aides – responded to the 31-question survey. The results were analyzed by Hagen and Jason Martin, a graduate student.

The findings were startling even to an informed public. In the survey, about two-thirds of teachers who responded said that violence and disruption in their buildings hindered their students' learning.

In the aftermath of the series, the newspaper received many tips about other problems contributing to the violence in the city's schools: Some offenses in which students were seriously injured were downgraded to disorderly conduct. Expensive safety cameras were malfunctioning or not being properly monitored. Safety plans for the most dangerous schools were scant. And perhaps most disturbingly, there were serious concerns about the quality of the district's school police force, including officers with conduct and drug problems.

The district's school police are unarmed and are not police-academy trained. They receive only four weeks of training before going on the job. They are not drug screened or given psychological testing. A national consultant that conducted safety audits of district schools in spring 2010 criticized some officers for yelling at students and "aggressively challenging them" for minor issues. Even the police officers' union president was critical of training and screening requirements.

Reporters decided to conduct criminal record checks of the school district police force. The first step was to obtain an employee list, which was secured through a Right to Know request. But names by themselves were not enough. To accurately match officers to court records, reporters also had to get their birth dates, which the district declined to provide. Birth dates of government employees are typically considered confidential in Pennsylvania.

Instead, those were acquired through a reliable source.

Crossing the officer information with a separately obtained database of millions of court cases in the state over several years, the team found more than a dozen matches for notable arrests, including officers with crack cocaine, marijuana, heroin, DUI, assault and theft arrests. In each case, reporters meticulously corroborated the information by pulling court files, talking with the officers or their lawyers, and obtaining their internal personnel files through a source. In one case, reporters confronted an officer who had to go to court on cocaine possession charges the first day of school and showed up in her uniform. Another officer had an active bench warrant out for his arrest yet reported to a local elementary school each day and served as the school police officer.

The reporters eliminated cases in which charges were withdrawn, the officer was found not guilty or the charges were minor, but they included those cases that resulted in ARD (Accelerated Rehabilitative Disposition) or some variation. The reporters found that in one of the cases a Pennsylvania law was applied which permits ARD with probation if the defendant provides proof of drug addiction. Since the district screening process was limited to convictions, these admittances were not considered for job performance review.

The personnel files were key to the investigation because they showed that most of the officers who ran afoul of the law also got into trouble on the job. A high school officer, for example, was brought up on school district discipline charges after he was alleged to have stolen an orange juice and frosted Entenmann's chocolate doughnuts from a local convenience store while on duty and in uniform.

In some cases, the district hired officers who had prior arrests. One officer said that it was easier to get hired as a school district cop than it was at Walmart.

In the aftermath of the story, the district promised to do more intensive background checks on prospective officers. The city's deputy mayor for public safety also plans to recommend even tighter screening procedures for school district officers and increased training, including the 32-week police academy.

The newspaper's examination of school violence at least in part prompted a number of other significant changes. The school district in December began posting detailed information on violent incidents at each school on its website in an effort to be more transparent. Earlier this year, it changed its system for reporting violence, giving the primary responsibility to school police officers, rather than principals, because officers are on the front line dealing with safety.

The state appointed a new safety watchdog to advocate for victims of violence in the city's schools. The position had been vacant for more than two years. And the School Reform Commission, the district's governing body, created a special committee to focus on safety and school climate with a commitment to come up with a comprehensive plan to address school violence.

David Swanson | The Philadelphia Inquirer

Michael Lodise, president of the Philadelphia school police officers' union, told reporters about his concerns about the lack of training and screening of school police officers. He is shown in his union office.

Susan Snyder is a reporter for The Philadelphia Inquirer. *Dylan Purcell is a computer-assisted reporter on the investigative team at T*he Philadelphia Inquirer.

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.

Boot Camp skills lead to story on employee cash outs

By Deirdre Fernandes
The Boston Globe

During the weeklong IRE and NICAR Computer-Assisted Reporting Boot Camp you wake up thinking about spreadsheet pivot tables and practice so many database queries that you never want to ask another question that requires a "WHERE" statement. But the most important lesson that gets drilled into your head is a simple one: practice, practice, practice.

After I left the January 2011 Boot Camp, I tested out my skills on some smaller stories at *The Virginian Pilot*, where I worked as a government reporter. I took a look at the public and private colleges that received Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits, which was primarily an exercise in cleaning up a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The federal government's data listed colleges separately under different campuses, so I spent a lot of my time running a find and replace in Excel to standardize the names.

