UNIV 401 SYLLABUS
Journalism and Statistics
Fall Semester 2014

“It is the mark of a truly intelligent person to be moved by statistics.”
– George Bernard Shaw

CRN: 15420
Credit: 1/2 unit
Wednesdays 10:30-11:45 a.m.
Room: BUS Q288

Professors:

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Availability of Instructors:
The enrollment in this class is relatively small so students will have
extraordinary access to each of the instructors. This includes face to face
interactions outside of class at mutually agreed upon times as well as
ongoing availability through email. Each student should take the initiative
to seek consultation (with appropriate courtesy) at the time it is needed.

Communication:
Class assignments and other pertinent materials will be posted on
Blackboard. Time sensitive communications with the instructors should be
made through email. Every email should include both instructors as
recipients.

Required Texts:
Numbers in the Newsroom – Sarah Cohen

The Signal and the Noise: Why Most Predictions Fail – but Some Don’t –
Nate Silver
Free resources:
http://datajournalismhandbook.org/1.0/en/case_studies.html

http://journalistsresource.org/skills/research/statistics-for-journalists

http://www.robertniles.com/stats/

“There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.”
- Benjamin Disraeli

Introduction:
Statistics matter. In an information society frequently infected by myths, mistakes and misinformation, the importance of reliable data cannot be overstressed. Journalists too often shirk their responsibility to accurately report statistical data. And just as often, consumers fail to ask the right kinds of questions in evaluating statistics-driven news. This course is a .5 unit cross-school seminar focused on the critical analysis of the way that statistics are used in reporting and/or the support of particular points of views on issues appearing in traditional and non-traditional forms of journalism. The main objectives of the seminar are: (1) to help students recognize the motivation of sources and producers behind specific kinds of news stories and commentaries (2) to critically examine the statistics that are used in those pieces, recognizing them as descriptive or inferential, recognizing how the data were collected, and analyzing the measures used with special attention to how these measures relate to the claims made in the piece.

“Facts are stubborn, but statistics are more pliable.”
- Mark Twain
“If the statistics are boring, then you’ve got the wrong numbers.”
Edward R. Tufte

Grading Policy and Assignments:

Students will be evaluated and grades will be earned on performance in these four areas:

1. Formal presentations (25 percent); work together and individually to present analyses of statistically-driven pieces of journalism
2. Class participation (25 percent); engagement in discussions that reflect news and text reading
3. Blog postings (25 percent); one original post and one response per week on contemporary issues related to statistics and journalism
4. Final paper (25 percent); individual assignment that requires insight and analysis of data-related journalism

Honor Policy:
This language is taken largely from Coursera.

All students participating in the class must agree to abide by the following code of conduct:

1. My project presentations, answers to homework, quizzes and exams will be my own work (except for assignments that explicitly permit collaboration).
2. I will not make solutions to projects, homework, quizzes or exams available to anyone else. This includes both solutions written by me, as well as any official solutions provided by the course staff.
3. I will not engage in any other activities that will dishonestly improve my results or dishonestly improve/hurt the results of others.
Attendance Policy:
Attendance at each class session is expected of every student. Some of the material presented in class will not be found in the texts. Each student is responsible for all material presented and all assignments made in each class session. Absences are not excused and makeup work is not allowed except in the case of an absence associated with a University sponsored activity. Absences associated with emergencies or illnesses are accommodated through the flexibility of the grading policy at the discretion of the instructor.

If a student wishes to observe religious holidays that are not specifically recognized in the University calendar, the student must notify the instructor during the first two weeks of class so that appropriate accommodations can be made.

Lateness Policy:
It is the responsibility of every student to be punctual for every class. Students with special circumstances should advise the instructor in advance. The instructor reserves the right to alter the lateness policy (possibly affecting the grading policy) if problems persist.

Tentative Course Schedule
Week 1: Journalism basics; factors that go into defining news; differences between reporting and opinion journalism; differences among media

Week 2: Continued from week 1; motivation of sources related to statistics and use of source control to influence content

Week 3: Basic statistics; the most common statistical elements used in journalism; readings from Numbers in the Newsroom and free resource sites

Week 4: Continued from week 3; exercises to practice concepts; readings from Numbers in the Newsroom and free resource sites
**Week 5:** Case study #1 (the Opportunity Gap); readings from *The Signal and the Noise*

**Week 6:** Continue case study #1; readings from *The Signal and the Noise*; discuss individual presentation topics

**Week 7:** Case study #2 (Hospital Billing); readings from *The Signal and the Noise*; discuss individual presentation topic, group topic

**Week 8:** Continue case study #2, individual topic work

**Week 9:** Individual presentations

**Week 10:** Work on case for group presentation

**Week 11:** Case study #3 (political case); readings from *The Signal and the Noise*

**Week 12:** Continue case study #3; discuss the wrong ways of using statistics; group case work

**Week 13:** The write (yes, we mean write in this case) ways; group work

**Week 14:** Final presentation

**Note well**

Statistics in journalism are about more than numbers. Statistics help to tell stories that we need to fully function in a democratic society. Media scholars Bill Kovach and Tom Rosentiel, in their award-winning book “The Elements of Journalism,” remind us that the primary purpose of journalism is to help the community to have the information it needs for people to be self-governing. That is an awesome responsibility and it should be a shared responsibility. News consumers – all of us – have an obligation not only to hold the media accountable, but ourselves when it comes to evaluating articles and opinion pieces based on statistical evidence. To borrow from the Bard, the fault is not in the statistics, but in ourselves.