

Numbers are not neutral: How journalists can detect deep bias & avoid hidden traps



Zoom chat transcript

Speakers

- [Fernand Amandi](#) (@AmandiOnAir), managing partner of Bendixen & Amandi, the nation's leading multilingual and multiethnic public opinion research and strategic communications consulting firm
- [Caroline Chen](#) (@CarolineYLChen), health care reporter at ProPublica, and 2019 winner of the June L. Biedler Cancer Prize for Cancer Journalism for her series with Riley Wong on racial disparities in clinical trials
- [Dr. Kyler J. Sherman-Wilkins](#) (@kyes_the_limit), assistant professor in the Sociology and Anthropology department at Missouri State University and a Mellon Emerging Faculty Leader for 2021
- Moderator: [Tinsley Davis](#) (@TinsleyHD), executive director of the National Association of Science Writers (NASW)

Julie Moos (NPCJI; she/her):

Here's information on the Provincetown coverage that Caroline is describing:

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2021/08/08/cdc-report-provincetown-covid-outbreak-misinterpreted-social-media/5530097001/>

bonny McClain: 75% of 4 is not as impactful as 75% of 150.

Julie Moos (NPCJI; she/her): Great point, Bonny, thank you!

bonny McClain: Quite often the population being polled is not clearly described or transparent. For example 65% of Republicans support...Did they ask every Republican? Recently registered Republicans? Only Republicans voting in last election...

Julie Moos (NPCJI; she/her): MMWR = Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report

Julie Moos (NPCJI; she/her): <https://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/index.html>

Celia Wexler: Caroline, Can you walk us through how you reviewed the Provincetown data? (This was answered on camera during the program)

jane dunnage: readers want to know what their risk of getting covid-19 is - how do you give an accurate description when the profile of readers vary so much

Caroline Chen - ProPublica (she/her): Jane- I think you can try to break down the information in various buckets (e.g. ages, vaccination status, etc) and readers will have to decide for themselves which bucket they're closest to. I also sometimes like to do something like give the average person's risk then link out to more detailed information if someone wants to get more information.

Angela Botzer: Great explanation re: the denominator factor

bonny McClain: Great point Caroline. We need the ability to hold attention. Speaking to the uncertainty or unknown.

bonny McClain: Also important to look at different industries. Several industries showed increased while others were declining. Granularity is important.

jane dunnage: thanks Caroline, some really good points.

Julie Moos (NPCJ); she/her): Here's some additional information on research being 'underpowered': <https://www.statisticsonewrong.com/power.html>

Julie Moos (NPCJ); she/her):
<https://towardsdatascience.com/why-you-shouldnt-say-this-study-is-underpowered-627f002ddf35>

Smaranda Tolosano: Thank you Julie, very useful!

Dan Keller: It can be impossible to draw conclusions from subgroups in a clinical trial if the trial was designed with a limited sample OR if it failed to recruit the intended sample size.

Caroline Chen - ProPublica (she/her): Great point, Dan. 100%! And yet we see Pharma companies drawing this conclusions all the time.

bonny McClain: Rejecting or accepting null hypothesis erroneously requires sample sizes of a certain magnitude.

Mihaela Biliavschi Smith: What is a "robust" sample size? What should we look for to have confidence a sample size is credible. (Thank you).

bonny McClain: Perfect Fernand! This is often not transparent.

DEBORAH POTTER: Useful link: 20 questions a journalist should ask about polls.
<http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/4>

Dan Keller: In a clinical trial, always look at the number of drop-outs from the treatment vs control group. If there is an imbalance (more in one than the other), find out why.

Caroline Chen - ProPublica (she/her): 100% Dan!

Cindy McGrath: What are examples of more rigorous vetting/probing?

bonny McClain: Here is a cool tool for calculating sample size:

<https://clincalc.com/stats/samplesize.aspx>

Smaranda Tolosano: Bonny, thanks for that link. Does anyone else recommend tools for other aspects of reporting with numbers or assessing studies?

Aileen Schlef: Thank you so much! This is a critical discussion. I know that data on “Hispanics” and other more invisible populations are not appropriately researched. Complex research required. This is a great foundation- yes for “geeking out”!

Caroline Chen - ProPublica (she/her): Sorry that I have to leave early but feel free to reach out if you have more questions for me - caroline.chen@propublica.org ([@CarolineYLChen](https://twitter.com/CarolineYLChen))

Julie Moos (NPCJ); she/her): Thanks so much for being here, Caroline!

Smaranda Tolosano: Thank you Caroline!

Aileen Schlef: Can you mention asset framing vs. deficit framing!? (This was answered live on video during the program)

Julie Moos (NPCJ); she/her): Here's some additional information on sampling:

<https://stattrek.com/survey-research/sampling-methods.aspx>

Mihaela Biliovschi Smith: Thank you for the very helpful answers!

Dan Keller: For Tyler: Does each subgroup in a sample have to be of sufficient size to draw any conclusion about that subgroup? For example, an overall sample of 300 people with 10% AA's means there are only 30 AA's polled.

Julie Moos (NPCJ); she/her): great question!

