

Spot News

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Gather, all ye elves. . . it's party time



ETSPJ's holiday party will be at the Cherokee Bluff clubhouse again this year. Plan to arrive between 6 :00 and 6:30 p.m., on Thursday, Dec. 9. We'll begin with a social hour, which will be followed by buffet and gift exchange.

Please bring a covered dish for the buffet. Let Sally Guthrie (sallyguthrie@mindspring.com) know by Dec. 7 that you are planning to attend and what you wish to bring. We have to turn your name in to the guard at the Cherokee Bluff gatehouse, and we don't want to end up with too many tofu salads.

We will have the popular, crazy "Chinese" gift exchange. Members and guests who wish to participate should bring a wrapped gift costing approximately \$10. Some are gag gifts; some are nice gifts. We will trade to see who gets the goodies and who gets the not so goodies.

Instead of collecting toys, we ask members to contribute to the scholarship endowment fund. You can, if you wish to donate, place your money in an envelope.

In advance, we wish to thank Georgiana Vines and John Fox for making arrangements to hold the party at their clubhouse.

Be prepared: GPC deadline comes early this year

From Michele Silva, GPC chair

Journalists, photogs and artists, take note. SPJ's Golden Press Card Awards deadline for entries is sooner than later this year. We are moving it up to Feb. 15. That means all of your entries must be postmarked or hand delivered to the UT College of Communication with your CHECK for payment by that date. So, start thinking about getting those tapes and newspapers together. We will send the call for entries around the first of the year.

Stay tuned for more info, including a mailing address and the date and time for the awards ceremony.

Ayo gives lesson in computer-assisted reporting

by James Fields

Federal and state statutes have long affirmed public access to government data and records — a right used in large part by journalists, lawyers and researchers. But isolating and retrieving relevant information was a laborious task until much of the data was stored in electronic database files accessible from a distance via modem and computers.

Techniques for accessing and augmenting such database information were presented by Laura Ayo to ETSPJ members and guests at a professional development program on Nov. 17 at the Knoxville News Sentinel.

Ayo, a News Sentinel journalist specializing in computer-assisted reporting, described three source models: standard Web sites, often known and accessed by the public; agency databases, which can be mined and manipulated by trained researchers; and in-house databases constructed by newsroom staffers using disparate sources.

Standard Web sites, usually augmenting data with narrative, are numerous, and they provide members of the public with a review on many topics. Some look like electronic newspapers. The URL for such a Web site can likely be found with a simple inquiry to a search engine such as Google.

Some databases are proprietary, requiring payment for use. Free public information is provided by others maintained by federal, state, and local government agencies. There are many others that advertise products, promote ideas and create Web-based communities.

Ayo focused primarily on government agency databases whose raw data can be manipulated for study by a skilled researcher to highlight trends. But doing so can require seeking codes to identify the meaning of agency abbreviations.



The News Sentinel's Laura Ayo uses her trusty computer to explore databases.

The News Sentinel had contacted the state before the release of annual Tennessee State educational achievement data to get the data in spreadsheet format, as well as a list of codes to explain abbreviations. For example, *THQ* in an array of Tennessee state educational achievement data signified "highly qualified teachers."

Ayo used a desktop projector to show an enlarged series of computer screens providing examples of her Excel techniques for extracting specific rows and columns of spreadsheet data to provide insight on educational achievements. A pertinent question might be: Did our district student achievement go up or down or remain the same?

Ayo and her newspaper associates were able to identify details of particular interest to News Sentinel readers. For example, high attainments in a nearby school

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ETSPJ members tell students about foreign experiences

Note: Several ETSPJ members with foreign journalism experience spoke to the UT SPJ student chapter. Gabriel Garcia, who wrote the following story for Spot News, is academics editor of the UT Daily Beacon.

by Gabriel Garcia

The foreign exchange program, “Europe and the World,” allows aspiring foreign correspondents to build practical experience in reporting overseas and credentials for prestigious internships and employment, according to two members of a panel of four journalists at a meeting of the Society of Professional Journalists’ University of Tennessee chapter Nov. 18.

The exchange program lasts two semesters and is run entirely in English. The first semester takes place in Holland, where students get “a strong dose of European politics,” James Crook, interim director of the School of Journalism and Electronic Media, said.

The semester in Holland counts for the equivalent of four courses in the UT journalism major, according to Crook.

The second semester starts in Denmark, where the students are assigned to piece together a magazine. The students are divided into separate teams and travel anywhere in Europe over a period of two weeks to search for story ideas for the magazine. The total amount of

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Computer-assisted reporting

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district (Alcoa) emerged from a review of the state’s voluminous data. Interestingly, districts with more highly qualified teachers did not necessarily produce more student achievement than districts with fewer of that THQ group — and vice versa.