I also helped a colleague work on salary data, which required joining tables in Microsoft Access database manager as we tried to identify city employees who had received the biggest raises.

I initially spent about an hour a week after the Boot Camp working on some sort of Excel or Access data. I also often found myself frequently turning to the Boot Camp training manual, mostly the section on joining tables and separating cell data in Excel.

This initial work helped me keep my skills up to date, so I could tackle my own data story in September. If I hadn't practiced throughout the year, I imagine I would have been *that* reporter who had to repeat the class (I think the instructors use that story to scare every CAR group).

My story on vacation and sick leave cash outs (http://bit.ly/rKZ4Tt) by local city employees started on a very different track.

I had initially asked the city of Virginia Beach for the pay that employees took home the previous year. Our paper routinely asks for base salary data, but it doesn't necessarily reflect the actual payment workers receive. There are bonuses, overtime and other supplementary income that can boost government pay.

The year-to-date earnings report came in an Excel file. As I scanned the data and sorted it by amount, I noticed that the former sheriff had received more than $42,000 in 2010. That was strange because his term had ended the previous Dec. 31.

When I called the city's human resources director about the payment, she explained that it was the sheriff's accumulated sick and vacation time payment. She also mentioned that when employees leave the city, they're given a lump-sum check for sick and vacation time.

I then realized that this was a payment that the city could isolate pretty easily, since it's a separate check from an employee's bi-monthly salary payment. So I asked for vacation and sick leave payouts for all employees for the past year and a half.

And since our coverage area includes five cities, I decided to get the information from all of them.

The results were mixed, but we fortunately didn't have to pay for any of the data. The city of Norfolk had two departments run the request, and the employees' names on the sick-leave list weren't the same as on the vacation-leave list.

The city of Chesapeake initially refused to provide me any information, arguing that under the state's Freedom of Information Act they had discretion to supply this information. The state requires governments to provide employee salary information, but Chesapeake's attorney argued that this was retiree information and FOIA allowed them a lot more discretion.

I went back and forth with city officials for several days. When I requested more aggregate information, they argued that the city's old computer system couldn't pull that data and that it would cost the paper to have an employee do the search by hand.

Chesapeake finally agreed to provide the information since April 2011 without the employee names.

I was disappointed that we were missing Chesapeake's data, but my editor and I didn't want the city's refusal to slow down the story. And the partial data that Chesapeake provided gave me a sense that their payouts weren't all that different from those of the neighboring cities.

Norfolk officials provided me with incomplete data. For example, some employees on the sick-leave list weren't on the vacation-leave list. And for weeks I had trouble understanding why the lists didn't match and learning the number of employees on one list but not the other. The city spokeswoman initially insisted it was only one or two employees, but I knew more were missing and I had to be able to show them.

I decided to create a spreadsheet to determine who might be missing. I knew this would require a join in Access, but first I needed to clean up the data in Excel. The sick-leave data had employee names all in one cell and some had middle initials. The vacation-leave list was more neatly organized with columns for first and last names. I had to make sure they were structured in the same way.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 31

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

Collected WISDOM

Staying alive (to fight another day)

BY DUANE POHLMAN

You must be ACTIVE in the definition, education and implementation of investigative reporting because you are the expert. Your mission is to define the cause and thereby, define the role in the newsroom.

In 2010, I was pondering a three-year contract extension with a great salary to continue as an investigative reporter at the ABC affiliate in Cleveland. It was not the norm. Most of my colleagues were being shown the door.

This erosion of investigative reporting, and of journalism in general, led me to the decision to turn down a rare offer to stay. I decided it was time to strike out on my own.

A year and a half later, after a disappointing move to try journalism from the outside, I am back in television at a place and in a city I ultimately picked to allow me to reinvent, as much as corporate media allows, on my terms.

Now that I am anchoring and reporting in Louisville, I can look across my career – Raleigh, Milwaukee, Seattle and Cleveland – and see, for the most part, with greater objectivity the lessons within the tumultuous land of television.

While I could list the awards I've received as proof of my abilities as a bona fide investigative journalist, the only accomplishment that matters to me at this point is to have made it this far. With that compacted chronology, I feel it is important to impart some limited wisdom on how to continue fighting the good fight, while managing to stay alive.

