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Data for projects and beats

Anatomy of a project:

Neglected to Death

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Beyond Beat Reporting

- Data is incredibly useful in projects reporting
- Simple web programming skills help, too: create an interface reporters can use to access and store information

Neglected to Death

- Year-long Miami Herald project made extensive use of data, including secret abuse and neglect records.

- Three reporters constantly turned to our database of thousands of assisted living facilities.

- We stored our notes, records and FOIA requests in the database, helping us collaborate throughout the project.

Neglected to Death
Some Findings

- A man with Alzheimer's was eaten by an alligator. A woman was bound so tightly, the restraints killed her. A man died from burns after he was left alone in a bathtub filled with scalding hot water.

- Since 2009, the Florida Agency for Health Care Administration could have shuttered at least 70 homes for elderly and vulnerable people, but closed just seven.

- The agency chronically failed to enforce its law, even when people died or were severely abused.

- Nearly once a month, residents at ALFs die from abuse and neglect – with some caregivers even altering and forging records to conceal evidence – but law enforcement agencies almost never make arrests.

Neglected to Death Databases

- Had a database of nearly 4,000 assisted-living facilities open since 2000.
- Cross-referenced multiple databases:
  - Medical examiner records
  - State inspection and thousands of scraped discipline reports
  - Police reports, arrest records and involuntary commitment data
  - State neglect and abuse reports
  - Civil court cases
  - Medicaid records
  - Property and corporate records
  - And more…

Neglected to Death
Why all the data?

- It's easy to find isolated cases of abuse, neglect and death in homes that care for vulnerable people.

- A broad analysis took us beyond those cases, allowing us to make authoritative statements about breakdowns across the industry.

- Armed with so much information, we could be confident we truly were focusing on the right facilities. When owners tried to tell us things weren't so bad, we could tell them they were in the 99th percentile for death, crimes and sanctions.

Neglected to Death
State's Secret Archive

- We spent several months working to obtain more than 44,000 reports of abuse and neglect from the state Department of Children & Families.

- To ensure the agency complied with state law, we helped them develop a method for redacting names from extensive case narratives.

- Matched records to ALFs by pairing addresses and licensing dates. Hand-checked thousands of the pairings to ensure accuracy.

- Even so, we were careful about drawing aggregate information from the records. Tried to hand-check every number in the series.

Neglected to Death
State's Secret Archives

- The never-before released records were invaluable – especially in death cases.

- Helped us track the progress of regulatory and criminal investigations.

- Offered a second source to match against ALF records, sometimes with inexplicable results.

- For example: a woman who failed to get heart-saving medicine for four days died of cancer, the house doctor said.

Neglected to Death
Creating Databases

- Couldn't rely entirely on prefab databases. We needed some of our own.

- To study death cases, we culled out 70 abuse deaths. We spent weeks reviewing each case and answering questions about it, entering our answers into web forms.

  - Was there an autopsy?
  - Was there a police investigation?
  - Notes from the family, video records and photos.
  - And more…

Neglected to Death
Creating Databases

- In the end, we had highly detailed records on each death and could quickly access records for quotes, police reports and other records.

- Helped us determine conclusively exactly how many cases were investigated and their outcomes.

Neglected to Death
Opening our data to the world

- In the end, we released a slightly reduced but much prettier version of our in-house database to the public:
  - http://www.miamiherald.com/cgi-bin/alfs/
- In addition to data otherwise unavailable to the public, the database also contains thousands of agency final orders and discipline reports.

A Plug for Web Scraping

- I believe web scraping is one of the most valuable tools a database reporter can have.

- Bypass pesky FOIA requests (as long as you're sure you've got all the information you need!)

- Gather huge amounts of data in a hurry. Some examples:
  - Up-to-date property information
  - Final orders
  - Legislation
  - Current criminal records

Things I try to do…

- Plan on releasing a database to the world early in the process. It'll always come up, and it's never easy to write stories and program at the same time – especially when an editor is breathing down your neck.

- Instead of running queries on the fly and buttoning them down later, button them down the first time. Then button them down again.

- Keep notes on analysis, even in the beginning. It'll give you a few more hours of sleep in the weeks leading up to publication.