

Syllabus

MPJO-720, Computer-Assisted Reporting

Spring 2010

Time and location TBD

Georgetown Lecturer Robert Benincasa

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(202) 513-3596 (M-F, 9-6)

Office hours by appointment

Course Description

Students will learn the basics of doing computer-assisted reporting in today's complex and dynamic media world. We'll work on developing marketable data-driven storytelling skills for news, enterprise and investigative coverage. Lectures will be tailored to the current state of the art in data reporting on the Web, print and broadcast platforms. The course includes hands-on training leading to proficiency in spreadsheet and database applications. Course themes include ethical and aggressive watchdog reporting, data quality, audience expectations and social media. For certain topics, we'll take a less technical and more conceptual approach. These topics include GIS mapping and the technologies that drive interactive data visualizations. We'll also examine the journalistic decisions and values that accompany data-oriented stories, including communicating appropriate levels of precision and uncertainty in narratives, polls and graphics. By the end of the course, students will be required to acquire a database, determine its journalistic merits and perform a basic analysis. Students will write a detailed story memo based on the analysis.

Course Objectives

Develop professional understanding and skill in computer-assisted reporting techniques that adapt social science concepts to journalism. The skills and techniques will be useful across a variety of assignments and media platforms. Develop the ability to perform and critically evaluate the research and analysis of advocates and others in a journalistic context. Develop a practical understanding of the roles computer-assisted reporting/analysis and databases are playing in the media.

Required Materials

Houston, Brant. (2004) *Computer Assisted Reporting, A Practical Guide* (3rd Ed). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's. (\$44.25 from the university bookstore)

Meyer, Philip. (2002) *Precision Journalism, A Reporter's Introduction to Social Science Methods* (4th Ed). Lanham, Md: Rowman and Littlefield. (\$29.95 from the university bookstore)

2 GB minimum storage capacity USB flash drive such as the SanDisk Cruzer Micro. Available at electronics and discount stores.

Recommended Reading

For help with basic Excel functions: Walkenbach, John. (2003) *Excel 2003 Bible*. Wiley. (\$26 from amazon.com)

For more advanced Excel topics: Jelen, Bill. (2005) *Learn Excel from Mr. Excel: 277 Excel Mysteries Solved*. Holy Macro! Books. (\$24 from amazon.com)

For basic and more advanced Access tasks: Viescas, John L. (2003) *Microsoft Office Access 2003 Inside Out*. Microsoft Press. (\$30 on amazon.com)

For specialization in data graphics: Tufte, Edward R. (2001) *The Visual Display of Quantitative Information, 2nd Edition*. Graphics Press. (\$33 on amazon.com)

Additional materials

In addition to the listed texts, there are numerous other required and recommended readings. Readings required to be done prior to class on a specific week will be posted in that week's folder on Blackboard. Recommended but not required materials will be posted in the "For Further Reading" folder on Blackboard. Also, assignment and practice data will be available on Blackboard. For more information about Blackboard, visit <http://cndls.georgetown.edu/blackboard/student.html>. Many materials are in PDF format and require the free Acrobat Reader software to read. The reader is available at http://www.adobe.com/products/acrobat/readstep2_allversions.html

Course schedule

Most class meetings will have two components: a technical training component relating to tools and techniques, and a class discussion on selected topics relevant to practicing computer-assisted reporting. For each week below, technical topics are listed first, in bold. Readings may be added as late as one week before their due date, and the sequence of classes may change. Any revisions to the syllabus will be posted to Blackboard.

Week 1: **Introduction to CAR software and methodology**. Course overview; examples of data-oriented stories; trends in CAR.

Week 2: **Excel 1**; Data aggregation and granularity. News value of grouped and granular data. Readings due: Meyer Ch. 1, Houston Chapters 1, 3 and 4; materials in the Week 2 Readings folder on Blackboard.

Week 3: **Excel 2**; Acquiring data from a variety of sources, online and otherwise. Social media platforms. Guest speaker on social media. Materials in Week 3 Readings folder on Blackboard. **Assignment given: Mini analysis 1.**

Week 4: **Excel 3**; Finding and capturing data on the Internet. The Invisible Web. File management and conversion issues. Readings due: Materials in the Week 4 Readings folder on Blackboard.