Know your bosses

It's plural on purpose. In television, news directors and general managers often change as much as those weather forecasts. Even as you shake hands and accept a job with a boss who is in your corner, know that another one may be rounding it sooner than you think. The cold, hard reality in television is that you get only as much time and resources as the boss allows. If the boss says he or she wants solid, long-term projects – Great! But if the current boss doesn't want anything but daily investigations (an oxymoron in most circles), then you do those – and you do them to the best of your abilities, at least until you can gain traction (advice on that below). Anywhere in between? See above.

Define investigative reporting

You'd be surprised at the way many news directors and general managers define investigative reporting. Not so long ago, an executive in a broadcasting group (who will remain nameless) told a crowd of investigative journalists that a few phone calls qualifies as an investigative report. I'm not going to argue the point here, but I think most of us agree, in most circumstances, it takes more than a few comments over the phone to qualify. Yet, increasingly, we have allowed our bosses to brand it that way and thereby allow the watering down of investigative reporting

The key to the definition is YOU! How do you define investigative journalism? Do you have a short way of wrapping the complexities of what we do? If not, you need to get it, because if you don't know, no one else will. And you'll need it to help educate your bosses each and every time a new one comes in the door. You must be ACTIVE in the definition, education and implementation of investigative reporting because you are the expert. Your mission is to define the cause and thereby, define the role in the newsroom.

Knowing when to say 'no' without saying 'no'

Often, many of us think saying "yes" is the only way to survive today. In reality, a lack of "no" will often doom investigative reporters just as easily. Let me give you an example. The news director approaches and says, "I have an idea for the May Book."(This should send shudders down your spine!) You smile and answer, "Great!" He or she then lays out a plan to do 20 investigative reports. That works out to one every weekday. Now, it may seem in your best interest to "go with the flow" and say, "Yes." But, if you are working every day leading up to the book covering daily events, it will be next-to-impossible to accomplish what your boss is asking.

The moment the plan is divulged is the time when you need to say, "That's a good idea (or a variation of that). Let me think about the best way to accomplish this." You then need to follow up. Try

to unify the pieces; scheduling time for the inevitable follow-ups; get a firm schedule of shooting, writing and editing to produce the pieces; and communicate about the goals of each piece. If you participate in the active process of formulating this strategy, you will often find that reason will prevail. Your boss may back off from the original idea or make the necessary adjustments to allow for realistic targets when confronted with the pragmatic realities. Remember, you know what it takes to investigate. It's up to you to become ACTIVE in the process. In the end, the good managers will appreciate the help in coming up with a plan that succeeds. The "yes" approach will lead to failure (and the door!).

WATCH and READ the NEWS

I am as guilty as the next person when it comes to myopia when facing the daunting challenges of investigative projects. But over the years, I have trained myself to view and read the local news while working on those projects in isolation. As journalists, we must be at least as informed as those around us. More importantly, investigative journalism should be organic, springing from the issues that arise from the news of the day. We owe it to ourselves (and our audience) to pay attention to our own product.

Keep a master list

I sometimes laugh about my early years as an investigative reporter when I would keep a "super secret" list of my stories, with codes, etc. Half my time was spent trying to figure out my own hieroglyphs! I am still protective of my list, but I now share it with my colleagues, who will often weigh in with ideas that make the projects better. I also keep a list with me, adding notes and comments as they come to me, or when the contacts call. With all the gadgets I utilize, the list kept in a Hemingway-type notebook is a bit comforting, and it doesn't pause when the boss asks for the latest updates and ideas.

Stop swinging for the long ball (every time!)

There are still some journalists gifted with natural talent and nurtured by a system and managers that allow them to produce huge investigative projects that win Peabody awards. I am not in that category. I haven't had the luxury of exclusively producing long-form pieces in several years. Instead, I uncover issues daily or weekly, in addition to producing projects. While there are clear drawbacks, it has taught me a valuable lesson. Good journalism is not measured in the amount of time it takes to produce. The same is true for our projects. Not every investigation is an award-winner. Pick and choose which projects are worth the investment of huge time, and reserve that time for them. The other projects should still shine, but they will often fall flat the more you try to coax something out of them that simply isn't there. Doubles and triples still help win games. Be smart enough to swing for the fence when you get the right pitch!

Be a part of the newsroom

Investigative reporters and producers know a golden rule. If you speak up, you'll often be assigned. That is very true. But, if you don't speak up, it will be worse. You'll be forgotten. Try to integrate yourself into the newsroom. Be part of the culture. Help your colleagues with their projects. Add value. There is nothing worse than becoming irrelevant in today's media.

