

Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide

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Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide

Abstract

A review of *Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide*, by Brant Houston.

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Reviews

***Computer-Assisted Reporting: A Practical Guide*, by Brant Houston. (St. Martin's Press, New York, 1996.) (ISBN 0-312-13260-3.) 278 pp. soft cover with IBM data disk included, \$30.**

According to the publisher, this book is the first of its kind. It is designed to be a concise handbook written specifically for beginners, and offers a practical overview of database managers, spreadsheets, and the various on-line resources available to help reporters do their work.

While it is advertised as a supplemental textbook for advanced journalism courses, this impressive little publication can be a useful and important reference for virtually any working communicator. I found Chapter 6, "On-line Resources: Everything but the Internet," to be worth the price of the book. It covers such topics as on-line newspaper clips, direct dialing into government resources, local and state records and various commercial services.

Other chapters cover the basics of "high-tech" journalism, use of statistics, search techniques for using the World Wide Web, and locating, negotiating and importing databases. There are also useful appendices covering everything from software to query language.

This is a user-friendly book. It includes step-by-step procedures for those less experienced in computer information searches, while computer-screen graphics guide the reader through the actual use of software for data analysis. It uses actual examples to illustrate many of the common advantages of using the computer to assist in the collection of information.

One such example is the bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building in 1995. On-line resources helped several reporters in the aftermath of that dramatic and tragic event, with much of the early information appearing in "chat" sessions on the Internet. In addition, information about militia groups and their beliefs was available through various newsgroups, and news about survivors and government action following the bombing quickly appeared on-line. Reporters also were able to use on-line listings to locate experts and library references pertinent to the story.

Other interesting examples include the use of on-line databases by reporters in Ohio and Connecticut in murder investigations. In both cases, the journalists were able to establish patterns clearly indicating the work of serial killers. (One of the reporters actually was Brant Houston, the author of *Computer-Assisted Reporting*.) In compiling data for such stories, the author demonstrates the importance not only of knowing how to search for information but also the very practical value of moving beyond stacks of index cards and into the electronic age in terms of keeping track.

Houston is a long-time daily newspaper journalist and managing director of the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting at the University of Missouri. He has conducted a number of seminars and workshops on the subject, through which he's helped train hundreds of professional print and broadcast journalists in computer-assisted reporting.

Houston obviously called on a number of practicing journalists as well as academics for suggestions during the preparation of this book. That shows up not only in the selection of subject matter, but also in the careful avoidance of "technospeak." An example: The modem, Houston explains, is "one of the clunkiest devices in the computer world."

The IBM disk that accompanies this book contains sets of sample data for use in various exercises that provide simulated hands-on training. A Macintosh version also is available.

Computer-Assisted Reporting is precisely what the sub-title suggests: a practical guide. It doesn't offer a great deal that will be new to the experienced on-line information searcher, but for those of us less knowledgeable in the area of electronic searching it is a valuable reference to have at hand.

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