

# The Regional Reporter

www.rra.org

NOVEMBER 2005

## Searching for Sources

Finding Relevant Real People Beyond The Beltway

**D**o you ever need to find a person a hundred miles from Washington for your national Social Security story? Or what about a family who would benefit from a tax cut in the lower income bracket?

Database guru Robert Benincasa of Gannett last month showed a group of regional reporters a handful of tips for finding such people through Internet searches.

Story By SAMANTHA YOUNG  
Stephens Media Group

Illustration By CHRIS CAMPBELL  
Scripps Howard News Service

One of the first places you can start is your own newspaper. If you haven't been filing away letters to the editor (and most of us haven't) many newspaper websites archive these valuable letters on the Internet.

It's as simple as searching using key words, "letters to the editor" and your "subject," Benincasa said. Once you have the name of the writer, you can go to an online phone directory to look up an individual's phone number.

Some newspapers also have local chat sites that can be great sources of opinioned people from the area. While join-

**See SOURCES on Page 3**



**INSIDE: PRESIDENT'S REPORT, 2 ■ MEETING MINUTES, 4**

## PRESIDENT'S REPORT

By SAMANTHA YOUNG ■ Stephens Media Group

# Going Beyond The Press Statements

It is so easy in Washington to cover news events from your desk. With C-SPAN, the Internet, and e-mail, a reporter in the nation's capitol can write the story of the day without leaving his or her office.

Committees now webcast hearings and markups. The White House sends out transcripts from the President's speech and daily briefings with the Q and A are posted within hours.

Savvy press secretaries are posting lawmakers' statements as radio actual-

ities on the web as an MP3 file.

While these tools are all valuable resources, nothing compares to old-fashioned shoe leather reporting. For one thing, being at a hearing or a press briefing in person gives a reporter the power to ask his or her question.

It seems like such simple logic to go to the place you cover, but more and more reporters are relying upon technology to write their stories. But, we don't always get the complete story from the computer screen or a transcript.

The Capitol is full of people and stories. Lawmakers, congressional aides and other reporters talking, exchanging opinions about the news of the day.

Stephens Media takes on an intern most of the year, and with each new arrival, us "wise and veteran" reporters try to impart our wisdom on the college student of semester.

We would stand to listen to our own advice — get to the Hill as often as possible.

## RRA discussion focuses on Corps' role, processes

By SAMANTHA YOUNG  
Stephens Media Group and  
JESSICA WEHRMAN  
Dayton Daily News

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, Louisiana's senators are seeking to steer an estimated \$40 billion to the state to rebuild its levees and facilitate commercial navigation on the Mississippi. What that means to Corps projects in other states is anybody's guess, said Paul Johnston, a public affairs officer for the Northwestern Division of the Army Corps of Engineers.

Johnston was asked about the national implications Monday, Sept. 26, at briefing hosted by the National Press Foundation for the Regional Reporters Association. Washington Post reporter Michael Grunwald, a Corps guru, was also on hand to give his perspective on covering the 36,000-employee agency.

"Where that money is going to come from is too early to know," Johnston said. "One thing is they don't know the extent of the damage."

"You're talking about rebuilding an area the size of England in the south," he added.

### How a Corps of Engineers project comes to fruition:

- Locals come to Corps with a problem
- Corps completes a reconnaissance study — is there a technical fix
- Corps runs the dollar numbers: Is the fix less expensive than the problem. The project has to deliver more benefits than it costs to make it happen.
- What are the environmental impacts?
- Is there a local sponsor to pay a share of the project costs, provide land and rights of way?
- Congress must authorize the project
- Congress must appropriate dollars to the project

Grunwald predicts Congress will demand an investigation into the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers before writing a check to revamp Louisiana's levees.

"The Corps was supposed to protect the city. Part of its mission was flood control and it failed," Grunwald said.

Even as the federal government scrambles to find the best way to help the Gulf Coast recover from Hurricane Katrina, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is struggling to complete a laundry list of projects that show few

signs of prioritization.

Every administration since Herbert Hoover has sought to reign in corps funding, focusing on necessary projects rather than spreading the dollars among hundreds of projects, according to Grunwald.

With 38,000 employees and 40 districts, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers focuses on three major missions: civil works, military projects and cleanup of toxic waste.

Although Johnston said the Corps turns down 75 percent of proposed projects, Congress sets the agenda and workload of the agency.

"Congress loves to steer money and jobs to their district," Grunwald said. "Usually nobody is opposed to a corps project in their district."

Information about Corps projects can be found on the agency's website. Most district offices have project descriptions and documents posted on their websites. Other information — such as environmental impact statements and feasibility studies — can be obtained by calling the public affairs office.

