



Math Tools for Journalists

Kathleen Woodruff Wickham

Marion Street Press, 2002 159 pages \$16.95

Numbers in the Newsroom: Using Math and Statistics in News

Sarah Cohen

Investigative Reporters and Editors, 2001

108 pages

\$15 for members, \$25 for nonmembers

By Doug Fisher

This just in. Journalists have trouble with math and numbers. (Stop the presses! Is there a calculator in the house?)

Kathleen Wickham, a journalism professor at the University of Mississippi, and Sarah Cohen, former training director for Investigative Reporters and Editors who now is with The Washington Post, take different paths to help journalists get more comfortable using and interpreting numbers, and each would be a useful addition to a journalist's library. But Cohen, with her more holistic approach, might be a better choice for the copy desk.

Wickham starts almost literally with $2+2=4$ – the first few paragraphs explain the plus, minus and equal signs -- and builds from there to a volume packed with useful formulas from calculating loan payments and property taxes to figuring out how fast an acrobat was falling when he hit the safety net. The appendix of 35 formulas and the section on how to figure out basic sports statistics in themselves make the book a useful tool.

Her chapter on real estate taxes is a handy refresher and the chapter on polls and surveys handles in seven pages most of the information a reporter will need, including an easily understood explanation of different polling techniques. Lacking, however, is the lucid explanation of probabilities and how to report them that Cohen has, with headings such as "Small probabilities x big numbers = big mistakes." In these days when reporters constantly run into probability problems, from the chances of winning the lottery to the chances of dying from cancer, that's an important part of any math book.

Cohen doesn't try to present a complete warehouse of formulas, but sets the tone with her opening sentence: "We often ask too much of numbers, and that's why we're uncomfortable with them." She emphasizes a does-this-make-sense approach to every number in every story and that numbers, when they are well-chosen, can summarize the world's complexities.

She exhorts journalists to limit the number of digits (her suggestion is less than eight per paragraph), round off frequently, and "think in simple ratios." Cohen's "The 10 most wanted list: Mistakes in the news from simple math to lapses in judgment," probably should be required reading in newsrooms.

With a solid appendix of formulas, Cohen's book would be a more complete work. But it does have a valuable quick-glance chart for converting fractions to percents, ratios or "easier words for readers," such as almost two-thirds for $5/8$.

And Cohen does understand that journalists, though they may do the math, usually use words to present it. So she spends more time on the correct use of those words. Her explanation of the difference between using "as likely" and "more likely" to express relative risk (think of those mortgage stories that say black families are so many times more likely to be denied loans than white families) is clear and concise.

Because Wickham's book is designed more as a textbook, it has valuable review lessons that Cohen lacks. But Cohen's

has an equally valuable chapter on translating numbers into meaningful graphics.

Neither book is all that expensive, so this may well be a case where having both means the sum adds up to more than its parts.

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