Junior Honors Seminar: Exploring Trends in News Coverage  
PS 494 (CRN #60013)  
M W 12:30pm–1:50pm  
G17 Foreign Languages Building  
Fall 2015

Professor Scott Althaus  
Office: 328e David Kinley Hall  
Hours: M 11:30am-12:20pm, W 2:00pm-3:00pm, and by appt.

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Course Overview

Our class will be conducting two original academic research projects that have the potential to make a difference in our understanding of the world. The first class project follows from recent unrest around the country about injustices perpetrated by the criminal justice system against racial minorities. Our class will systematically analyze the visual depictions of lawbreakers in local news coverage from the Champaign-Urbana area, focusing on the correspondence between the “face of crime” depicted in news media imagery and the real-world racial breakdown of arrests in the local area. This project will assess whether local news media present an accurate or distorted racial profile of criminal perpetrators in the Champaign-Urbana community.

The second class project will be the first study ever undertaken of the topical distribution of news items appearing in the American newsreel system between 1915 and 1967. You might have heard of newsreels (if you’ve ever watched the History Channel, you’ll have seen film from them), but most people know little about them as a news medium. Few scholars even realize that newsreels were the first truly global visual news medium, and that the global newsreel system was broadcasting film of current events all around the world before World War One started. For you history buffs, this was more than 60 years before CNN went on the air. This second project will produce an accurate mapping of the evolution of the newsreel system from a pure entertainment medium to the precursor for what would become national television newscasts on television. The data from this second project will also be used by the Cline Center for Democracy to conduct text-analytic research on these newsreel holdings.

You should know that as a student in this class, you will not only be contributing to something of potentially great public and scholarly interest, but also that you’ll be working harder than you would in most other courses. Not only will you be keeping up with lectures and readings, but you will also be producing original research to contribute to current debates about news depictions of race and crime in the United States, and about the history of political communication. It will be an intense course in terms of workload, but I suspect also an exceptionally rewarding course for everyone involved. It will truly be a collaborative scholarly undertaking where faculty and students work together as a team to conduct research that will be distributed publicly.

Course Objectives

This course has five primary objectives. By the end of this course, students should have learned to:

1) formulate good research questions and hypotheses
2) understand why social scientists use rigorous methods and procedures to generate valid empirical findings
3) conduct original social science research using the methods of quantitative content analysis
4) analyze those research findings in ways that advance public understanding of
   a) whether news portrayals of crime perpetrators present an accurate reflection of real-world criminal behavior in a community
b) the topical agenda of the global communication system embodied by the newsreel system
5) effectively communicate research findings to lay audiences

Course Projects
This is a project-based course consisting of two group projects and an individual research paper. The individual research paper can either expand on a topic of interest in the first group project, or explore a new topic using “big data” text analytics resources available to the Cline Center for Democracy. Most of the class time will be spent on the two group projects, rather than on lectures or readings.

Acknowledgement Credit
Each of our class’ research projects is intended to generate new insights on important questions. They might also gain public visibility or contribute to an academic publication. If this happens, student contributors will be acknowledged by name in any reports or publications that might draw directly on the results of these class projects.

Required Reading
Students are required to obtain the following book, which is available at local bookstores (a copy will be placed on reserve at the Undergraduate Library):


Students are also required to obtain a set of additional readings which will be distributed over the course Moodle.

Course Moodle Site
This course has a Moodle site that will be the primary vehicle for receiving course assignments and distributing course-related materials in electronic form. The Moodle site can be accessed at https://learn.illinois.edu/.

Assignments
Your final grade for this course will be determined by your performance on the following assignments:

- Class participation (10% of final grade)
- Hypothesis generation papers (2-3 double-spaced pages each) (5% each, 10% of final grade)
- Individual research paper (8-10 double-spaced pages) (30% of final grade)
- First group project report (30% of final grade)
- Second group project report (20% of final grade)

The class participation component considers a number of factors, including class attendance, participating in class discussions, the amount of effort expended in coding data for the research projects, and the accuracy with which the data is coded.

You will turn in two short hypothesis generation papers (2-3 pages double-spaced pages each). Each paper will focus on a specific set of readings, and will require you to develop original research questions and hypotheses based on the readings. These papers may be rewritten and re-submitted for an improved grade. Students desiring this option must notify the instructor before the notification period for each paper assignment has ended, and must meet with the instructor to
discuss the revisions before any revised paper can be turned in. The grade for any revised paper will be averaged with the original paper grade to determine the overall grade for the paper assignment.

The individual research paper (8-10 pages double-spaced) will either explore a topic related to the first group project, or explore a new topic using “big data” text analytics resources available to the Cline Center for Democracy. With the first option, this assignment will allow you to dig deeper into the topic than the quantitative evidence that our content analysis work will be producing. This paper may be rewritten and re-submitted for an improved grade. Students desiring this option must notify the instructor before the notification period for the paper assignment has ended, and must meet with the instructor to discuss the revisions before any revised paper can be turned in. The grade for any revised paper will be averaged with the original paper grade to determine the overall grade for the paper assignment.