The Corps website is:  
[www.usace.army.mil](http://www.usace.army.mil)

## SOURCES

Continued from Page 1

ing a chat group can be good for finding a retired schoolteacher angry at the Bush administration, this route requires reporters to verify an interviewee's identity before using them in a story, Benincasa said. It is also a good idea to ask an e-mail subject if you can call them for a phone interview, he added.

The same is true for Internet chat groups on MSN, Google, Yahoo and other websites. The Internet is full of people who have joined specialized groups to talk about their passions from building cars to politics.

Benincasa also advised that reporters identify themselves as a journalist if they contact a person who has posted on a group website.

Trade publications are also a valuable source. For example, a transportation magazine is likely to source experts knowledgeable in the HAZMAT trucking.

National organizations often have local branches that can find "real people" for your story from your paper's community. University Cooperative extension offices are in regular contact with farmers and local businesses. Another college campus outlet can be the student union.

One reporter suggested calling a local hotspot in town where retired folks meet every day. It could be the main street restaurant, a barbershop or a gift shop.

"A lot of times there's an opinioned person there," a seminar attendee said.

For breaking news stories, blog search engines are a great tool for finding people commenting on real time news. Unlike news searches through Google or Yahoo, the blog searches update more regularly than regular web pages.

"You can get tips by reading blogs that you can never get reading the mainstream media," Benincasa said.

## Tips for finding local sources from Washington

### Published Sources

- Letters to the Editor
- Obituaries
- Trade Journals
- Membership Organization publications
- Alumni Magazines

### Online Chat & Forums

- Local newspaper forums
- Yahoo
- MSN
- Locally focused Websites
- Usenet: [www.usenet.com](http://www.usenet.com)

### Online Services

- Sitereports/Claritas (Reporters contact Steve Moore at [stmoore@claritas.com](mailto:stmoore@claritas.com))
- Goggle Maps: [maps.goggle.com](http://maps.goggle.com)
- Accurint: \$75/month. Recently bought by Lexis/Nexis: [www.accurint.com](http://www.accurint.com)
- Autotrack: \$50/month. A la carte searching: [www.autotrackxp.com](http://www.autotrackxp.com)

- Lexis/Nexis: Typically via newsroom subscription; content varies by contract

### Blogsphere

- Bloggers and the circle of readers they attract and interact with
- Blog searches such as [www.technorati.com](http://www.technorati.com), or [www.feedster.com](http://www.feedster.com)

### Identity Verification Techniques

- If interviewing by e-mail, shift to the telephone. Get a home or work number as opposed to a mobile one.
- Ask for home address and then look it up.
- Look for signs of deception, inconsistency, unwillingness to talk on the phone.
- Ask them to refer you to someone else they know.

— By Robert Benincassa, Database Editor,  
Gannett News Service

## More Resources ...

A wealth of other online databases exist that can give reporters another source for information, and Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute, makes those sites his business.

As the author of Al's Morning Meeting, Tompkins keeps an eye out for sites that can help inform reporters on the news of the

day. He also keeps an eye on other online resources for journalists.

Here's a list of sites Tompkins shared recently with reporters at Cox Washington bureau.

— By Jessica Wehrman

**Run Google and Yahoo at the same time:**  
[twingine.com](http://twingine.com)

**Get a picture of something:**  
[images.google.com](http://images.google.com) or  
[www.mamma.com](http://www.mamma.com) (click on "images")

**For scholarly papers and academic publishers:**  
[scholar.google.com](http://scholar.google.com)

**Government sites:**  
[www.google.com/unclesam](http://www.google.com/unclesam)

**Find a website that has been offline for years:** [www.archive.org/index.html](http://www.archive.org/index.html)

**Find state and national links to more than 28,000 public records databases:**  
[www.searchsystems.net](http://www.searchsystems.net)

**Free phone, address and people search tool:**  
[www.argali.com](http://www.argali.com)

**Another people finder:**  
[www.zabasearch.com](http://www.zabasearch.com)

**Find someone in the U.S. or Canada:**  
[www.infospace.com](http://www.infospace.com)

**Find the number for a payphone somewhere in the world:** [www.payphone-project.com](http://www.payphone-project.com)

**SEC and business filings:**  
[www.hoovers.com/free](http://www.hoovers.com/free)

**Is that person dead?**

[www.dpsinfo.com/dps/index.html](http://www.dpsinfo.com/dps/index.html)

**Biographies of famous people:**  
[www.s9.com/biography](http://www.s9.com/biography) or [politicalgraveyard.com](http://politicalgraveyard.com)

**Find a person in a state, local or federal government office:**  
[www.whowhere.lycos.com/Govt/main.html](http://www.whowhere.lycos.com/Govt/main.html)

