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| Course Title: | **Research Literacy for Media Professionals** |
| Course Number: | MEJO 790.1 |
| Instructor: | Prof. Deen Freelon, Ph.D. |
| Time: | M 1l am – 145 pm |
| Room: | <https://unc.zoom.us/j/94816465085> |
| Office hours: | Virtual and by appt only |
| My office: | Technically Carroll 380, but I’m not planning on spending much time there this semester. Instead, please schedule office hours here:  <https://doodle.com/mm/deenfreelon/book-a-time> |
| My email: | [freelon@email.unc.edu](mailto:freelon@email.unc.edu) |
| Course website: | <https://sakai.unc.edu/portal/site/mejo790.001.fa21> |

**Course introduction**

Research is one of the primary goals of the best universities, and one to which they commit billions of dollars annually. Yet most graduates of this university and most others will not go on to conduct formal research as one of their primary employment duties. That said, understanding what research is, how it is conducted, and the basics of how to critique it are important skills in many media-centric jobs, even if they aren’t listed in the job description. The purpose of this course is to introduce you to those research skills that are most useful for non-researchers. Its central premise is that whatever media-centric job you end up taking, you’ll find these skills valuable from time to time. Whether it’s knowing the right questions to ask about research studies, evaluating expert sources, or understanding how to interpret and critique data visualizations, my goal is to show you how research literacy can help you be a better media practitioner (or professional, if you prefer).

**By the end of this course, you should be able to:**

* Identify the major types of research as well as their goals and associated research methods
* Extract key pieces of information from scientific papers
* Ask critical questions of a research study that may reveal flaws in the study design
* Explain who counts as an “expert” and why
* Identify attempts to deceive and manipulate media audiences with false expertise
* Identify common techniques of statistical deception
* Understand and critique popular data visualization techniques

**Summary of course requirements**

* Attend and participate in all class meetings – 10%
* Discussion leadership - 10%
* News/research study critique - 20%
* Expert analysis- 25%
* Issue coverage analysis- 35%

**Course plan**

This course is divided into three main units (listed below in order):

1. Understanding research
2. Authority, expertise, and deception
3. Statistical and quantitative visualization literacy

The first unit is devoted to understanding what research is, its various types, how to read it, and how we can tell when it is conducted well vs. poorly. The second unit focuses on the nature of authority and expertise: where they come from, when they are valid and invalid, how people and organizations try to fabricate them, and how they shape our beliefs about what is true and false. The third unit focuses on differing philosophies of data visualization and their utility for various audiences and purposes.

*Grade key*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| 91-100% | H |
| 81-90% | P |
| 71-80% | L |
| < 70% | F |

**Required materials**

There are four books required for this course, all of which you should purchase ASAP:

Huff, D. (2010). *How to Lie with Statistics* (Reissue edition). W. W. Norton & Company.

Nichols, T. (2017). *The Death of Expertise: The Campaign against Established Knowledge and Why it Matters*. Oxford University Press.

Novella, S., Novella, B., Santa Maria, C., Novella, J., & Bernstein, E. (2018). *The Skeptic’s Guide to the Universe: How to Know What’s Really Real in a World Increasingly Full of Fake.* Hachette Book Group.

Ragin, C. C., & Amoroso, L. M. (2018). *Constructing Social Research: The Unity and Diversity of Method*. SAGE Publications, Inc.

Additional course readings are available on the course Sakai site through the “Course Reserves” link. Please read all assigned readings before the date on which they are listed and come to class prepared to discuss them.