The normal mode of participation in our course will be as part of a project team or group. Students will be joining together to complete group project reports in which the final product will be a fully collaborative effort. The first group project report will consist of an in-class presentation accompanied by a detailed summary report suitable for online distribution (8-10 pages double-spaced) and a short visual media summary (e.g., YouTube video or infographic) that presents the group’s research question(s), methods, and findings for external audiences. The second group project report will consist of an in-class presentation only. As is well known, group projects often end up with some members doing a disproportionate share of the work. To ensure that each member contributes a fair share of the effort for the project, at the completion of each of the group assignments I will ask you to confidentially assess the contributions made by each of your fellow group members. If at least two members of a group give any particular group member less than a 100% score for effort, then the average score for that member will be used as a multiplier to reduce the individual’s grade on that report. In this way, it is possible for the group as a whole to receive an “A” while a particular team member receives an “F”. It is important to keep in mind that effort is being evaluated here rather than ability. It is expected that groups will allocate responsibilities according to the skills and abilities of individual members, so that members with fewer relevant skills can work on mastering new ones or take on simpler but more time-consuming tasks required for the project. In addition, you will have the opportunity to allocate a small amount of extra credit among your fellow group members to reward extra effort or special contributions.

Bibliographic Citation Format: I expect proper bibliographic references in all written work produced in this course, and for this reason our class will consistently follow the APA author-date style. Papers should be typed or word-processed, double-spaced, and set in a standard font (generally 10-12 point sizes).

Extra Credit Policy: There are no extra credit opportunities available to students taking this course other than peer-awarded points that can be earned in the group project work.

Late Assignment Policy: Unless you make prior arrangements with me, assignments turned in past deadline will lose one full letter grade for each day of class that the assignment is late (beginning with the day the assignment is due). Only in extraordinary circumstances will I grant extensions when the request is made in the 48-hour period before the time the assignment is due.

Special Accommodations: All qualified students entitled to special testing accommodations or assignment deadlines should let me know as early in the semester as possible so I can make appropriate arrangements. Do not be shy about asking for appropriate accommodations in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)—if you have qualified for them, then you deserve to have them. Please let me know as soon as possible if you have a disability that requires special accommodations for taking this class. I am committed to making sure that all
students taking the course have equal opportunities for doing their best work.

Expectations for Students

- Students are expected to be seated at a workstation and ready to work at the start of each class period (12:30pm). No accommodations will be made for students who arrive late, miss an in-class assignment, or miss logging their presence into a class sign-in sheet.
- Students should read and be prepared to discuss all readings assigned for a particular day prior to coming to class.
- Students are allowed to use laptop or classroom computers only for taking class notes, working on class assignments, or conducting class research. Students violating this rule may be asked to leave class for the day.
- Mobile phones, tablets, and other communication devices must be put on silent mode and stowed out of sight while class is in session.
- Conflicts with deadlines or other matters should be brought up with me well in advance of the conflict. I will do my best to find a remedy for the conflict, so long as I am given adequate time to do so.
- Students must attend class. If you miss a class, you’ll need to get a copy of lecture notes from another student. I don’t provide copies of my notes or PowerPoint presentations to students.

Tentative Weekly Schedule for Class Topics and Reading Assignments

8/24  Introduction

8/26  Overview of First Group Project: How Accurate Is Local News Coverage of Criminal Perpetrators?


8/31  How to Generate Good Research Questions and Hypotheses


9/2  Soak and Poke Session with Local News Content

Guest lecturer: Kylee Britzman


9/7  [NO CLASS—LABOR DAY HOLIDAY]

9/9  Introduction to Content Analysis Methods


9/14 Codebook Refinement
9/14 First hypothesis generation paper due at start of class

9/16 Reliability Testing

9/21, 23 Data Collection

9/28, 30 Data Collection

10/5, 7 Reconciliation Coding and Data Analysis

10/12, 14 Report Preparation

10/19 First Group Project Presentation

10/21 Overview of Second Group Project: When Did Newsreels Get Serious about News?


10/26, 28 Soak and Poke Sessions with Newsreel Content

*Fielding, The American newsreel, chapters 1-9

11/2 Codebook Refinement

11/2 Individual research paper due at start of class

11/4 Reliability Testing

*Fielding, The American newsreel, chapters 10-18

11/9, 11 Data Collection


11/16, 18 Data Collection

11/16 Second hypothesis generation paper due at start of class

12/23, 25 [NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING BREAK]

11/30, 12/2 Data Analysis

No readings assigned

12/7, 9 Report Preparation

No readings assigned

12/14 Second Group Project Presentation (7:00-10:00pm)