**Charities: Check where the money is going:**  
[www.guidestar.com](http://www.guidestar.com) or [www.give.org](http://www.give.org)

**Who owns a website:**  
[allwhois.com](http://allwhois.com)

**Product safety recalls:**  
[www.Recalls.gov](http://www.Recalls.gov)

**Links to every known local newspaper in the United States:**  
[www.newspapers.com/usa\\_news.htm](http://www.newspapers.com/usa_news.htm)

**Check on the blogs:**  
[www.blogsnow.com](http://www.blogsnow.com)

**Research a 527:**  
[www.publicintegrity.org/527](http://www.publicintegrity.org/527)

**Track polls:**  
[www.pollingreport.com](http://www.pollingreport.com)

**Translate a site:**  
[www.freetranslation.com](http://www.freetranslation.com)



# MEETING MINUTES

## AUGUST

Aug. 1, 2005

Present: Samantha Young, Suzanne Struglinski, Jessica Wehrman, Paul Krawzak, Todd Gillman, Kevin Goldberg, Jake Thompson, Sean Reilly, Anita Kumar

As at the previous meeting, the bulk of the discussion involved newsmakers. Kumar said she has gotten a favorable reception from Specter's office, which promised to get back to her soon. To facilitate the process of setting up future events, Young said she would send out a form letter that could be tailored to individual requests. She went on to describe the July newsmaker with Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist as "fabulous," while Thompson said it appeared that some 20 people attended. Kumar said she did not go, but a colleague did and gleaned material for two different stories. The one negative was that Frist's office requested a list of RRA members in advance. RRA refused to provide that, instead referring to a list of member papers on the web site and a list of RSVPs.

Wehrman viewed the request as an attempt to "cherry pick" who would be included. Goldberg said RRA has never provided such information. Among other potential newsmakers, Gillman said he would explore the possibility of getting together with DeLay, but held out little hope of success. He also agreed to approach NASA and, thanks to a long-standing relationship with Margaret Spellings' press person, said he would also sound out the Department of Education, not to mention HUD. Among other possibilities, Wehrman is pursuing USTR and FEMA (I'm going partly off the list that Samantha sent out last month); Reilly, Veterans Affairs; Kumar, Homeland Security and Justice; Thompson, Agriculture; Struglinski, Energy and Transportation; Young, Interior and Defense; and Krawzak, Health and Human Services and House Speaker Hastert. Young expressed hope at getting the newsletter out by the end of the week. The meeting adjourned uneventfully.

## SEPTEMBER

Sept. 12, 2005

Present: Samantha Young, Linda Dono, Todd Gillman, Marc Heller, Kevin Goldberg, Cohn and Marks LLP Attorneys at Law

A quorum was not present, so the four members there agreed to discuss items on the agenda but otherwise could take no official action.

Minutes: Approval of the August 2005 meeting minutes was deferred until the next regular meeting because of lack of a quorum.

Treasurer's report: Treasurer Linda Dono presented treasurer's reports for the 2004-05 fiscal year, July 2005 and August 2005 as well as a proposed 2005-06 budget. Discussion and votes were deferred until the next regular meeting.

Meeting time change: President Samantha Young expressed a desire to change the board's regular meeting time from 1 p.m. to noon, in part because the Las Vegas Sun would be switching from an afternoon to a morning cycle. Legal counsel Kevin Goldberg said board action was not needed make the change.

Shield law: The group informally agreed to ask Mr. Goldberg to write an item for the next Regional Reporters Association newsletter on the Free Flow of Information Act, now HR 3323 and S 1419, which would establish a federal shield law for journalists. The RRA, as well as other press organizations, is being asked to endorse the legislation. A vote on endorsing the proposal was deferred until the next regular meeting.

Newsmakers: Ms. Young asked for an update on Newsmaker assignments: Todd Gillman said the office of Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, expressed interest in having a meeting with regional reporters, even perhaps "making news" by scheduling one of his press events as the Newsmaker. Mr. Gillman also said the Department of Housing and Urban

Development had a high level of interest in scheduling Secretary Alphonso Jackson for a Newsmaker but had not set a date. Board members also are working to firm up a Newsmaker with Veterans Affairs Secretary Jim Nicholson, whose office has shown an interest in scheduling a meeting. Web site: Ms. Young reported that she had 30 newspaper affiliations for RRA members to add to the Web site, www.rra.org. She also solicited feedback on whether to establish a password-protected area for the Web site where members-only information could be posted. Among the ideas for members-only information: the RRA newsletter, a spreadsheet with cell phone numbers for Capitol Hill press secretaries.

