

# Ready when the story breaks

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There are two ways you can incorporate data into a breaking news story.

- 1) Get a few pieces of information from an online database lookup (i.e. find out who owns a plane that just crashed)
- 2) Analyze raw data using your own software

For either approach, the most important thing you can do now is to get an idea of what's possible.

- Spend some time researching what's available in your area and bookmark key websites.
- Get to know the people who "keep" local data that might be useful to you in case you need to call them.
- Practice working with the online searchable database or downloading and working with raw data BEFORE you actually need it.
- Look for an "explainer" story that you could do now with the data, that would not only give you practice with the data, but also result in a story for your news org.

When you're on deadline, you don't want to be working with data that you're not at least a little familiar with. This is especially true if you're planning to analyze raw data using your own software.

There may also be some databases you want to keep in-house (and update at least once a year) if they are not readily searchable on a website, or if it's something where you might need all the records for an analysis.

## Plane Crashes:

Find out info on flight origination and destination, takeoff times, etc. on FlightAware (you need to get on there quickly, though. The free stuff is only for a limited window of time): <http://flightaware.com/>

Find out who owns a plane and other details. It works best if you have the tail number (also called the N number):

<http://registry.faa.gov/aircraftinquiry/>

Airport-Data.com

<http://www.airport-data.com/> (search everything from tail numbers, to airports, to serial numbers, etc)

NTSB Accident Database:

<http://www.nts.gov/ntsb/query.asp>

Landings.com:

Searchable databases of pilots and registered aircraft, and service difficulty reports-- SDR's (note: the reporting requirements for SDRs are not very comprehensive).

<http://www.landings.com/>

### **Car accidents:**

FARS-Fatality Analysis Reporting System has a query tool that allows you to find summary data on fatal accidents in your locality, going back a number of years. You can either view the results online or download to a txt file:

<http://www.nhtsa.dot.gov/people/ncsa/fars.html>

Also check with your state highway patrol -- they likely have their own database of accidents.

### **Commercial trucks and buses:**

The U.S. Department of Transportation has a database called SAFER that has information on interstate trucking and bus companies. You can find out safety records of a trucking company and more.

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

### **Vehicle recalls (like the Toyota recall last year):**

Download data files of all complaints filed with NHTSA, defect investigations, recalls, and technical service bulletins (updated regularly).

<http://www-odi.nhtsa.dot.gov/downloads/>

### **Bridge Collapse**

The National Bridge Inventory database, kept by the U.S. Department of Transportation's Federal Highway Administration has inspection data on all bridges in the U.S. The data is usually a year or so behind, so it might be worth checking with your state agency that oversees bridges to see if you can get a more current copy of this same data for your state (we were able to do that easily in MN). Best way to get the national dataset is from NICAR: <http://data.nicar.org/node/2521>

Example: When the I-35W bridge collapsed in Minneapolis in Aug. 2007, I obtained the bridge inspection database from NICAR and was plowing through it within a couple hours after the collapse occurred (and with a deadline looming in less than 2 hours). That night, I used it solely for reporting on the most recent inspection results --the fact that it was considered deficient and in need of repair or replacement. In the days that followed, we generated several stories, including one that showed there were many other bridges in the area considered in equal or worse shape than the 35W bridge.

### **Scandal**

- Campaign finance contributions (federal, state, local). Best source for federal level candidates is the Center for Responsive Politics. You can use one of their search tools or download a chunk of data, <http://www.opensecrets.org/action/data.php>
- Government contracts (federal, state, local)
- Government employee salary databases (you will most likely have to request a copy of these databases from the respective authorities)

Example: Center for Public Integrity cross-matching Enron executives with campaign finance contribution database to find those who had given large sums to then-President Bush.

### **Workplace safety:**

OSHA's website allows you to search their inspection database online.  
<http://www.osha.gov/oshstats/index.html>

This would be useful following workplace accidents at local businesses. You can also get the raw data from the NICAR database library.

### **Bad Weather**

Storm Events database (kept by NOAA) has data on all kinds of weather events, including tornadoes, hail, high winds, etc. The NICAR database library also offers the raw data for purchase.

<http://www4.ncdc.noaa.gov/cgi-win/wwcgi.dll?wwEvent~Storms>

Check with your local branch of the National Weather Service to see what they might have. One in MN keeps an Excel file with all the past tornadoes and details about each one.

Also check with your state climatology office to see what they have. The MN one has data on precipitation, temperature, etc. on a daily basis going back decades.

National Hurricane Center: <http://www.nhc.noaa.gov/>

The Hurricane Research division produces ArcView shapefiles after each hurricane with data points every two kilometers showing maximum sustained winds -- great for estimates by neighborhood or ZIP code.

FEMA: <http://www.gismaps.fema.gov> has all kinds of goodies following a weather disaster.

### **Flooding**

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers maintains levees throughout the U.S. If you live near one or more of these, would be worth getting inspection records on the levees in your area. Find the closest Corps office and ask them for inspection records. (The Minnesota office only had PDFs of the inspections)

A few years ago, the Pioneer Press got FEMA's list of Minnesota communities participating in the National Flood Program. (A city must be a participant in this program for its residents to be eligible for flood insurance). We found a number of communities in flood-prone areas that weren't in the program.

### **Other Examples:**

Ford Motor Co. announced it was closing a manufacturing plant in St. Paul. I worked with another reporter to get the parcel data for the plant and the neighborhood (which is mostly residential). We used the property values in the surrounding neighborhood to

calculate what the land would be worth if the 122-acre site were simply redeveloped to replicate the surrounding neighborhood. We turned this story around in a couple of days.

**Other data you might use on deadline:**

- Census data: to get demographics of a particular city or neighborhood ([factfinder2.census.gov](http://factfinder2.census.gov))
- IRS 990 forms: to get basic financial information about a non-profit organization ([www2.guidestar.org](http://www2.guidestar.org))
- Local property records. Most county assessor/appraiser offices have searchable databases on their websites that allow you to find out who owns a particular piece of property (and whether they are current on their taxes). I've run into some counties that don't display the owner's name, however.
- Felony convictions. If your state has an online searchable database (by name). If not, add this one to the list of databases you should have in your in-house collection.
- Education data. The National Center for Education Statistics has a "build a table" option to get a variety of data on schools across the country. <http://nces.ed.gov/ccd/bat/>. Also check with your state department of education to see what they have (MN, for example, puts Excel files of all their primary data tables online for easy download)
- IPEDS has all kinds of data on public universities. Use the "download custom data" option. <http://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/datacenter/login.aspx>
- CDC Wonder database. Public health data. <http://wonder.cdc.gov/>
- PACER, federal court records. <https://pcl.uscourts.gov/search>. Great for finding if someone has been in federal court for criminal, civil or bankruptcy. There is a cost for pulling up the actual documents, so you must have an account. (No way to download data in bulk, unfortunately)
- National Electronic Injury Surveillance System (NEISS) has "estimates" of product-related injuries treated in hospital emergency rooms (data is a sampling of reports from ER's around the country). Use it to give readers some idea of how common injuries are related to a particular product (i.e. snowmobile, crib, air mattress, cleaning product, nail guns, etc) <http://www.cpsc.gov/library/neiss.html>

**Databases you might want to have in-house for deadline reporting:**

- Birth certificates
- Death certificates
- Voter registration
- Government employee salary databases
- Local campaign finance data (state, county, city)
- Felony convictions