I wish each of you who do this honorable work the very best in your efforts not only to survive, but thrive!

Duane Pohlman is an anchor/investigative reporter at WLKY-TV, Louisville, Ky. You can reach him at duanespohlman@me.com.

UPLINK

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 29

I wasted a lot of time trying to separate the sick-leave names using the "TRIM()" function. But our paper's data editor pointed me to the "text-to-columns" function in Excel that helped me pull apart the names more easily and quickly. Next time, I'm trying that first.

Then I imported the sick-leave and vacation-leave data into Access. I joined them by the names and asked the program to show me all names in the sick-leave spreadsheet that didn't appear on the vacation-leave spreadsheet. This is a really nifty and helpful feature in Access that helps answer a sometimes-critical question: What records are missing from the join?

I did this in the query design view by right-clicking on the line that connects the joined fields in the two tables. Right-click on the highlighted line and it opens up a "Join Properties" option. I chose to display all of the records from the sick-leave table and only those that matched from the vacation-leave table. That give me 114 hits.

I sent that list to Norfolk officials and asked for an explanation.

Having something in hand to show officials the discrepancies in their data really helped. Within a few days, city officials sent me explanations of why the two lists were different. In some cases employees had resigned before 2010, but started drawing vacation or sick leave only when they retired. In other cases, the city had just left them off the list.

Based on the data, we were able to report the following:

Since January 2010, South Hampton Roads cities collectively made more than $7.7 million in such payments to departing employees, mostly for unused vacation and sick time.

Nearly a quarter of Virginia Beach's 675 departing employees walked away with $10,000 or more in unused leave time.

In the other cities, at least 108 workers got checks of more than $10,000 in unused leave time. The employees who retired also received taxpayer-funded pensions.

The payouts cost Suffolk, with a workforce of about 1,400 people, $456,629. Virginia Beach, which employs nearly 5,500 people, paid out nearly $3.9 million.

And that sheriff who first caught my eye – he received one of the highest payouts and ended up being the lede of the story. He wasn't alone though. A former city manager was scheduled to receive a payout of more than $80,300.

The story generated plenty of comments, a column and an editorial. And separately, state officials are also considering changing their employee-leave policies.

The training I received at Boot Camp definitely provided me with a good foundation. But as I work on these data stories, I'm also surprised by how much I don't know and still need to learn.

Is there a Boot Camp Part 2?

Deirdre Fernandes was a city hall reporter for The Virginian-Pilot *and is now a reporter for* The Boston Globe. *She may be reached at dfernandes_19@yahoo.com.*

The payouts cost Suffolk, with a workforce of about 1,400 people, $456,629. Virginia Beach, which employs nearly 5,500 people, paid out nearly $3.9 million.

GLOBAL FOI

AP tests laws in 105 countries

By Martha Mendoza
The Associated Press

The director of anti-terrorism, the spokesman of the judiciary and the police spokesman all said they had no figures, but our stringer found the data with a court clerk.

My freedom of information lesson at The Associated Press Mexico City bureau was not going well.

Everyone kept inexplicably cracking up.

MISTAKE #1. It ends up that "FOIA" sounds remarkably close to a vulgar f-word in Spanish.

Also, because Mexico actually has a very effective freedom of information law, I was neither impressing nor informing anyone with my high-minded lecture.

Well, what about other countries? I wondered.

A quick count found 105 countries with legal promises of transparency, either FOI laws or constitutional provisions, most introduced in the past five or six years. Transparency is now being tied to foreign aid, and there are strong grassroots movements, boosted by WikiLeaks revelations, pressing for it as well. By the end of 2010, governments had made access to information a legal right for 85 percent of people in the world.

"So … let's hold them accountable!" I pitched to my editors.

It was a wild idea, the first worldwide test of FOI. But AP is a strong advocate for freedom of information, and its reporters in the U.S. routinely use right-to-know laws. With professional journalists all around the world, we were perfectly positioned to pull this off.

John Daniszewski, AP's vice president and senior managing editor for international news, was enthusiastic, with consummately cheerful International Enterprise Editor Mary Rajkumar taking on the heavy lifting.

She had no clue.

I had no clue.

Here are the records The Associated Press requested:

1. Any documents, memos, reports or other records that would show how many people had been arrested and how many convicted each year for the past 10 years under anti-terrorism laws.

2. Any documents, memos, reports or other records that would show how many people had been detained without arrest each year for the past 10 years for ties to terrorism.