**Assignments**

This course has five graded assignments:

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Assignment** | **Description** | **% Grade** | **Due date** |
| Class participation | Students are expected to attend and actively participate in each class session. This will mostly mean speaking up during seminar discussions, but also includes other in-class activities we will occasionally undertake. | 10 | None |
| Discussion leadership | During the first week of class, each student will sign up to be a discussion leader for one class day. Discussion leadership entails generating a list of questions based on the readings for that day and presenting them to the class for discussion--essentially creating a class agenda and ensuring that the students remain engaged for at least 90 minutes. I encourage each discussion leader to apply the course readings to themes or topics they are interested in. During each discussion leadership session, I will play the role of moderator, responding to and sometimes reframing the questions to help the discussion on a useful track. | 10 | Variable |
| News/research study critique | For this written assignment, you will identify a research study that has been covered in the media within the past two years. (Articles on the syllabus do not count.) You will read the study itself as well as one news article of at least 500 words that is primarily devoted to covering the study. Your paper will be a critique of how effectively and accurately the news article covered the study, and should include the following elements:   * A brief description of the study, including its overall purpose, method(s) used, findings, and overall significance. * A brief description of the news article, including the aspects of the study presented as most important (i.e. in the headline and lead paragraph), and any aspects that were omitted or minimized. You should also analyze any language choices that deviate from the language used by the study author(s) that might influence how readers interpret the study. * An evaluation of the accuracy of the article’s coverage, including whether the article made any claims not supported by the study, whether it emphasized the same findings the study authors did, and whether it left out anything that it should have included. * A detailed discussion of how the article could be rewritten to report on the study more accurately. This might include reorganizing it to place certain information closer to the beginning, using different (possibly less sensational?) language, explaining how the study fits with the broader literature on the topic, and/or explaining the study’s key methodological limitations. * You should be able to accomplish all this in 1200 - 1500 words. Microsoft Word or Google Docs format please. * Include the original study and news article in your assignment submission. | 20 | Sun, Sept 19 by 11:59pm |
| Expert analysis | For this assignment you will start by identifying an individual or organization (entity) that is frequently cited in the mainstream news media as an expert on a given topic. Then you will write a paper containing the following elements:   * A brief, *original* profile of the entity, including citations (Wikipedia may not be used as a source) * Evidence that the entity is mentioned frequently by a broad range of media outlets (you can get this from Lexis Nexis or Factiva, which we will discuss in class) * Using readings from the course and outside it, discuss the entity’s strengths and weaknesses as an expert. * Finally, suggest a second expert who would be a better choice (if the entity’s weaknesses outweigh its strengths) or who would provide an appropriate alternative viewpoint (if the opposite is true). Justify your choice. * You should be able to accomplish all this in 1300 - 1600 words. Microsoft Word or Google Docs format please. | 25 | Sun, Oct 17 by 11:59pm |
| Issue coverage analysis | Briefly, this assignment will require you to analyze how news coverage of a particular issue uses sources and academic research. You’ll start by choosing a controversial issue that’s been prominent in the US news media during the past two years. You’ll then select at least 50 articles covering your issue for analysis (I’ll show you the best way to do this). You’ll work with a classmate to extract the following information from each article:   * Every quoted individual and organization/institution (including anonymous sources) * The presence of various broad social categories quoted as sources (e.g. government, private sector, nonprofit sector, etc.). These categories will likely differ from your classmates’ based on your chosen topic. * Evidence of possible deception, manipulation, or “spin” as well as how the journalist tries to address it (when applicable)   To clarify, every student will write a paper about their own chosen topic, but every student will analyze data for two projects: their own and their partner’s. The idea is to have every issue dataset analyzed twice to get some level of agreement on the prevalence of each data point.  Your paper should include the following elements:   * A summary of your findings (e.g. the most cited sources, social categories, and any attempts at deception or spin) * An analysis of the quality of news coverage of this issue, including at least three of the following four topics:   + Source diversity (are there many sources representing many interests, or the same few sources again and again?)   + Category diversity (is a broad or narrow set of social interests represented?)   + Susceptibility to deceptive tactics (how much evidence is there of attempts by sources to spread lies or misinfo on this issue? How effectively do your news articles handle these attempts?)   + One more quality issue of your own choice that came up in your reading of the articles * A set of recommendations for how to improve news coverage of this issue. This should focus on how to rectify the major shortcomings identified in the previous sections and build upon existing strengths. Also discuss any challenges that might make your recommendations difficult to implement. * This paper should run between 2000 and 2500 words, not including tables, charts, and references. Microsoft Word or Google Docs format please. You will also present your findings to the class during our final exam period. * Please cite all sources. | 35 | Fri, Dec 10 by 12pm |

