

JRN-STA 380: News & Numbers: Lies, Statistics, and the Stories Media Tell

Spring 2009

TR, 2-3:15 p.m., BAC 112

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Course Description

JRN-STA 380 explores the quality of how quantitative ideas and material are represented in daily journalism—where, in fact, most of us get our common-sense ideas about the numbers and data present in our everyday lives. The topics for the course are ripped from current events and headlines—especially those numbers and data related to political polling, the financial crisis, and health/science issues. In analyzing the numbers that underlie such current news stories, we dig under the surface of a *USA Today* graph or a CNN poll to give students the chance to critique contemporary journalism's use of numerical representations. In the course we examine and critique concepts such as journalistic objectivity and bias, the concept of uncertainty, and various visual presentations of numerical data. We also give students opportunities to craft their own articles on related topics, some of them tied to course speakers and/or Miami faculty who have expertise in political polls, financial systems, and environmental sustainability. For selected speakers, students will “cover” their lectures and write -- as individuals and in groups --their own news stories. In turn, their stories will be critiqued, not only by course faculty, but by the lecturers themselves to see how well students presented complex numeracy in their journalistic representations. The course, useful to students in any major, advances in-depth critical thinking, promotes clear communication, and teaches compelling storytelling about complex topics. Finally, the course aims to help students understand numbers in a way that helps them become more discerning media consumers, more perceptive journalistic critics, and more actively engaged citizens in democratic life.

General learning objectives:

1. Critically assessing assertions
 - Students should be able to incorporate quantitative measures of uncertainty in understanding assertions, such as those found in popular media.
2. Communicating with quantitative concepts
 - Students should be able to interpret graphs and multiple visual displays of information and data.
 - Students should be able to communicate quantitative information in written or graphical forms.
3. Qualitative dimensions of inquiry
 - Students should have strategies for making decisions in the face of uncertainty and incomplete data.
 - Students should be able to write narratives interpreting quantitative data and their meaning.

Teaching Approach:

The course will be taught by a journalism professor and a statistics professor. The first half of the course will provide context for understanding both journalism (e.g. news as narrative, journalistic

bias) and statistics (e.g. description of data, study designs, uncertainty, etc.), particularly kinds of numeracy required to function as a well-informed citizen. In part, this material will be explored in a series of stories pulled from today’s news and through research presentations and projects from key faculty. We will alternate emphasis each week between “news” (journalism) and “numbers” (statistical literacy). While the instructors will be providing some examples, students will be responsible for creating a **news & numbers portfolio** and for bringing additional examples to the class for discussion and feedback. Reporters and editors from the news media will also visit the class to discuss the art and practice of news reporting of quantitative information. The second half of the class will allow the students to function as working journalists who will interview faculty on their research and write up stories for local media outlets. Two or three professors doing work that has numerical contexts will serve as the basis for students’ producing their own reporting and writing. Ideally, we hope to focus the work in the course on polling data, health issues, and the financial crisis. Student will interview faculty presenters and write stories about their work. In addition to partnering with *The Miami Student*, we will also bring in newsroom partners to help produce stories for publication and/or broadcast with the *Dayton Daily News*, *Cincinnati Business Courier*, and WMUB. We also expect class work to appear on the various Web sites of each of these media outlets.

Required Texts/Readings:

[CC] Cohn V. and Cope L. (2001) *News and Numbers*. 2nd edition. Blackwell Publishing Professional: Ames, Iowa.
 [Best] Best J. (2008) *Stat-Spotting: A Field Guide to Identifying Dubious Data*. University of California Press: Berkeley, CA.
 Additional articles and handouts

Key readings & assignments [Tentative and Evolving ...]

<i>Key concepts when reviewing numbers in the news</i>			
Week	Topics	Readings	Other activities
#1 1/13 1/15	Introduction, Uncertainty; News and objectivity	[CC] 1-2 [Best] A = Questionable Numbers; B = Background	Library/media session for Lexis/Nexis use.
#2 1/20 1/22	Drawing conclusions from data; News as storytelling	[CC] 3 [Best] C = Blunders; D = Sources	Meeting with <i>Dayton Daily News</i> Reporter/ Editor
#3 1/27 1/29	What is a good study? News as science	[CC] 4 [Best] E = Definitions; F = Measurements	Visitor [Annie Laurie-Blair?]
#4 2/3 2/5	Polling & Politics; News and Bias	[CC] 10-11 [Best] G = Packaging; H = Debates	Visitor [Monica Schneider?]
#5 2/10 2/12	The critical consumer – questions for reporters and the public Interviewing	[CC] 5 [Best] I = Summary	
#6 2/17 2/19	Experimental studies JRN example study	[CC] 6 [Best] J = Better data	
#7	Health Issues	[CC] 7-8	

2/24 2/26	JRN example study		
#8 3/3 3/5	Living in a risky environment JRN example study	[CC] 9	
#9 <i>SPRING BREAK</i>			
#10 3/17 3/19	Faculty research 1	Papers provided by visitors in advance of visit	
#11 3/24 3/26	Faculty research 2	“	
#12 3/31 4/1	Work on fac. research stories	“	
#13 4/7 4/9	Critique—fac. research 1	“	
#14 4/21 4/23	Critique—fac. research 2	“	
#15 4/28 4/30	Group projects--meet w/ editors	“	

Grading Criteria:

1. Class discussion [10%] – includes bringing news stories to class for general discussion
2. Short writing exercises/illustrations of current classroom topics from the media [10%] – includes 1-page contact report for any visitor to class
3. News & numbers portfolio [25%] – reviewed at Midterm at end of the class
4. Two major individual stories based on faculty research projects [20%]
5. Critically edit and peer review other stories [10%]
6. Group project – for these we can partner with a publication [25%]

For the journalistic pieces produced by individuals and groups, the grading criteria are:

- A --article is publishable, as is
- B—article could be published with minor editing
- C—article has potential but need major edits
- R—rewrite please, you have more work to do.

Student may choose to rewrite all journalistic reports after meeting with instructor (s).

For the statistical/scientific elements of the pieces produced by the students, the grading criteria are:

- A – summary of the numerical arguments and background science is correct, clear, and concise.
- B – additional analyses, data displays are required to make this a top story
- C – either numerical arguments or summary of the science background is seriously flawed (but not both).

R – re-analyze and rewrite, work remains.

All major stories will be revised based on comments, and ultimately will aim for publication and/or broadcast. Reports will also be posted on various online sites, including the Miami-Whitewater Valley Public Media Project. As such, it is expected that all work will be of high quality following revision.

Grading rubric for the portfolio will be handed out later. Elements of this will include completeness of the portfolio [all topics of media/reporting illustrations included for full credit] and commentary on the illustrations.