3. Any documents, memos, reports or other records that would show the current status of people convicted and the sections and subsections of crime under which they had been convicted under antiterrorism laws during the past 10 years.

4. Any documents, memos, reports or other records that would show the nationality of those arrested and convicted under anti-terrorism laws during the past 10 years.

5. Any documents, memos, reports or other records that would show the names, dates and circumstances of people arrested under anti-terrorism laws for the past 10 years.

6. Any audits, surveys or studies of anti-terrorism published in the last 10 years.

What happened next was overwhelming, exhilarating and in the end extremely rewarding. It was more time-consuming and complicated than we had anticipated, eventually involving more than 140 AP journalists, some for weeks at a time. Don't try this alone.

We started by brainstorming: What to request? We conferred with regional editors, who turned to reporters around the world. I also grilled everyone from my running partner and my kids to university professors and policy makers in medicine, criminal justice and environmental issues.

MISTAKE #2: If I had spent more time brainstorming, our questions would have been more streamlined and clear. I set up one-time chats with experts, where I explained what we were doing in an email and then asked them if they had any ideas. In hindsight, I should have followed up a week later, sharing our ideas and allowing theirs to percolate.

Within a few weeks we had an aha moment. The 10-year anniversary of 9/11 was approaching. Why not take the first look at the impact of the global war on terror? Until then, no one had tracked how many people had been arrested – and how many convicted – as terrorists in the past decade, when almost every country had adopted terrorism legislation.

We framed our questions, consulting with FOI experts and researchers who had written extensively on government transparency. Our greatest asset was AP's own FOI lawyer, Karen Kaiser, with whom we narrowed down exactly what to ask for, troubleshooting for possible pitfalls that could result in rejections or stonewalling.

Regional editors in London, Cairo, Bangkok and Mexico City identified country-by-country which of AP's 3,000 reporters would work with us. We asked these reporters to describe how to file a FOI request in their countries and to figure out which agencies would have information and data about terrorism prosecutions. This was more than just prep work: in the end, we were able to publish country-by-country guides on how to file FOI requests.

Our News Information Research Center built a Sharepoint site where we listed countries, editors, reporters, the year FOI was adopted, links to laws and more details. (Sharepoint is great software for collaborating with colleagues on projects. It creates a password-protected website where all members can post and manage documents, add to spreadsheets and share information.) This proved to be invaluable as a central place for gathering all information and building our spreadsheets.

MISTAKE #3. I gave reporters the option of entering their information in Sharepoint or sending me the information. Unfamiliar with the software, incredibly busy with breaking news and in some cases unsteady with English, most colleagues opted to send everything straight to me. I missed a teaching opportunity and bogged myself down with uploading data.

During the last week of January, AP reporters around the world requested answers to the same six questions in 105 countries and the European Union. We hand-delivered letters in Liberia, logged into a website in Mexico, picked up the phone in Portugal and sent a certified letter in Japan. A few hiccups: Some countries require requesters first to try to get the information without a legal FOI request, and some countries require requesters to be citizens.

MISTAKE #4. In some countries, the requests went to just one agency; in others they went to more than six. Our spreadsheet didn't break down a country agency by agency, so if one agency responded but others didn't, a country was still marked as "responsive."

With FOIs filed, we began looking for people behind the numbers. But the data from the FOI responses was arriving in a trickle. Surprisingly, the quickest and most responsive governments tended to be in smaller, less-developed countries like Guatemala and Georgia. In one country after another, officials begged off, saying there was no way to provide the information we sought. But AP reporters kept pressing. In Uganda, for example, the director of anti-terrorism, the spokesman of the judiciary and the police spokesman all said they had no figures, but our stringer found the data with a court clerk in Kampala. In Pakistan, a police inspector earning his doctorate in criminal justice pointed me to the data.

To fill in the blanks, we interviewed convicted terrorists, victims and prosecutors. I surveyed local crime data and government repositories and dug through reports at the U.N. and U.S. State Department. The Statistical Assessment Service at George Mason University (http://stats.org) reviewed our data and gave advice about how to analyze, compare, spot trends and avoid misinterpreting the numbers.

We built several databases. One of them showed country-by-country how many people had been arrested and how many convicted of terrorism year by year. A second database focused on how many days it took for responses and in what category the responses fit (i.e. useful, non-responsive, etc.). Other columns included how many days each country allowed for a response and how late each country was. We would eventually publish all of this on DocumentCloud.