**My classroom expectations**

In this class, I expect that you will:

* Come to class prepared to engage with the day’s material
* Come to class on time
* Complete all assignments on time
* Silence your mobile phone during class
* Not waste class time on electronic or online services unrelated to class.
* Speak up regularly and relevantly
* Let me know if and when you’re having trouble understanding anything (feel free to do so publicly or privately)
* Not insult or belittle me or your fellow classmates
* Refrain from plagiarism and other violations of UNC’s Honor Code (see below)

Additionally, given recent events, I feel it is important to clarify the bounds of class conduct and discussion in advance to reduce confusion about what is permitted and what is not. I undertake this task in the spirit of one of every university’s main purposes: to distinguish between valid and invalid knowledge and judgments. Therefore, over and above UNC’s official diversity statement (reproduced below), I hereby establish the following bounds of classroom conduct. All students in this class will:

* Refrain from judging individuals according to the collective groups of which they are members (e.g. race, gender, class, sexual orientation, disability status, etc.);
* Assess intellectual ideas and arguments strictly according to the evidence supporting them, and not based on the identities of the individual who created them;
* Acknowledge that due to historical and contemporary systems of oppression, allegations of racism, sexism, homophobia, ableism, etc. are not symmetrical between social groups. This means such claims can only be valid when advanced by members of a less powerful group against a more powerful group. Allegations in the opposite direction (e.g. of “reverse racism”) will not be tolerated. Such notions have been definitively debunked by many strong arguments for which I am happy to provide references upon request.

By the same token, you can expect that I will:

* Come to class prepared and enthused to engage with the day’s material
* Treat your personal views with respect
* Carefully explain any concepts that don’t make sense
* Cultivate a civil and welcoming class environment
* Return your graded assignments within about a week
* Reward good-faith efforts to engage with course material
* Refer plagiarism and other violations of UNC’s Honor Code to the proper authorities (see below)

**My policies**

* *Lateness:* Please arrive promptly for class; lateness is disruptive and inconsiderate. Chronic lateness will count against your grade.
* *Late assignments:* Turning in your assignments on time will be absolutely critical in this class. Otherwise you will fall behind, which will jeopardize your ability to complete the final assignment. So please keep current with these.
* *Mobile phones:* These should not be used during class under any circumstances, and your ringer should be set to silent.
* *Bathroom:* Feel free to use the bathroom whenever you need to; just leave and re-enter as quietly as possible.

**University Policies**

*Mask use*

All enrolled students are required to wear a mask covering their mouths and noses at all times in our classroom. This requirement is to protect our educational community -- your classmates and me – as we learn together. If you choose not to wear a mask, or wear it improperly, I will ask you to leave immediately, and I will submit a report to the Office of Student Conduct. At that point you will be disenrolled from this course for the protection of our educational community. Students who have an authorized accommodation from Accessibility Resources and Service have an exception. For additional information, see <https://carolinatogether.unc.edu/university-guidelines-for-facemasks/> .

*Attendance*

No right or privilege exists that permits a student to be absent from any class meetings, except for these University Approved Absences:

1. Authorized University activities
2. Disability/religious observance/pregnancy, as required by law and approved by Accessibility Resources and Service and/or the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (EOC)
3. Significant health condition and/or personal/family emergency as approved by the Office of the Dean of Students, Gender Violence Service Coordinators, and/or the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office (EOC).

Please communicate with me early about potential absences. Please be aware that you are bound by the Honor Code when making a request for a University approved absence.

