

Show-Me Institute Shows 'Em How to Get the Facts

By Eric Dixon

Journalistic accuracy is invaluable—and its value is nonpartisan. Anybody who values truth, oversight, and accountability for those who hold the public's trust is well-served by the presence of objective, data-driven reporting in the mainstream media, no matter their political leanings. The Heritage Foundation has been holding a series of Computer-Aided Research and Reporting (CARR) boot camps for years to provide Washington, D.C., journalists with the essential statistical skills they need. In October, the Show-Me Institute, a free market think tank based in Missouri, brought Heritage's CARR program to the Midwest.

The impulse to support analytical, fact-based journalism led Mark Tapscott to start the CARR program with The Heritage Foundation's Center for Media and Public Policy in 1999. From the start, Tapscott, who is now the editorial page editor for the *Washington Examiner*, worked closely with Bill Beach, director of Heritage's Center for Data Analysis, to ensure the program would be about number crunching rather than ideology. As he wrote on his "Copy Desk" blog almost two years

ago, "There is no 'conservative way' or 'liberal way' to teach journalists how to use an Excel spreadsheet to analyze a county government's budget. Either you know how to use Excel or you don't. So I am eager to recruit statistical experts from throughout the think tank community because so many of them have skills that are desperately needed by journalists and bloggers."

In recent years, this inclusiveness has led to the involvement of Greg Elin, chief data architect for the Sunlight Foundation, an organization dedicated to government transparency and open records. Although Elin would undoubtedly find himself on the opposing side of policy discussions he might have with Heritage staffers, his enthusiastic presence at the CARR boot camps demonstrates how a dedication to objectivity and data transcends personal political inclinations. Tapscott, Beach, and Elin were also joined in the Missouri CARR seminars by Robert Bluey, who now heads up the Center for Media and Public Policy at Heritage.

The CARR boot camps were brought into





Top: Veteran newspaperman Mark Tapscott helps veteran reporters become better reporters. Tapscott is the editorial page editor of the Washington Examiner. He started the Computer-Aided Research and Reporting boot camps in 1999 while at The Heritage Foundation.

Bottom: Mark Tapscott and Bill Beach instruct reporters on the finer points of gathering and analyzing data. Beach is the director of The Heritage Foundation's Center for Data Analysis.

Missouri by Jason Hannasch, vice president of the Show-Me Institute. He met Mark Tapscott in 2006 at a Washington, D.C., networking event sponsored by the State Policy Network, and decided then that CARR would be an extraordinarily valuable opportunity for Missouri journalists. Not only would it help impart essential computer-based reporting skills to members of Missouri's fourth estate, but it would also demonstrate the Show-Me

Institute's commitment to objective analysis. Hannasch sent me, the Show-Me Institute's editor, to attend one of the D.C.-based CARR boot camps at the National Press Club in July, to take a look at the program in person and decide whether it was feasible to host a version in Missouri.

Although nailing down a firm date with the D.C.-based instructors was relatively easy, the real trick was finding a way to reach out to

Missouri journalists, to get them involved, and to find locations and equipment suitable for the workshops. This is where Don Hicks, president of the Missouri Broadcasters Association, worked his magic. He earned a huge amount of gratitude not only for organizing publicity for the program among Missouri's broadcast journalists but also for finding space and facilities at the University of Missouri-Kansas City and the University of Missouri-St. Louis—and both schools were unfailingly generous hosts. Hicks also attended both daylong sessions, along with David Stokes, a privatization policy analyst with the Show-Me Institute, and myself.

Not only is CARR incredibly valuable—for younger newcomers to journalism and old hands alike—but, in a way, bringing this program to Missouri is like bringing it home. The textbook given out during the training sessions was written by Brant Houston of the University of Missouri-Columbia, who is also the acting executive director of Investigative Editors and Reporters, Inc. His book provides those who attended the workshop with a detailed reminder of the techniques they learned—how to use computers in researching articles, analyzing databases and spreadsheets, checking claims of fact, and using statistical methods appropriately.

Journalists who've recently finished their schooling aren't always prepared for the role computers will play in their investigative reporting efforts, and those who have already had long careers as reporters or editors don't often have a chance to keep up with the cutting edge of technology. Mark Tapscott's portion of the program focused on how to use basic spreadsheet tools to turn a collection of numbers into meaningful information. He not only provided practical, hands-on training, but also spurred participants to think about data—how it can be interpreted in different ways, and when each of those ways might be useful to a journalist.

Bill Beach provided a more in-depth look at

the use and misuse of statistics. Numbers can be displayed in many ways, many of which are misleading. He demonstrated how slight changes in the presentation of data can change the way it's interpreted, and highlighted some fundamental rules for creating accurate tables, graphs, and figures. Beach also took participants on a tour of some of the most useful places on the Internet for finding data. Most of it is just sitting there, waiting for somebody to analyze it—but you have to know how to find it first.

One of the most dynamic aspects of CARR training is Greg Elin's presentation of all the new and varied ways the Internet allows information to be gathered and used in ways unimaginable only a few years earlier. Online technology is changing so rapidly, and spawning so many new applications that build and feed off of each other, that Elin was able to use concrete, hands-on examples of technology that was brand new only the week before. As journalists see the news-gathering models of the 20th century gradually give way to a world of plentiful, almost instantaneous information, it's critical that they have the tools to sift through all the detritus in useful, innovative ways.

Everybody involved in the Missouri CARR seminars found them to be unqualified successes. According to Don Hicks, "It was the best news seminar that we've ever offered, in the 13 years that I've been with the association, in terms of usable information for the participants. I can't say enough good things about it. It was great." And Hicks, along with the Show-Me Institute, hopes to continue bringing CARR to Missouri well into the future.

Mr. Dixon is editor at the Show-Me Institute. He has also been an editor for U.S. Term Limits, Liberty magazine, and the Idaho Press-Tribune. For more information about the Computer-Aided Research and Reporting program, go to www.heritage.org/press/carr/index.cfm.