MISTAKE #5. Many countries responded with an acknowledgement of receipt of our questions and nothing more. I was categorizing these countries in a self-made methodology that didn't allow for this response. It turned out this wheel had been invented: Patrice McDermott, director of OpenTheGovernment.org, shared the standardized response categories used by most FOI researchers, and we shifted ours to those.

On Sept. 4, 2011, we published the first part, "Convicted for Terror." We reported that in the first tally of global terror prosecutions ever done, at least 35,000 people had been convicted and almost 120,000 arrested as terrorists over the preceding decade. And while some had bombed hotels or blew up buses, others had been thrown into jail for waving a sign or blogging about a protest.

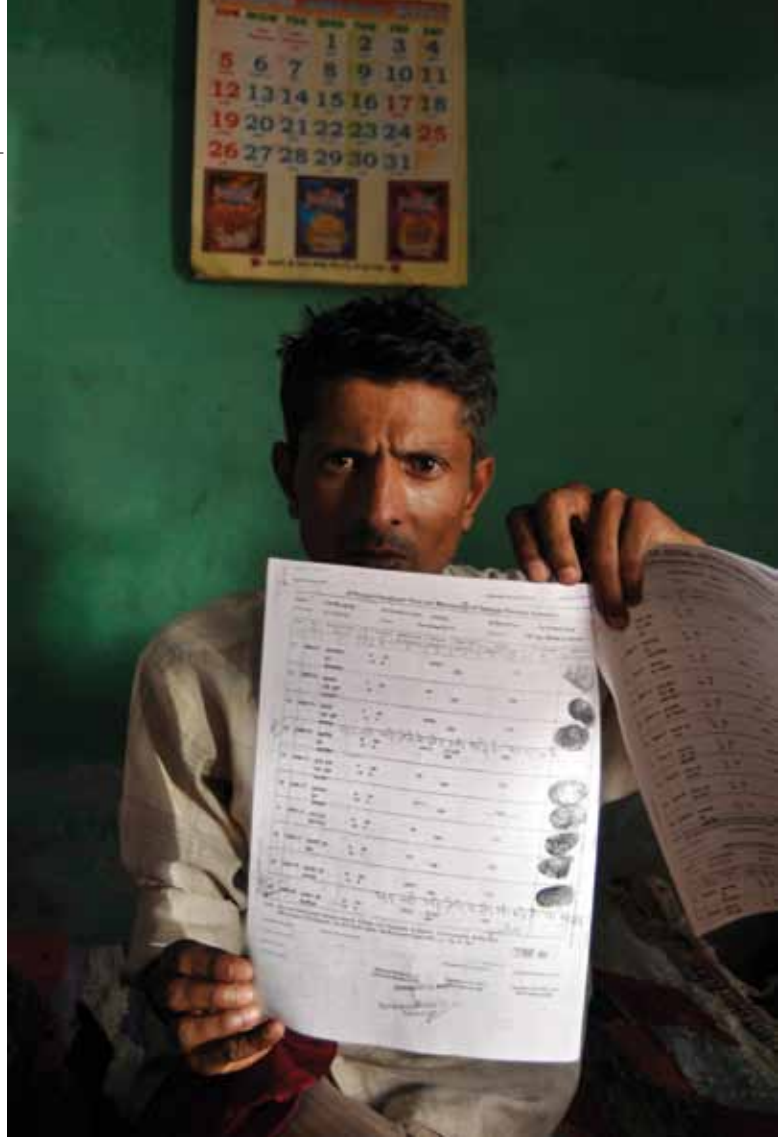
Two months later we published "Access Denied," in which we reported that in the first worldwide test of freedom of information laws, we found that more than half the countries with such laws do not follow them. New democracies are better at responding than older ones – including the United States, which responded late and only partially.

MISTAKE #6. We didn't brand the package well enough at first. Part one went out with about a dozen sidebars but no indication to readers that they had anything to do with each other. When part two was published two months later, we finally put them all in one place.

There were several unusual aspects to this project. For the first time, AP made a Facebook page (http://on.fb.me/rVJIi6) for the project, which put everything in one place – stories, interactives, photos, video and more. We also made every document from every country available on DocumentCloud, along with our request letters, spreadsheets and methodology.

We compiled the first centralized website for people around the world to find a link to their own FOI legislation (http://apne.ws/s4CLOG), including an explanation of how to file a request. And we invited readers to join in the conversation by suggesting what the AP might want to request next via FOI in any country.

