

Before Digital Had A Name

A team-reviewed second pass on Learfield Data, Learfield's early Internet work, and the Phil/Steve overlap

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June 25, 2026

Executive Read

The first pass treated the two Learfield papers as a strategic pattern: distribution capacity plus valuable information becoming business advantage. The team review did not overturn that view. It made it sharper and less tidy.

The revised read is this: Learfield's best early technology work was not about being "an Internet company." It was about finding trapped information, moving it through a cheaper or faster channel, and discovering who valued the result. That habit began before the web, with satellite sideband data, weather, crash reports, wire copy, and affiliate services. The web did not replace the habit. It exposed the same habit to a bigger audience, looser rights boundaries, weaker business models, and much more operational complexity. [S01] [S02]

The documents suggest that Steve and Phil occupied complementary parts of that system. Steve appears near newsroom pain, affiliate needs, product conversations, and early web/audio experiments. Phil appears most clearly where web ideas had to become repeatable systems: database-backed sites, live data feeds, searchable public records, and the crash-report prototype. Those are interpretations from the documents, not interview findings, but they are supported by the recurring evidence in the supplied papers. [S01] [S02]

The second-pass difference is important: rights, workflow, and ownership mattered as much as the technology. Learfield could prove that a service was possible, only to have a public agency or content owner later make the same information available for free. It could build custom tools that worked brilliantly, but depended on a small number of builders. It could stream sports early, but still face a market where audience behavior, advertising, bandwidth, and rights were all immature.

The Page Phil Brought Back

One clean scene sits near the center of the story. The Missouri Highway Patrol reportedly said putting crash reports on the web was not technically possible. Phil, then head of Learfield IT, came back with a working page: live crash reports flowing from the MULES feed already coming into Learfield's office. The argument changed because the thing existed. [S01]

That moment is useful because it is not just a personal anecdote. It shows the larger Learfield pattern. The company already had access to a live operational feed. The unmet need was public visibility and search. The web made that possible, but only after someone connected the feed, the database, and the page.

This is the practical Internet in miniature. Not a pitch deck. Not a vision statement. A live feed became a public service because someone made the architecture real.

Before Real Time Was Easy

The Learfield Data paper is valuable because it restores the physical friction that later Internet stories often erase. Before the web, information moved through teletypes, fanfold paper, ribbons, faxes, satellite receivers, mailed advisories, phone calls, and newsroom habits. A local radio station could be surrounded by information and still be waiting on the wrong machine.

Learfield's early data work was a response to that friction. The company had affiliate relationships and satellite distribution. It also had access to information that mattered locally: NOAA weather, Missouri Highway Patrol crash reports, state news, sports information, and later color radar weather. The unused capacity inside an existing distribution system became a way to serve affiliates and challenge expensive wire-service economics. [S02]

The business details matter. Learfield Data was not just a clever feed. It experimented with subscriber pricing, bank drafts, 30-day cancellation, setup fees, radar weather as a sales hook, WireReady capture, and eventually web delivery. The subscriber numbers tell a mixed story: 39 subscribers in 1989, 78 paying subscribers by May 1990, 255 by the end of 1995, then decline to around 170 by 2000 before Wheeler News and web delivery changed the shape again. [S02]

So the old lesson is not simply "data is valuable." It is that data becomes a business only when delivery, billing, support, workflow, rights, and customer habit all line up. The technology was necessary. It was not sufficient.

Steve's Arena: Need Becomes Product Shape

The documents place Steve near the translation layer: newsroom work, affiliate needs, wire-service alternatives, early web meetings, AudioNet conversations, and later Internet responsibility. That does not make him the sole author of the product strategy, and the source material should not be stretched that far. It does suggest that Steve was often close to the place where messy editorial work could become a product idea. [S01] [S02]

That position matters. Many technical ideas fail because nobody can translate between "we have access to this" and "someone would pay for this" or "someone would use this." Learfield Data needed more than a feed. It needed a sense of what local stations valued, what they would tolerate, what AP/UPI pricing left exposed, and what kind of package could be sold without collapsing under support burden.