Week 5: **Access 1 & SQL**; Understanding your data. Nulls vs. zeroes. Readings due: Houston, Chapter 9; materials in the Week 5 Readings folder on Blackboard. **Assignment due: Mini analysis 1. Assignment given: Mini analysis 2 with story memo.**

Week 6: **Access 2**; Designing your analysis. Making valid comparisons and ranks, the importance of appropriate denominators. Readings due: Meyer, Chapters 3 and 4; materials in the Week 6 Readings folder on Blackboard. **Assignment given: Final project proposal.**

Week 7: **Access 3**. Writing about your analysis. Ethics and transparency in reporting. Reporting on the research of others. Ethical strategies for pre-publication peer review. Readings due: Houston, Chapter 10; materials in the Week 7 Readings folder on Blackboard. **Assignment due: Mini analysis 2 with story memo.**

Spring Break

Week 8: **Access 4**. Visually depicting data and analysis results. Making effective graphs and charts across platforms; collaborating with graphic artists and Web developers. The latest trends in data visualization. Readings due: Materials in the Week 8 folder on Blackboard. **Assignment due: Final project proposal. Assignment given: Mini analysis 3 with story memo.**

Week 9: **Mapping Essentials**. Geographic concepts such as coordinate systems and projections. Visual considerations for effective maps. Mapping interactivity issues. Google Maps. News value of maps. Readings due: Materials in the Week 9 folder on Blackboard.

Week 10: **Hands-on GIS training**. Demonstration of the capabilities of ArcView GIS software. Mapping your data, performing spatial analysis. Meet in Lauinger Library, Gelardin New Media Center, Dubin Classroom. Readings due: Materials in the Week 10 folder on Blackboard.

Week 11: **Online database and interactivity technologies**. Considerations for putting searchable databases on the Internet. Web interactivity, present and future. Readings due: Materials in the Week 11 folder on Blackboard. **Assignment due: Mini analysis 3 with story memo.**

Week 12: **Polling & surveys**. Accurately and fairly reporting poll results. Polling design issues, margins of error. Readings due: Meyer, Chapter 6; materials in the Week 12 folder on Blackboard.

Week 13: **Building your own databases**. Database design issues, data entry projects. Readings due: materials in the Week 13 folder on Blackboard.

Week 14: **Relating to data gatekeepers.** FOIA laws. Readings due: RCFP FOIA guide at <http://www.rcfp.org/foiact/index.html> and <http://www.rcfp.org/electaccess/>; materials in the Week 14 folder on Blackboard.

Final project due on DATE: You have the option of a telephone consultation about your project after it's graded. If you choose, just note it on your paper, and include information on how to reach you.

Grading

Assignments will be graded on the following criteria:

Computational accuracy: Did you add things up properly, etc.?

Logical integrity: Did you choose the correct measures and methods for your analysis? Do your findings make sense? Did you answer the questions asked in the assignment?

Accuracy, clarity and relevance in writing: Does your narrative correctly describe your analytic findings and other information you seek to convey? In sections that require journalistic writing, is the prose engaging and clear?

Editorial judgment: Did you choose the best material to emphasize? Did you anticipate questions by your audience and answer them? Did you convey the weaknesses in your analysis transparently?

Grades on late assignments will be reduced at the instructor's discretion. I cannot accept a late assignment after the results of the assignment have been discussed in class.

The three mini analyses together comprise one third of the semester grade. The final project counts for one third, and class participation for one third. Class participation includes attending class ready to discuss the assigned reading material, contributing to class discussions and completing in-class exercises.

End-of-semester incompletes are unavailable, except in extreme circumstances. Numeric grades correspond to letter grades as follows:

A	100-92	B-	83-80
A-	91-90	C	79-70
B+	89-88	F	69-0
B	87-84		

Communicating with your teacher

The best way to reach me is via e-mail. Because I receive a large volume of e-mail that I discard each day, please include the letters "MPJO-720" at the start of your e-mail's subject line. This will insure that I do not accidentally delete your message. If you need a one-on-one consultation, the best time to arrange it will likely be in the evening before class starts. We can also schedule a telephone consultation.

University Resources

- MPS Writing Resource Program (Lauinger Library, 217A; 202-687-4246; <http://writingcenter.georgetown.edu/>)
- Academic Resource Center (Leavey Center, Suite 335; 202-687-8354; arc@georgetown.edu; <http://ldss.georgetown.edu/>)
- Counseling and Psychiatric Services (One Darnall Hall; 202-687-6985; <http://caps.georgetown.edu/>)
- The Honor Council
<http://www11.georgetown.edu/programs/gervase/hc/>
- Inclement Weather
<http://preparedness.georgetown.edu/>

Information about the status of campus during inclement weather is available on the Web or by calling the weather hotline at (202) 687-7669.

Students with Disabilities

Students with disabilities should contact the Academic Resource Center before the start of classes to allow their office time to review the documentation and make recommendations for appropriate accommodations. If accommodations are recommended, you will be given a letter from ARC to share with your professors. You are personally responsible for completing this process officially and in a timely manner. Neither accommodations nor exceptions to policies can be permitted to students who have not completed this process in advance.

Classroom etiquette

Students should turn off all cell phones and communication devices while in class. Class discussions should be respectful and considerate of others' views and opinions.

Georgetown Honor System

All students are held to the university's Honor Code. The Honor Pledge: *In the pursuit of the high ideals and rigorous standards of academic life, I commit myself to respect and uphold the Georgetown University Honor System: To be honest in any academic endeavor, and To conduct myself honorably, as a responsible member of the Georgetown community, as we live and work together.*