Gurinder Osan | Associated Press



Satbir Sharma holds up a government Right to Information response regarding an embezzlement scheme in his village, Chandrawal, India. The Sharmas say that his wife was killed and his father's leg broken after they filed a corruption case.

The projects ran on dozens of front pages and were featured on thousands of websites. We had thousands of responses to the stories online.

The British House of Commons Library made an urgent request for the entire terrorism package, saying AP's decision to post all its data "has been very helpful." The State Department and the U.N. also requested all of the material.

Henri-Christin Longendja, who directs Congo's Committee for Human Rights and Development, said AP's findings were helping his campaign to push parliament to vote for open government: "This is what we need to help."

In the end, well … actually, we've decided to keep going. So many great suggestions came to our Facebook site that we're going ahead and making requests on behalf of those readers. We're testing Nigeria's new law, as suggested. And we're even looking at some of the slightly offbeat suggestions, like the one from a reader who asked us to find out what *really* happened to Marilyn Monroe.

We're going for it, appealing the exemptions on the FBI's heavily redacted file to get to the bottom of the Marilyn Monroe mystery. What the FOIA!

Martha Mendoza is a national writer for The Associated Press.

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 "Using documents to cover religious organizations"

Covering religious organizations can be difficult because it can be tough to get public documents. *Kansas City Star* reporter Judy Thomas spoke at an IRE training session for McClatchy journalists and offered the following tips:

- Get to know your subjects inside out. Subscribe to newsletters, magazines and other publications of the organizations you cover. Get a flow chart of the organization, learn the chain of command, become familiar with the acronyms.
- While churches typically don't have to file IRS 990 forms, it's worth checking because some do so voluntarily. Guidestar.org is a good place to check). Court records can provide a good source of financial documents, so check state and federal court records, including bankruptcies.
- Explore the organization's website. For one project Thomas conducted, she was able to search an online sermon archive that went back several years.
- Track social media, both to look for sources and to keep current on issues.

From "Behind the Story: Tracking problem police officers in Florida" By Coulter Jones

It was an unbelievable record for anyone, let alone a public employee. *The Sarasota Herald-Tribune* reported about one Opa-Locka, Fla., officer:

"Fired five times and arrested three, he was charged with stealing a car, trying to board an airplane with a loaded gun and driving with a suspended license.… (He) split a man's lip with a head butt. He opened another man's head with a leg sweep and takedown. He spit in the face of a drunken, stumbling arrestee. One time, he smacked a juvenile so hard the boy's face was red and swollen the next day."

Still, the officer kept his badge.

The story led off "Unfit for Duty," a nine-part series, reported by investigations editor Matthew Doig and police reporter Anthony Cormier. The series chronicled how law enforcement agencies throughout the state continued to employ officers with severe misconduct charges. The two did dozens of interviews and gathered more than 12,000 pages of documents. The first step in their reporting was to analyze Florida's police misconduct database, which the state keeps in a Microsoft Access database. Doig and Cormier got the data through a public records request. They weren't charged for the data, and Doig called it "some of the cleanest data" he had ever worked with. They requested the data twice, first in March when their reporting started, and again shortly before publication, to have the most up-to-date information in the newspaper's searchable online database.

Doig explained during an interview with IRE the thinking behind the series and the techniques he and Cormier used to report it.

IRE: Why did you do this series?

Doig: My colleague Anthony Cormier had gotten the disciplinary data before and wanted to do a story on it, but he didn't have time then to tackle it. Anthony is a beat reporter covering cops. He requested the data again in March when we decided to look in to it. He had basically the holy grail of data – the state's disciplinary data, which has every officer who had ever got in trouble in the state, what they were accused of and what happened.

We did this story the way we like to do stories. We tried to take on a complex issue and look at the problem as a whole and what's causing it.

IRE: How long did you work on this series?

Doig: It was pretty much eight straight months of work. He may have had some bylines from some shootings and I had some bank stories that I worked on, but 90-to-95 percent of the time we were working on this… It was probably two solid months of public records requests, data and document work.

I did most of the data work at first. (Cormier) didn't have experience working with databases. He went to (the 2011 IRE Conference in) Orlando last year, and I remember running into him in a hallway and he said, "I just learned Access. I'm dangerous now."

IRE: When did you realize you had the story?

