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Junior Seminar 379 - Reflections on Justice: How then shall we live?

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Engagement with Data

Engaging with data, as opposed to opinions or even expert viewpoints, is important to determine and safeguard objective decision-making. Dealing with issues of justice, we must be able to make good decisions based not on our own emotions or opinion, nor on the emotions and opinions of others, no matter who they are or what they claim. Objective data are often the only means by which honest decisions can be made and decisions that are truly of benefit to all.

Therefore in this section, we will learn to work with data, search for data to support or reject a position, and work objectively with differing points of view.

Common Issues

The issues involved in engaging with data fall into two categories:

1. How to search for data
2. How to evaluate data

How do you search for data?

You can find data referenced in any of the following:

- Scholarly Articles
- Popular or trade articles
- Data Collections

When searching for data, it is crucial to know what you are likely to find in the aforementioned three kinds of sources. If you don't have accurate expectations of what you may find in a source, you can spend needless time and effort searching in the wrong place. These sources can vary greatly in levels of quality, reliability, scope of data, depth of data, and presentation of data.

In scholarly articles, data is presented in a formal manner, following the standards in a given discipline, and with cited references to the sources of that data. Often in scholarly research articles, the actual numeric data are presented in specific sections (e.g., Results section). However, the author will discuss the data throughout the article, noting strengths and weaknesses involved in gathering and analyzing the data, and will draw conclusions from the data..

In popular or trade articles, data is often summarized and presented in a prose style, or the numerica data will appear in a very reduced format, in contrast to the more extensive tabular or graphic data in scholarly articles. Most popular or trade articles will refer the reader to (a) the scholarly article in which the data was originally analyzed, and in much greater detail, or (b) a large collection of data from which only bits, pieces, and summations were used in the popular or trade article.

Data collections vary greatly in what that provide and can offer the reader (a) just the data; (b) data with summaries; and/or (c) charts or other graphics with accompanying interpretation. A collection of data may even reference several other sources for original data. You may work with confidential data collections at times, but most likely will be engaging with collections open to the public domain, such as data collected by government agencies or privately or publically funded organizations.

How do you evaluate the data you find?

First and foremost, the data you use should be from a reliable source. If you find data from non-scholarly articles or from other non-scholarly resources, you should trace the data to its original source, which would be either (a) a scholarly work or (b) raw data gathered from a primary document such as an interview or survey. In all cases, the reader must follow the trail of breadcrumbs until able to find and obtain the original data source in order to appropriately evaluate and analyze the data.

As you evaluate data and findings based on data, consider the following factors to determine the usability of the data:

- Relevance to your topic and your argument
- Timeliness of the data

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What's New

- Reliability (should be from valid, authoritative source)
- Objectivity (should be without bias)
- Scope of data provided (small pool of data vs. larger pool of data; representative amount?)
- Depth of data provided (level of detail)

Assessing the usability of data is essential for substantiating, debating, affirming, or refuting a decision or position.

Additional questions to consider when engaging with data include the following:

- Under what conditions was the data collected and in what type of study?. Controlled? Variable? Biases?
- What type of study or investigation was conducted? Survey? Interview? Case study?
- What questions were asked? Random questions? Structure questions? How were they structured? Any favoritism or bias in the questions asked?
- Who were the subjects of investigation? Random group? Target audience? Any particular aspects about the group that might make the findings more or less relevant to your topic of research?
- Does anyone involved in the study have a stake in the outcome of the data collection process or results? Researcher? Funding agency?
- Is there any evidence of bias in collecting or interpreting the data?

When using data from any source, you must be careful not to misrepresent the data by implying or presenting some statement or conclusion that was not part of the researcher's original data. So, when referring to data, be sure to use it within the context from which it was taken and to avoid cherry-picking.

Let's Practice: Engaging with Data

In the arena of social justice, voting and the circumstances surrounding this activity is hotly debated. Is voting a right or a privilege? And to what extent should felons be included amongst those who have that right or privilege? What would your stance on this be? To have an informed opinion, you will have to do some investigation to support your position. Your position might even change after your research!

We will examine data from the following:

- Scholarly article
- Non-scholarly article
- Data collection

Before we practice engaging with each of these sources, a brief review of the difference between qualitative and quantitative research may be necessary at this point. While **qualitative research** refers to an evaluation or analysis that is based on observation, principles, or experience and tends to deal with non-numerical information, **quantitative research** refers to research based on an examination of facts or data that can be measured because the data tends to be numerical data. Thus, quantitative research articles are often the articles with which we must engage in order to engage with reliable data.

Let's Practice: Engaging with Data in a Scholarly Article

Let's examine a scholarly article with data that have been gathered and analyzed for recidivism of former convicts when given the right to vote, with the understanding that a possible paper thesis might be based on a potential reason to argue for or against their right to vote.

