

The ultimate reason that newspapers will prevail in the Information Age is that they are better than anyone else at collecting, editing, filtering, and presenting real information, and they are allying with the computer juggernaut to do it.

—George Gilder

from "Digital Darkhorse Newspapers" in the Oct. '93 issue of *Forbes ASAP*.

Events

APRIL

17-22: Computer-Assisted Journalism, The Poynter Institute, St. Petersburg, FL; (813) 621-9494.

Notepad

PC and Macintosh GIS software: Prices vary, depending on accessory packages, but a lot can be done for about \$1,000 in software. A fast, 486 computer or similar speed Macintosh is best. Contact:

Atlas Pro

Strategic Mapping Inc.
4030 Moorpark Ave.
Suite 250
San Jose, CA 95117
Phone: (408) 985-7400
FAX: (408) 985-0859

MapInfo

MapInfo Corporation
200 Broadway
Troy, New York 12180
Phone: 800-327-8627
FAX: 518-274-0510

Magazine resource:

Document Delivery World
Meckler Publishing
11 Ferry Lane West
Westport, CT 06880
Phone: (203) 226-6967
FAX: (203) 454-5840
One-year: \$39 (10 issues)

A handy way to keep up with what information services are adding to their bills of fare.

Book resource:

"Online Information Hunting," by Nahum Goldmann, Windcrest/McGraw-Hill, Blue Ridge Summit, Pa. \$19.95.
Goldman, an engineer by training, has developed "Subject Expert Searching Technique," a non-librarian's strategy to sort through thousands of volumes of data.

BY J.T. JOHNSON

The idea and intent were right, but the technology intellectually flaccid. At least that's what I make of Item No. 7 on a list gathered by *Prize Press*, a monthly tabloid about newspaper journalism.

Prize Press editors called dozens of dailies and weeklies around the county and asked a variety of journalists what they really need to do their jobs. Number 7 out of 50 was "Push pins and a mounted city map to display development or crime trends."

What they had discovered was a rudimentary Geographical Information System. GIS is as old as maps, but off-the-shelf software like MapInfo or Atlas Pro can give a journalist with a PC unparalleled power to analyze social, economic, and political circumstances. Even the impact of the weather can be anticipated.



The shortcoming of the map-and-push-pin analysis tool is that it is limited in dimension. Sure, there can be different color pins for murders, arsons, burglaries, and assaults. And the proximity of the pin heads can give a superficial indication of the location of the crimes.

But what's missing is a quick way to massage that data at richer levels of abstraction. What are the demographic factors under those pins? What are the time and seasonal factors of the crimes? What does the system tell—or more important, allow the reporter to ask—about the economic dimensions of the location?

The power of computers is that they permit us to ask questions, draw conclusions, and find answers by arranging and rearranging data without much cost in time or materials.

GIS programs are becoming the fifth tool in a suite of fundamental utilities for journalists. (The other four? Telecommunications, word processing, spreadsheet, and database programs.) Political campaigns, businesses, and some newspapers are already utilizing them.

Bill Clinton's campaign staff started mapping voting trends and voter profiles, at the precinct level, two years before the election. Using Atlas Pro software from Strategic Mapping Inc., the infoworkers fine-tuned their battle plans by targeting states where the election could go either way.

"The challenge was to find a way to assimilate and analyze the information we received from a variety of sources," said Janet Handal, a campaign technology strategist. "Mapping was the best way."

The mapped information helped draw the Clinton-Gore bus route through the Midwest after the Democratic convention. "The maps showed us it was a part of the country hard-hit by the recession and where there were a lot of persuadable voters," a Democratic staffer told *InfoWorld*.

As Hurricane Andrew bore down on South Florida, ITT Hartford Insurance company employees listened to the radio reports and charted

Tired of pushing pins into maps? Let GIS do it

PC software plots statistics, analyzes databases, shows trends

the progress of the storm as geographic data points on a MapInfo map," reported *PC Week*. By estimating 10- to 40-mile paths of the storm when it made landfall, and overlaying those maps with information on census tracts and policy holders, the company was able to estimate damage to its clients. And estimate how many claims adjusters to dispatch where.

This technology is not foreign to journalism, at least not to newspapers, notably the *Miami Herald*, *San Jose Mercury-News* and *The New York Times*.

The Newspaper Association of America (NNA) has considered testing a GIS approach to marketing and circulation data called AMCIS (Advertising, Marketing, and Circulation Information System).

Your publication or station might already have the hardware, software, and skills right down the hall in the business office, waiting to be added to the "What a Journalist Needs" list.

Oh, yes. Number One on the *Prize Press* tally sheet? "A vicious sense of curiosity."

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