*The Honor Code*

I expect that each student will conduct himself or herself within the guidelines of the University honor system (http://honor.unc.edu). All academic work should be done with the high levels of honesty and integrity that this University demands. You are expected to produce your own work in this class. If you have any questions about your responsibility or your instructor’s responsibility as a faculty member under the Honor Code, please see the course instructor or Senior Associate Dean C. A. Tuggle, or you may speak with a representative of the Student Attorney Office or the Office of the Dean of Students.

A special note about plagiarism: The Instrument of Student Governance at UNC defines plagiarism as “deliberate or reckless representation of another’s words, thoughts, or ideas as one’s own without attribution in connection with submission of academic work, whether graded or otherwise.” Copying-and-pasting from online sources without citing the source from which you obtained the content is clearly an instance of plagiarism. However, it may also be plagiarism if you rely too heavily on the structure and reasoning of another piece (for example, if you rely too much on swapping out synonyms or making only very superficial changes to content that is not yours). This type of extensive paraphrasing is not acceptable in this course, which requires you to demonstrate original thinking and analysis. If you have any questions about whether your use of reference material is appropriate, please see me. If any part of your work is judged by me and an independent faculty member to reflect inappropriate use of reference material, I reserve the right to adjust assignment and course grades downwards, in addition to reporting suspected violations.

*Syllabus Changes*

I reserve the right to make changes to the syllabus, including project due dates and test dates. These changes will be announced as early as possible.

*ARS*

The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill facilitates the implementation of reasonable accommodations, including resources and services, for students with disabilities, chronic medical conditions, a temporary disability or pregnancy complications resulting in barriers to fully accessing University courses, programs and activities.

Accommodations are determined through the Office of Accessibility Resources and Service (ARS) for individuals with documented qualifying disabilities in accordance with applicable state and federal laws. See the ARS Website for contact information: [https://ars.unc.edu](https://ars.unc.edu/) or email [ars@unc.edu](mailto:ars@unc.edu).

*Counseling and Psychological Services*

CAPS is strongly committed to addressing the mental health needs of a diverse student body through timely access to consultation and connection to clinically appropriate services, whether for short or long-term needs. Go to their website: <https://caps.unc.edu/> or visit their facilities on the third floor of the Campus Health Services building for a walk-in evaluation to learn more. 

*Title IX*

Any student who is impacted by discrimination, harassment, interpersonal (relationship) violence, sexual violence, sexual exploitation, or stalking is encouraged to seek resources on campus or in the community. Reports can be made online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>. Please contact the University’s Title IX Coordinator (Elizabeth Hall, interim – [titleixcoordinator@unc.edu](mailto:titleixcoordinator@unc.edu)), Report and Response Coordinators in the Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office ([reportandresponse@unc.edu](mailto:reportandresponse@unc.edu)), Counseling and Psychological Services (confidential), or the Gender Violence Services Coordinators ([gvsc@unc.edu](mailto:gvsc@unc.edu); confidential) to discuss your specific needs. Additional resources are available at [safe.unc.edu](https://safe.unc.edu/).

*Policy on non-discrimination*

The University is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and to ensuring that educational and employment decisions are based on individuals’ abilities and qualifications. Consistent with this principle and applicable laws, the University’s [Policy Statement on Non-Discrimination](https://unc.policystat.com/policy/4467906/latest/) offers access to its educational programs and activities as well as employment terms and conditions without respect to race, color, gender, national origin, age, religion, creed, genetic information, disability, veteran’s status, sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.  Such a policy ensures that only relevant factors are considered and that equitable and consistent standards of conduct and performance are applied.

If you are experiencing harassment or discrimination, you can seek assistance and file a report through the Report and Response Coordinators (see contact info at  [safe.unc.edu](https://safe.unc.edu/)) or the [Equal Opportunity and Compliance Office](http://eoc.unc.edu/), or online to the EOC at <https://eoc.unc.edu/report-an-incident/>.