Mohamed Baouch: What is minimum percentage that a poll can be considered as accurate and representative? (5%-10% of the population Maybe?)

Evelyn Lamb: Mohamed, I don't know the math behind it, but polls can be quite accurate without surveying a large sample size. I'm trying to find a better reference, but it's mentioned here that a sample of 1,000 people has a fairly small margin of error in representing the US, assuming the sample is random: <http://www.ncpp.org/?q=node/6>

Mohamed Baouch: @Evelyn - Thanks for looking into that and for sending the link

Dan Keller: Two suggestions for online polls: Be honest with the participants about how long the questionnaire will take. Don't say it will take 15 minutes if it really takes 30 minutes. Show a progress bar so the respondent knows how much he/she has done and how much is left.

Mihaela Biliovschi Smith: Not an urgent question, but one that I would really like answered, if there is time at the end: some EU countries prohibit publishing polls in the week before a local or national election, because it is considered that it may influence the undecided vote unfairly. Would this be something that the US should consider? (This was answered live on video during the program)

jane dunnage: should people be invited to identify their own race/ethnicity? (This was answered live on video during the program)

bonny McClain: We certainly don't want to bring back enumeration from the 60s where your race was decided for you!

Evelyn Lamb: Here's an accessible overview of why sample size doesn't have to be that large: <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/howcan-a-poll-of-only-100/>

Mohamed Baouch: Thank you Evelyn

Rachel Weisel: Hi all! I work at Pew Research Center and we have a video series called Methods 101 that may be useful to you. For example, this one is about random sampling, and why a representative sample of 1,000 people can be used to estimate what the whole country thinks about an issue:

<https://www.pewresearch.org/methods/2017/05/12/methods-101-video-random-sampling/>

Julie Moos (NPCJI; she/her): Thanks so much for sharing that, Rachel!

Evelyn Lamb: Thanks, Rachel!

Mandy Wright: Thanks, both!

Smaranda Tolosano: Thank you Rachel!

Mohamed Baouch: Thank you Rachel

Peter Weiss: Trying to copy things from the chat unsuccessfully. (I Select All hit control C to copy but doesn't get to my clipboard) Any suggestions? Can workshop leaders maybe email a copy of chat contents to participants? Thanks!

Julie Moos (NPCJ); she/her): Hi, Peter. Yes, we can include the chat when we send the link to the video later today

Mohamed Baouch: Julie - That would be great, Thanks in advance

Dan Keller: Trying to ban publication of poll results at any time in the US. would raise huge First Amendment issues.

Angela Botzer: This is such a helpful presentation!

Aileen Schlef: Yes

Julie Moos (NPCJ); she/her): Thanks, Aileen!

bonny McClain: Look at assets or contributions of a population vs. the deficits (deficit)

Jennifer Cooper: Data is great, but if it is not presented in a solutions-journalism focus you have to ask why you are writing the story

Dan Keller: For professional help with evaluating statistics:

<https://senseaboutscienceusa.org/stats-check/>

bonny McClain: I second Dan's recommendation for stats for journalists —

<https://senseaboutscienceusa.org/stats-check/>

bonny McClain: Social media is NOT the real world.

Jennifer Cooper: An interesting report on data, solutions and increased newspaper revenue:

<https://sjn-static.s3.amazonaws.com/solutions-journalism-reader-revenue.pdf>

Kyler Sherman-Wilkins, Ph.D (he/him):

<https://www.aapor.org/Education-Resources/For-Media.aspx>

Cassandra Hockman: Agree w/ Jennifer--data used for solutions speaks back to what Caroline said about noting what data sets can and cannot speak to and thus what we're investigating & reporting

Paul Pfeffer: Can the consistently bad actors be called out?

Rachel Weisel: AAAS's SciLine also has a great resource for journalists:

<https://www.sciline.org/elections/covering-polls-surveys/>

Ruth Ebenstein: Julie, you just read my mind!!

Fernand Amandi: Thanks for attending all .. happy to answer any questions or give more info via DM on Twitter: [@AmandiOnAir](https://twitter.com/AmandiOnAir)

Natalie Doyle: Thanks so much for this wonderful topic.

Ruth Ebenstein: Tremendous gratitude to everyone for this sensational panel. Thank you!

Karen Addis: Fantastic event, thank you!

Tinsley Davis, NASW, she/her: Thank you Kyler, Fernand, and Julie!

Holly Grant: Aug. 20 event:
<https://www.pressclubinstitute.org/event/think-outside-the-classroom-how-to-diversify-education-sources-and-the-stories-we-tell/>

Peter Weiss: Thanks for a great program!!

Cassandra Hockman: Thank you all so much!

Holly Grant: Sept. 24:
<https://www.pressclubinstitute.org/event/how-op-eds-can-amplify-original-voices-engage-new-communities/>

Mukesh T: Thank you 

Tinsley Davis, NASW, she/her: and thank you to all who shared resources in the chat

Holly Grant: Support:
<https://national-press-club-journalism-institute.networkforgood.com/projects/135995-support-the-national-press-club-journalism-institute>

Smaranda Tolosano: Thanks, this was great!