The Internet work needed the same translation. Learfield had news, farm, sports, and affiliate content. The web made distribution broader, but also made the audience less captive. Affiliates could reasonably worry about Learfield sending listeners to a website. Newsrooms could resent airtime being used to promote a web product. What looked like distribution progress from one angle looked like channel conflict from another. [S01]

Steve's apparent role is best described carefully: the documents show him repeatedly near the editorial and business interpretation of new channels. That is more precise, and more interesting, than calling him a generic "early Internet guy."

The Web Arrives: Promise, Confusion, And Timing

The timing was genuinely early. Pew's long-term Internet adoption data puts U.S. adult Internet use at about 14 percent in 1995 and about 52 percent by 2000. RealAudio launched in 1995, so Learfield's January 1996 streaming work was close to the birth of consumer streaming audio, not safely downstream from it. [S04] [S05]

That context makes the AudioNet work and the Mark Cuban meetings look more substantial. Learfield was testing live college sports, political audio, RealAudio distribution, and web sponsorship in a market where the audience was still forming. Broadcast.com's 1998 SEC filing shows a much larger version of the same problem: streaming media, business services, web advertising, traditional-media advertising, infrastructure, and content aggregation all bundled together because nobody yet knew which model would carry the weight. [S06]

Learfield saw something real. It also misread parts of the business. Straylight, Gamecruiser, AdActive, and Ballot Box are better treated as commercially unsuccessful experiments than as hidden successes. The documents portray them as products that ran ahead of audience size, bandwidth, ad readiness, software maturity, or Learfield's native advantages. [S01]

But "unsuccessful" is not the same as "wasted." Those experiments taught Learfield where the Internet matched its strengths and where it merely made Learfield look like a smaller startup.

Phil's Arena: Pages Become Systems

The first web problem was presence: get a site, register a domain, put things online. The second problem was machinery: stop hand-editing pages and make content repeatable, searchable, and fed by data.

This is where Phil's role becomes clearest in the documents. The Internet paper describes the pain of manually maintained pages and then the shift toward database-backed work through ColdFusion, Andy Waschick, Gestalt, CATS, and later related internal tools. The documents suggest Phil had been pushing for database development capability before the web work fully caught up to that need. [S01]

That shift changed what Learfield could imagine. A page could advertise a service. A system could maintain sports schedules, public records, crash reports, client pages, affiliate downloads, court audio, sales tools, and searchable archives. Once content lived in structured form, the web stopped being a brochure rack and started becoming operational infrastructure.

There is a caveat. Bespoke brilliance has a hidden cost. The same source material that shows the power of Gestalt and custom systems also shows dependency risk: small teams, custom tools, one-person knowledge, and maintenance obligations that can outlive the original excitement. [S01] The lesson is not "do not customize." It is "custom systems need an ownership model."

The Boomerang Pattern

Scout and Scribe both called out a pattern the first report underplayed: Learfield as public-sector prototype shop.

Legislature.com, Supreme Court audio, and MHP crash reports all seem to follow a version of the same arc. Learfield identified a public-information bottleneck, built or tested a digital service, proved public demand or feasibility, and then the official content owner or public agency eventually had reason to offer the information directly, often for free. [S01]

That pattern complicates the business lesson. From a public-interest standpoint, these were good outcomes. More people got access to useful information. From a product standpoint, they were unstable. Learfield could create the proof-of-concept and still lose the moat once the owner of the content saw the same opportunity.

This is where "rights beat tech" becomes the sharper observation. Technology can prove access. Rights and ownership decide who can sustain the business.

What Lasted

The product names are not the point. Some lived, some died, some were absorbed, and some became lessons with invoices attached.

What appears to have lasted was an operating discipline:

- Look for information trapped in slow, expensive, or local systems.
- Pair it with a channel Learfield could reach or influence.
- Reduce friction for affiliates, clients, listeners, agencies, or subscribers.
- Learn quickly whether the value was in advertising, subscription, sponsorship, public access, or client service.
- Keep the infrastructure lessons even when the named product failed.