*Diversity*

I strive to make this classroom an inclusive space for all students. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to improve; I appreciate any suggestions. More broadly, our school has adopted diversity and inclusion mission and vision statements with accompanying goals. These complement the University policy on prohibiting harassment and discrimination. In summary, UNC is committed to providing an inclusive and welcoming environment for all members of our community and does not discriminate in offering access to its educational programs and activities on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, creed, disability, veteran’s status, sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression. The Dean of Students (Suite 1106, Student Academic Services Building, CB# 5100, 450 Ridge Road, Chapel Hill, NC 27599-5100 or [919] 966-4042) has been designated to handle inquiries regarding the University’s nondiscrimination policies.

**Course reading schedule**

The readings below are subject to change. I won’t change more than one reading per week, and if/when I do, I’ll give at least a week’s notice.

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| *Date* | *Topic* | *Readings* | *Assignment due* |
| 8/23 | What is research (literacy)? | * Ragin ch 1 * Dow & Sutton * <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research> * Shapiro & Hughes |  |
| 8/30 | How to read a research paper | * McGregor ch 1 * Ragin chs 2 and 3 * Elysium Health * Keshav * Broniatowski et al |  |
| 9/13 | Understanding quantitative research | * Ragin ch 7 * Veronese et al. * Solon * Zorthian * Anderson & Jiang |  |
| 9/20 | Understanding qualitative research | * Ragin ch 5 * Chrisomalis * Peters * Yin * Carmichael et al. | News/research study critique due **Sun, 9/19 @ 11:59pm** |
| 9/27 | Understanding digital research | * Freelon, “Inferring individual-level characteristics from digital trace data” * Silverman * Vo * Howard et al. * Jalonick |  |
| 10/4 | What is authority? Humans and institutions | * Nichols chs 1, 2 * Gelfert * Gingrich * Resnick |  |
| 10/11 | What is authority? Tech and media overload | * Nichols chs 4, 5 * boyd * Angwin et al. * Shulevitz |  |
| 10/18 | On being wrong (or misinformation) | * Nichols ch 6 * Novella 4, 5, 8, 9, 12, 15 * Frank | Expert analysis **due Sun, 10/17 @ 11:59pm** |
| 10/25 | Disinformation | * Novella 23, 25, 35, 46 * Subedar * Marwick & Lewis pp. 1-49 * Lapowsky |  |
| 11/1 | Who gets to be an expert? Racists, socialists, and snake-oil salespeople | * Novella 42, 44, 52, 54 * Harkinson * Siese * Freelon * Relman |  |
| 11/8 | Stat/visual literacy 1 | * Huff chs 1, 2 * Novella 17, 18, 24, 30 * Gelman & Unwin * [Viz example](https://www.behance.net/gallery/10901127/History-of-Life) |  |
| 11/15 | Stat/visual literacy 2 | * Huff chs 3, 4 * Tufte * Healy (everything except 1.3) * [Viz example 1](https://imgur.com/DNxvj) * [Viz example 2](http://duelingdata.blogspot.com/2016/01/the-beatles.html) * [Viz example 3](https://mir-s3-cdn-cf.behance.net/project_modules/2800/f95d8a17308455.562b866f7adf7.png) |  |
| 11/22 | Stat/visual literacy 3 | * Huff chs 5, 6 * Abernathy pp. 1-49 * Wilkinson * [Viz example 1](https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/ng-interactive/2017/dec/20/bussed-out-america-moves-homeless-people-country-study) * [Viz example 2](https://cdn.mos.cms.futurecdn.net/7Me8Lf2wR5tUkfQJ9Gz2q6.jpg) |  |
| 11/29 | Visualization best practices 2 | * Huff chs 7, 8 * Correll * Wilke * D’Ignazio & Klein * [Viz example 1](http://www.metoomentum.com/trending.html) * [Viz example 2](https://2oqz471sa19h3vbwa53m33yj-wpengine.netdna-ssl.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/world-debt-2019.png) * [Viz example 3](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/resources/library/images/20200303PHT73852/20200303PHT73852_original.jpg) |  |
| 12/10 | **Final presentations** | (none) | Issue coverage analysis due **Fri, 12/10 by 12pm**. The exam period is **12pm – 3pm.** |