Joint programs: Ms. Young reported that she and Nolan Walters, director of programs for the National Press Foundation, were finalizing plans for a Newsmaker on the Army Corps of Engineers at the press foundation's office. It is tentatively scheduled 9 to 11 a.m. Sept. 26 and additional information for members would be disseminated as it becomes final. Ms. Young also solicited ideas for additional joint programs with the National Press Foundation, along the lines of a Paul Miller Washington Reporting Fellowship "graduate" program, and said she would be meeting further with Mr. Walters. Among the ideas suggested: How to find official and committee records and transcripts, how to get past press secretaries to the people who make policy and wield power, how to figure out when to cover a story that happens in increments, how to find the earmarks — the pork — before a bill becomes law.

Newsletter: Ms. Young reported that board member Jessica Wehrman is asking graphic artists she knows about their interest in laying out the RRA newsletter. In the meantime, Ms. Young plans to ask the present layout editor, Jim Sergent, if he would be willing to help out until at least the end of the year. Ms. Young also is looking for a way to make the newslet-

**Continues on next page >>**

## SEPTEMBER (cont.)

ter appear more regularly and have editing be less burdensome. She and the present newsletter editor, Marc Heller, came up with the idea of a roster of revolving editors, someone who would commit to editing the stories for a particular month or two or three and others who could be backup if an editor's paying job becomes too demanding. Mr. Heller agreed to do the job for the next newsletter, whose

deadline is Sept. 23. The group also discussed ideas for that newsletter, including covering Hurricane Katrina from Washington and a sidebar to that story on how one news service is helping papers and readers cope with the aftermath of Katrina. The newsletter also will contain bios of the newly elected RRA board members; a summary of the Army Corps of Engineers Newsmaker, which also could be related to Hurricane Katrina; and other staples.

## OCTOBER

Oct. 3, 2005

Present: Samantha Young, Linda Dono, Marc Heller, Paul Krawzak, Jake Thompson, Jessica Wehrman, Kevin Goldberg, Cohn and Marks LLP Attorneys at Law

The regular meeting of the RRA Board of Directors convened at noon Oct. 3, 2005 at the National Press Club. President Samantha Young presided. Immediate past president Jessica Wehrman acted as secretary.

A quorum as not present, so the board could take no official action.

Minutes for August and September were deferred because of the absence of a quorum.

Treasurer's report: Treasurer Linda Dono presented treasurer's reports for September. No votes could be taken because of an absence of a quorum. The board has yet to approve its proposed 2005-06 budget.

Young asked the board for an update on their newsmakers. Sean Reilly told Young he is working on a veterans newsmaker, and Young and Suzanne Struglinski are working on an Energy newsmaker. Jake Thompson is pursuing an agriculture news-

maker. Paul Krawzak is trying for a House leadership newsmaker, presumably with Hastert. Wehrman said she has made contact with the Education Department. Young urged the board of the importance of getting a newsmaker for fall, and asked them to redouble their efforts.

Young asked for input in a recent National Press Foundation session on the Army Corps of Engineers. Wehrman said it was informative, if a little long. Goldberg solicited more input, and Wehrman stressed the need to keep such newsmakers within an hour or hour-and-a-half time frame. She also suggested the NPF consider a mid-career Paul Miller Fellowship on a more condensed schedule.

Young said she'd like the board to put together a fall panel, not necessarily with a cabinet official. Dono recalled a recent one on how to get good local sources in Washington regional stories. Thompson said such a panel would be informative. Among the names suggested were the Gannett computer database coordinator and Alan Schlein. Board members suggested having the panel in the McClendon room, but Dono said the Gannett Conference room was another possibility. She and Young said they planned to pursue it, for 10 a.m. on a Monday morning before November.

Young said she and Struglinski planned to have lunch Friday to brainstorm how to recruit new members. Wehrman said she would recruit members from Cox and Scripps. Young invited anyone interested in brainstorming how to recruit new members to attend Friday's lunch.

Young also expressed frustration about the lack of attendance by two board members. One, she said, has not attended a single board meeting since being voted onto the board two years ago. She said she would ask the two board members in question for letters of resignation, and asked for suggestions for replacements. Dono suggested Bill Theobald of Gannett, and Wehrman said she had a few potential board members in mind.

Young and Heller said the next newsletter was due out the week of Oct. 3, and Young said Chris Campbell of Scripps Howard News Service has agreed to be the new designer. Goldberg said he would help make the transition to a new designer easy and help draw up all necessary paperwork. Wehrman is the November newsletter editor, and said she'd like things in by the end of October. Struglinski will serve as the December editor.

The next meeting will be Nov. 14. at noon.

### The Regional Reporter

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