Activity 1: Engaging with Data in a Scholarly Article

View the article, "[Voting and Subsequent Crime and Arrest: Evidence from a Community Sample.](#)" (1) (also available via the database SocIndex)

In the article, go to the third section, titled "Data and Measures" and view the first table of data you find, **Table 1**.

([Can't find the table? Verify Table 1 here.](#))

Once you have scanned through the table of data, note the text prior to the table and following the table. Always review the article to explain fully the data presented in any table, chart, or graphic. Tables, charts, and other visual displays of data are just that—displays only. For thorough discussion, analysis, and significance of the data displayed, the reader must engage with the entire article.

In this same article, scroll down to the fourth section in "Results" and examine **Figure 1**, titled "Percentage Arrested and Incarcerated in 1997-2000 among Voters and Non-Voters in 1996." What does this bar graph show? What does the graph not show?

To be able to answer this question is imperative to understanding the data represented graphically.

answer

A common mistake many make when reviewing graphic data is to assume that when data elements, such as voting or not voting, are presented side by side visually that a causal relationship exists, where one factor influences the other factor. We cannot infer or leap to the conclusion from a graph or figure alone that being able to vote or not vote caused a felon to commit a crime or not to be arrested or not. Always review the article for an explanation of what the data elements mean and how to interpret the data within the context of the study. You should expect this information to be presented by authors of scholarly articles.

Activity 2: Proceeding from a News Article to a Scholarly Article for Data

Have you ever read a news article that refers to a study or to another article? Do you ever search for the study or article to check out the original data? Just as you might trace a message to the original messenger to verify a message, the same investigative skills of checking for "who said what" is important when reading a news or popular article that cites another publication. Thus, our next activity explains the steps a good researcher takes to check references cited in an article.

Let's start by engaging with a news article that refers to quantitative data to show how if felons were able to vote, election results may have turned out differently.

Read through a brief article in the ASA News (American Sociological Association) titled [If Felons Could Have Voted, National Election Outcomes Would Have Been Different](#) (2).

Note that the author presents some of the initial data about states with "disenfranchised felons" to illustrate a point. However, the reader, in pursuit of authoritative data, is directed in the article to a scholarly review of the data in the first paragraph:

"This is the finding of a study by sociologists Christopher Uggen, University of Minnesota, and Jeff Manza, Northwestern University, reported in the most recent issue of the American Sociological Review.." (3)

In the third paragraph, the authors provide the title of the article: "Democratic Contraction? Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States" (4)

What is the next step? To locate and review the article referenced in this news article.

A search in Academic Search Complete for the article will provide [Democratic Contraction? Political Consequences of Felon Disenfranchisement in the United States](#), by academic researchers, Uggen and Manza (5). Take a look at this article briefly. Where do the data come from? This latter article gives critical attribution to the original sources of the data presented.

Search Strategy Tip : This example was a rather easy one, but when we search through non-scholarly materials for information we hope can lead to verifiable and authoritative sources for data, intervening steps may need to occur to ascertain those sources. Newspapers and magazines, such as USA Today and Newsweek, sometimes offer their sources in an abbreviated manner, leaving the confused researcher to hunt for the source. You may be given only one author and the journal and the year, for example. You must use the information given to search for the article, choosing the most relevant databases within which to search. and search in the databases.

Let's Practice: Engaging with Data in Non-Scholarly Resources

Activity 3: Engaging with data from a popular article

Often, we read abbreviated presentations of data in popular articles. These popular articles can be good starting points in our search for data. The key to engaging with the data from these articles involves the following steps:

1. Finding and reading the popular article
2. Finding and returning to the original source of data cited and used in the article
3. Examining the data in the original source using effective criteria

Take note that you as the reader will move from engaging with data from a popular article to engaging with data from the cited, and original, source. If you are to evaluate the data effectively, the best way to do so is to examine the data in the original source and context. It is wise not to rely on just the author of the popular article which cites that source to do this step for you.

Step 1: Finding and reading a popular article

Let's examine an article about the loss of the right to vote of criminals who have committed felony-level crimes. If we do a database search in [Academic Search Complete](#) with the search terms felons and voting rights, we find a [result list](#) with a reference to an article in USA Today, [Many States Grapple with Voting Status of Felons](#), (6) which gives information about the states that "disenfranchise" felons (and former-felons) and under what conditions felons may vote again.

Review the article. What is the source given for the data presented, specifically for the state laws governing felon voting rights?

answer

Notice, too, from the article, that comprehensive U.S. states' information is not offered, only a reference to "many states," which indicates a limited, but possibly useful scope of information.

Step 2: Find/Go Back to Original Source of Data

How do we find the original source of data cited in the USA Today article? One method of getting to the information may be to visit the ACLU website - <http://www.aclu.org> - to find the data presented in context. By using the terms we found in the article - voting rights and felon- in the search box on the ACLU web page, we can locate sections of the website that refer to those terms.