That discipline also explains the later shape of Learfield better than a generic Internet-startup narrative. Learfield's durable advantage was institutional relationship, rights, sponsorship, sports, and service infrastructure. The later Atairos acquisition and IMG College merger point toward the same center of gravity: not generic web products, but college-sports media, sponsorship, data, and institutional scale. [S07] [S08]

Evidence Map

- Learfield Data: satellite capacity, weather, MULES crash reports, WireReady, AP/UPI pressure, Broadcast Partners radar, subscriber pricing, Wheeler News, and eventual web delivery. This is the pre-web version of the same distribution-and-information pattern. [S02]
- Learfield Internet: 1995 web meetings, Learfield.com, AudioNet, Straylight, Gamecruiser, AdActive, Ballot Box, Gestalt, Legislature.com, court audio, crash reports, sports databases, and client/affiliate tools. This is the pattern moving onto the web. [S01]
- Steve evidence: recurring involvement in Learfield Data direction, UPI/WireReady context, early web meetings, Mark Cuban/AudioNet work, Dallas visit, and later Internet responsibility. The role interpretation is "editorial/product translation," not sole ownership. [S01] [S02]
- Phil evidence: IT leadership, database-platform push, web systems transition, and the working MULES-fed crash-report prototype. The role interpretation is "systems architecture and feasibility proof," not generic support. [S01]
- Caveats: the Internet paper is partly personal recollection; some dates or details are uncertain; the crash-report public launch date is not pinned down in the source; and some product outcomes lack complete profit/loss evidence. Those limits matter because Steve is both a source and a recipient. [S01]

Closing

The better claim is not that Learfield predicted the Internet. Almost nobody predicted it cleanly. The better claim is that Learfield already had habits the Internet would reward: notice trapped information, find a cheaper channel, make updates faster, and turn private feeds into useful services.

The documents also show the limits of that habit. Rights could defeat technology. Public agencies could absorb public-information products. Custom systems could create dependency. Affiliates could see the web as competition, not help. And early streaming could be technically impressive before the market was commercially ready.

That is why the second pass lands differently than the first. Learfield was not simply early. It was early to the hard, practical version of digital work: content, rights, workflow, architecture, distribution, support, and business model all tangled together. The old floorboards creak there because that is where the real weight was.

Source Register

S01 Steve Mays, "Learfield and the Internet: 1995-2005," PDF provided by Phil Atkinson, reviewed June 25, 2026.

S02 Steve Mays, "Learfield Data," PDF provided by Phil Atkinson, reviewed June 25, 2026.

S03 Steve Mays, "Twenty-five Years of Looking for What Isn't There," smays.com, June 24, 2026, <https://www.smays.com/2026/06/what-isnt-there/>

S04 Pew Research Center, "How the internet has woven itself into American life," February 27, 2014, <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2014/02/27/part-1-how-the-internet-has-woven-itself-into-american-life/>

S05 RealNetworks, "25 Years of Streaming," accessed June 25, 2026, <https://25yearsofstreaming.com/>

S06 Broadcast.com Inc., Amendment No. 2 to Form S-1, SEC EDGAR, filed July 10, 1998, <https://www.sec.gov/Archives/edgar/data/1061236/0000950134-98-005844.txt>

S07 Learfield, "Atairos Group to Acquire Learfield," October 14, 2016, <https://www.learfield.com/2016/10/atairos-group-to-acquire-learfield/>

S08 Learfield, "Learfield and IMG College Complete Merger," December 31, 2018, <https://www.learfield.com/2018/12/learfield-img-college-complete-merger/>

Team Review Note

Scout added outside context and identified underweighted themes: rights, public-sector displacement, channel conflict, operational fragility, subscriber economics, and later Learfield continuity. Scribe proposed the revised narrative frame and the "Before Digital Had A Name" structure. Proctor found the incorrect SEC citation, overconfident role language, missing caveats, and the need for an evidence map. Milton integrated and rendered the final revised version.