Doig: We knew from the get-go it was going to be big. The bosses aren't inclined to give us eight months to work on a project if it's going to be one 20-inch story. It was probably mid-October or so after we had done all of our public records requests that we wrote up what the budget was going to look like. We followed that pretty closely. There were some pieces that we thought were going to be sidebars that turned out to be full stories. The union story wasn't even on the budget. That turned into a pretty key piece of the series.

IRE: How did that happen?

Doig: We like to do some initial interviews at the beginning of an investigation like this. We're pretty ignorant of the system at the time and we like to get some initial feedback. When we're doing that next round of interviews we're as knowledgeable of the system as some of our sources. Doing those interviews we started asking questions, "Why is this happening? Why is that happening?" We were hearing more and more that the process was being taken over by the powerful law enforcement unions.

Read The Sarasota Tribune *series at http://bit.ly/tCmJD6.*

From "Behind the Story: Doctors caught cheating on the way to the top" By Johanna Somers

Memorizing test questions and passing them on to future test takers is considered cheating by most people. However, for many radiologists attempting to become board certified, it is simply a technique used to study. CNN's "Exclusive: Doctors cheated on exams" took a close look:

"From my understanding, I would say nationwide from my friends across the country who are all in the same stages of training throughout the years, everyone gets a group," said Dr. John Yoo, a practicing radiologist. "People decided beforehand what sections I will focus on, in terms of trying to recall those questions and answers. And then immediately after the examination, the residents get together and try to put these down onto paper or word processor to be able to share it with the classes coming behind you."

While Yoo and many others see "recalls" as study guides, Dr. Matthew Webb, the doctor who tipped off CNN, and Dr. Gary Becker, executive director of the American Board of Radiology, do not.

"We would call it cheating, and our exam security policy would call it cheating," Becker told CNN.

Scott Zamost, senior investigative producer for CNN, discussed how one whistleblower led to CNN's report, a nationwide call for the practice to stop and a follow-up story on cheating dermatologists in an IRE "Behind the Story" Q&A:

IRE: How did you first come across this story?

Zamost: We were contacted by Dr. Matthew Webb about the use of "recalls" at a military radiology program in San Antonio. My first reaction was that this was something that I had never heard before, so I was immediately intrigued by the potential story. Initially, it was a story about possible cheating at a well-known military program, because we didn't know whether the practice was going on anywhere else.

IRE: Did I understand correctly that Dr. Matthew Webb was terminated from his job before he went to CNN and spoke up about the recalls? Was Webb's credibility ever an issue for you?

Zamost: As with all whistleblowers, one of my first questions is "Why are you speaking out now – what's your motivation?" Dr. Webb was candid – he had been fired from the radiology program and he was trying to get reinstated. He thought the recalls were cheating, but obviously also was not happy about what had happened to him.

As we began investigating, we asked him for all the paperwork about his case, since the military would not be permitted to release it for privacy reasons. He didn't hold back, even if the documents did not paint him in a favorable light.

At the same time, we began the process of verifying his allegations about the "recalls," and every one of them checked out. He did not exaggerate or mislead us – his information was simply correct. It's just that he strongly considered the practice cheating, while the vast majority of radiology residents did not.

When we interviewed Dr. Gary Becker, executive director of the American Board of Dermatology, he said he believed this was cheating and agreed with Webb that it would be "despicable" if radiologists gained their board certification that way without the proper knowledge. To us, this further verified Webb's claims and bolstered his credibility.

IRE: Who was the hardest person to get on camera or on the record? Did you use some of the techniques that you mentioned using in an FBI story at a previous IRE conference?

Zamost: It took several weeks for Dr. Becker to agree to speak to us. As I do with all potential interview subjects, I told his staff what we were interested in discussing and that it was important to get their message out to the public. The radiology board had already taken a position in the radiology community that the use of the recalls was unprofessional and illegal, but Becker had not specifically used the word "cheating" to directly describe the practice.

I think being upfront from the beginning goes a long way in securing a difficult interview. For the FBI misconduct investigation, it was a process that took several months before the agency would agree to provide a top FBI official to go on camera. In this case, I pressed the military in a lengthy phone conversation to talk to us on camera. I had been making a lot of phone calls to radiology residents, and those conversations had gotten back to the program's leaders as well as the public affairs office. By the time I called for comment, they had already prepared a statement and set up a phone interview with the program director, who was forthcoming about the use of recalls. But despite efforts to go beyond that conversation and several follow-up statements, the military would not go on camera for this story.

See the CNN story at http://bit.ly/zNI1Is.

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