Scan the [resultant articles](#). Can you locate the original source of the data cited in USA Today?

answer

So, a little more investigative work is necessary. Looking at the subject listing on the right side of the menu on the ACLU homepage, we can connect to the **voting rights** section. When we access that page, we can see further breakdowns within the subject, including Voting Rights Issues. What might be a good option to try?

answer

To continue the search for the original source of data, click on the link for [Felon Enfranchisement](#) from the ACLU web site. Near the bottom of this page, check out the link to the article, "[Know Your Voting Rights - State by State](#)," which is the very topic of the data cited in USA Today.

As you scroll down that page, you have the option of either clicking on a map or on a list of resources for each state to obtain voting rights information. While the data provided is helpful, you have to read through a lot of information to find out the voting rights of felons in each state. Exploring this webpage further, you will see a section, just above the map, titled "General Voting Resources." One link of particular interest is "[Democracy's Ghosts](#)," which leads you to a map again, but this time, you will find only voting rights for felons by state, without having to sift through other information. But did we find the original source of the data cited in the USA Today article and referenced to ACLU?

answer

Can we use the data? It would not be wise at this point because the data source is still unclear. The next step would be to continue our search for the original source of data.

Search Strategy Tip: Be aware that if you start with popular articles, rather than scholarly articles, you may have a laborious task of attempting to track down the original data. Sometimes, as in this case, you will not be able to track down the source of the data and thus not be able to verify the veracity or validity of the data in the popular article. It is typically best to start with scholarly articles or data collections.

Step 3: Examine the Data in the Original Source

When the original data (in this case, governmental information) is cited in a news article or web site, particular attention needs to be given to the way that the authors of the article have used the data to illustrate their views.

In this case, unfortunately, the data source is still unclear. Data from the article we have just examined is in part a tally of the states with legislative actions passed or pending. Yet we don't have the actual source of the data from which this tally was derived. Therefore, at this stage, the only way of double-checking the data may be to go directly to state legislative sites--a rather laborious task and very time-consuming. That is, you would need to check each state's own site in order to verify the data presented in the USA Today article ([view example of one state's site](#)).

Activity 4: Engaging with Data Collections

As noted earlier, data collections vary greatly in what they provide and can offer the reader (a) just the data; (b) data with summaries; and/or (c) charts or other graphics with accompanying interpretation. Some data collections are indeed scholarly, but many are created and maintained rather by non-profit and other organizations. One example of the latter can be found at the ProCon.org website, a site that most likely will appear in the results of a simple search in a search engine for felon "voting rights" ([view sample results](#)).

Examine one of the pages at this site, the page titled [State Felon Voting Laws](#), which purports to have data from each U.S. state's information on their felon voting restraints. We can make the following quick observations about the data here:

- The data is compiled and offered in a useful presentation; a summary of the data available.
- According to the site, the data are fairly current ("as of Sep. 25, 2008" at the time of this writing)

Yet again, we must ask, what is the actual source of the data?

answer

How might the source(s) impact your decision to use or not use the data?

answer

Data collections can be good starting points for data, but again, the collections are only as good as their sources.

Let's examine one additional example of a data collection--one that is cited as a source for another data collection at ProCon.org, [Disenfranchised Totals by State](#). (Note again the advocacy language again: "disenfranchised" is not an objective, neutral term). As you will notice, one of the sources cited at the bottom of the table on that page is the [Sentencing Project](#).

Click on the U.S. interactive map provided on the homepage of [Sentencing Project](#). What are the sources of the data? What are the pros and cons of the sources and statements made about the data in what you find?

answer

The good news is that several of the sources listed are government offices and agencies. These

would be great sources to track down reliable, verifiable data! The bad news is, as might be expected, that while the authors claim that the data represent the most recent statistics, we are given no indication when this web page and the map were created or last updated. So we must continue on to the original source of data!

Compared with the first web site's data, from the ProCon, this web site does cite reliable sources. The next step would be to go to those sources and continue our search for reliable data.

Note on Information Sources: Caution should be taken when viewing compilations of original data to ensure that "cherry-picking" is not present, whereby the author ignores significant data to further the views and biases of the compiler. To safeguard against the presentation of selective data, you need to sample the original data to qualify the accuracy of the compilation.

When it is possible to verify the data from a collection, the benefits are straightforward. You don't have to compile the data, and can use it with a single reference. And with authoritative sources, your research is strengthened its standing by using respected sources. Compiled data usually gives you a useable presentation, such as a pie chart, tables, or a formatted view, such as a PowerPoint® presentation.

However, as you now know, the verification needed for popular and trade articles, as well as data collections, can take much time and diligence. Often, you may find searching for such data in scholarly articles to be more effective and efficient.

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