

News & Numbers: Overview

1st ed.

News & Numbers: A Guide to Reporting Statistical Claims and Controversies in Health and Other Fields

A Note to Readers

The rules of statistics are the rules of good thinking, codified. They apply to any kind of reporting in which numbers -- stated or implied -- are involved: political reporting, science reporting, business, economics, sports, or whatever.

This guide is an attempt to explain the role, logic and language of statistics so reporters can ask better questions about the many alleged facts or findings that rest, or should rest, on some credible numbers. Because this manual began as a project of the Harvard School of Public Health, the reporting of health and the environment is the major example. But the principles and many of the suggested "questions for reporters" can be used by inquiring reporters in any field. They can help you read a scientific report or listen to the conflicting claims of politicians, environmentalists, physicians, scientists or almost anyone and weigh and explain them. And the final chapter specifically shows how these principles apply in all areas.

VICTOR COHN

BACK COVER

"Statistics are involved in almost everything we journalists report, even statements by people who don't offer any statistics at all but make statistical claims anyway. We often report poorly because we fail to understand statistics, or to take them into account, or because we get bamboozled by phony or unreliable numbers.

"We can do better by learning some basic principles – the laws of uncertainty, probability and chance, power and numbers, variability and bias –in order to learn the probable truth of the things we are told, to weigh and question claims, to read and judge the contentions of scientists, doctors, environmentalists, politicians and economists.

"News & Numbers is a sample and nonmathematical 'how to' guide – how to understand and analyze and explain and do a better job of telling our audiences the truth, given reporting's tight constraints, either in print or on the air."

Victor Cohn

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