



When Nerds and Words Collide

Reflections on the Development of Computer Assisted Reporting

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The Myth of the Machine

By Michael J. Berens

It was the darkest of nights in a windowless room when the source, perched on my desk, quietly delivered a stunning revelation: City police officers owned crack houses. Years later, the source imparted another gem: A serial killer was trolling truck stops in five states for female victims. Most recently, and still going strong after a facelift, my confidant divulged that Chicago nursing homes were secret dumping grounds for violent state psychiatric patients.

For the last decade, there has been no other exhilarating and exasperating source as my computer, a modern-day Siren whose seductive call leads to journalistic ecstasy – or certain ruin for the unwary.

We call it computer assisted reporting, CAR for short. There are impressive self-help books and manuals wrapped with sample disks, training classes touting chi squares to regression analysis, self-described gurus who've become data gods, and reporters who possess more electronic equipment than common sense. Obscured behind the techno-babble is a simple truth: The best computer assisted reporting is born from the heart, not the machine.

Critics often charge that CAR represents a barrier to good storytelling. There are no shortages of examples to confirm this fear. Of course, the telephone has been used for bad stories, too; skeptics are not shunning *that* journalism tool. The best computer assisted reporting is invisible within the narrative, a hidden backbone that authoritatively supports the story. A random sample of this country's best journalism will, more often than not, reveal the role of computer assisted research.

It helps to envision the computer as a person, someone with frailties and faults, a woefully naïve child who only repeats what it has been told, but possessing an innocence that can spot simple truths. Stories are unlocked by penetrating questions, not by the capacity of the Pentium chip. Vision, intuition, and imagination should combine bits and bytes into words that cause the reader to bolt into anger or shed a tear.

More than a decade ago, I owned nothing more than a boxy Macintosh Plus and a piece of accounting software, Microsoft Excel. The resulting stories still stand tall today. Vice squad officers who got drunk on duty, juvenile prisoners raped by state guards, police informants who framed innocent citizens – these stories resulted from filling in blanks of little Excel squares, resembling blank graph paper on the screen. It was a valuable lesson: Start simple.

All I had to do was fill in the blanks. This was something I could understand. And the computer could reorganize the information in ways that seemed, well, magical. I would stare at the information for hours. I looked for patterns and anomalies, sorting and re-sorting to my every whim. Later came the realization that I was interviewing the data just as I would any other source.

Do most nursing homes mix young psychiatric patients with elderly residents? Is it normal for police cruisers to crash in half



Michael J. Berens is a project reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*. He has been a frequent speaker and trainer for IRE. Computer assisted projects include a secretive state plan to warehouse young psychiatric patients in geriatric nursing homes; a possible serial killer trolling truck stops nationally; the deadly toll of police chases and federal government underreporting; and cops who owned crack houses.

of all high-speed pursuits? How many fugitives are secretly released because police don't want to pay for extradition?

Following analysis of a court database, I determined that 90 percent of domestic violence cases were eventually dismissed. Some might jump at this lead, trumpet the computer findings, snag a few prosecutor quotes, touch base with victim advocates, and mix it all into an instant story. This would be a CAR failure.

Why were there so many dismissals? Again, ask the computer for clues. Dismissals were typically granted during arraignment hearings, computer analysis showed. Arraignment hearings are held with 24 hours of the crime. What the heck was going on? A visit to the hearings provided the answers: Cases were automatically dismissed if victims could not make it to the hearing, even if they had no transportation or had been hospitalized just hours before. If victims did show, they were required to stand just feet away from their attacker, an intimidating requirement for some women who fled in tears. Some male judges unmercifully grilled female victims who asked for protection orders. Traditional reporting skills still create the outer covering, the contour, and the texture. The resulting human stories were a CAR success.

The myth of the machine hit home in the early 1990s when a Cable News Network crew visited the newsroom to film a segment on how I documented the existence of a possible serial killer. Using a spreadsheet program, I tracked the unsolved deaths of women whose bodies were found along highways. The computer was a significant tool, but breakthroughs occurred through interviews and leaked law enforcement documents.

"How did you do the story?" the producer asked. My answers stressed old-fashioned legwork coupled with the power of the computer. My answer was unsatisfactory. Surely I discovered some sort of technological alchemy; perhaps a complex mathematical formula was employed, no? The producer was sure that I was trying to be modest. "Come on," she said. "You can tell us how you really did it."

Later, the FBI invited me to Quantico, Va., to explain how my trusty Macintosh outmatched the bureau's mainframes, which were programmed to spot pattern crimes. It's not the size of the computer, but the human behind it that matters most, I told a crowd of homicide detectives. "Sounds like it was blind luck," one agent quipped.

Indeed, luck is part of the quotient. For example, I computerized search warrants on a spreadsheet to analyze the success of the crack war. One of the fields – reluctantly included following an editor's suggestion – designated the time and day of the raid. I

was looking for corruption, not a feature story. But the computer findings surprised us: No raids were ever conducted on a weekend. My partner and I ran out to some crack neighborhoods. One dealer smiled as he told us, "Sure, we know about that. That's why we are open only on weekends."

To this day, I adhere to three basic philosophies:

- Begin small.
- Think simple.
- No detail is unimportant.

It's not necessary to learn how to write programming language. Learn what is necessary to accomplish the job. The computer should serve you. With each story comes more skill. Before you know it, you'll find yourself knee-high in magnetic tapes and relational database programs.

Some industry observers say that journalists have arrived at a

technological crossroad. The advent of the Internet has dramatically altered how we accumulate information, and given rise to reader expectations. We already have multimedia newsrooms as print reporters double as television hosts, and assist in web page design. The birth of virtual reality will further transform the journalistic landscape.

Sadly, newsrooms have been slow to react. And the majority of reporters remain modern-day illiterates – unable to read a world of computerized information. Newsroom training remains one of the most inexcusable deficiencies. For most, the crossroads are still many miles away.

The secret is not to follow the machine. Instead, follow your passion for the story; use the computer to track your ideas and test those hunches. When that happens, you will have a lifetime source like no other.