Localizing national stories is a regular task in newsrooms; doing so is made easier with database sources. For example, the Associated Press “War Casualty Database,” updated daily, was used by the News Sentinel to identify Tennessee casualties in Iraq by their hometown, rank, age, race, and service branch.

Making daily newsroom deadlines is helped by accessing information in databases available online. But Ayo emphasized the need to “clean up inconsistencies” in such available data.

Investigative reporting and complex issues are aided by media creating their own databases that combine electronically stored information with details derived from paper documents. Ayo said that she and her associates check to see what’s out there; they have then spent long days building and updating specialized databases for future reporting on special assignments.

She mentioned local database sources such as Campaign Finances, County Voter Registration Roll, Building Permits, Business Licenses Granted, Real Estate Transfers and local Property Assessments and Vendors

Web sites referenced by Ayo

<http://www.waybackmachine.org/>

<http://www.guidestar.org>

<http://www.whois.net/>

<http://www.kgis.org/>

<http://www.state.tn.us/cgi-bin/commerce/roster2.pl>

https://www.tennesseeanytime.org/foil/foil_index.jsp

<http://www.census.gov>

Doing Business with the County. Useful information can also be derived from federal databases such as crime reports at <http://www.fbi.gov/ucr/ucr.htm>

The newspaper’s own databases can be constructed by importing information existing in spreadsheet, text or comma-delimited form. But Ayo emphasized she would rather avoid portable document format (PDF), which does not permit cut and paste techniques for transferring portions.

Techniques can be learned in locally available short courses, said Ayo, giving, for example, the University of Tennessee’s one-day course in using Excel. Her intensive presentation, attended by 31 persons, required only 75 minutes.

Foreign experiences

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time working on the project is between six and seven weeks.

"They give you about six to seven weeks to report, and they want about 6,000 words. This project should honestly take up all of your assigned time to work on it," said Matt Whittaker, a senior in journalism who had participated last year.

Whittaker's travels took him to Bosnia without a partner to report on the problems caused by landmines left over from the conflicts there.

"I want to be a combat correspondent, ultimately," he said.

Students pay their university's regular tuition while participating in the exchange program. Students are responsible for paying their own personal, living and travel expenses.

"Foreign students come here (to UT) and use your tuition in return," Crook said.

Whittaker warned that living expenses are high in Europe.

"It is more expensive to live in Denmark than in Knoxville," he said. "A meal at Burger King costs \$8."

Whittaker elaborated on another benefit of the "Europe and the World program" – job opportunities.

"The main benefit for me is, career-wise, when I came back," he said. "It opens up a lot of doors, and you can get a great cover letter set up."

Whittaker credited his receiving an academic internship at the Baltimore Sun to his experiences in the exchange program.

Crook said UT students from all travel and journalistic backgrounds have participated and succeeded in the exchange program.

"We've sent veteran foreign correspondents; we've sent people who have never been outside Knox County," he said. "No one has ever quit in the middle."

Crook also mentioned that all the interns in the program were changed by the experience when they got back.

"They find it more difficult to live in Knoxville," he said.

The experiences of the exchange students are similar to one of the disadvantages, according to Jean Ash, a former Knoxville broadcast journalist who has worked as an editor in Beijing for Chinese radio and television networks.

"Friends go on with their lives without you," Ash said. "It's a shock when you go back (home)."

However, Ash also mentioned several advantages enjoyed by some foreign correspondents, including better pay, a furnished apartment and office, a car and driver, and extra excitement. She encouraged aspiring correspondents to "start paying (their) dues now."

"Get an entry-level job," she said. "There is a lot you can do to start here in Knoxville, localizing stories and building your resume. The competition is really high for the best places like Amsterdam and Paris, so you'll probably have to start off at a less-than desirable place."

"Foreign correspondents get into places everyone else tries to get out of," said Ed Miller, a former instructor in journalism at UT and a foreign correspondent in Brazil for many years.

Miller said a good education and effective writing skills are important. Miller also illustrated the importance of knowledge of the country's culture by recalling a time in Brazil when he mistook a Brazilian Independence Day parade for a coup d'etat.

The home offices of wire services such as the Associated Press take no excuses from their foreign correspondents. Miller mentioned the refusal of one United Press International correspondent to report to duty because she considered herself on vacation. She was fired.

"The home office doesn't give a damn about why you miss a story," Miller said. "If you miss it, you can be fired."

Mark Your Calendar

Thursday, Dec. 9, 6 p.m., Christmas Party, Cherokee Bluff Clubhouse

Thursday, Jan. 20, 6:30 p.m. Meeting, WBIR-TV Community Room, Panel: Covering Diverse Groups in Our Community

Feb. 15, 5 p.m., GPC entry deadline

April 8-9, 2005, Region 3 Conference, Riverview Hotel, Charleston, S.C.