



**JOUR 322: Introduction to Investigative  
and Data Journalism**  
**2 units**

**Spring 2022 – Wednesdays – 12-1:40 p.m.**

**Section:** 21169R

**Location:** ANN 408

**Instructor: Dana Chinn**

**Office:** ASC 227 and on Zoom (see Blackboard for link)

**Office Hours:** By appointment at [danachinn.appointlet.com](http://danachinn.appointlet.com)

**Contact Info:** [chinn@usc.edu](mailto:chinn@usc.edu)

Cell: See the Contacts section on Blackboard

**Pronouns:** she/her/hers

**Course Description**

This course builds on the beat reporting skills you developed in JOUR 207/307 Reporting and Writing I and II. It's an introduction to the fundamentals of investigative and data journalism – identifying and getting primary and secondary sources, quantitatively analyzing datasets, summarizing facts and opinions, and fact checking.

You will learn a research methodology and organizational structure that you can use as a foundation for beat reporting, a comprehensive story pitch, or an in-depth story that would take months or years. The final is a research plan that will require levels of detail, accuracy and transparency that you may find intimidating, but we'll work on it together as a class step-by-step throughout the semester.

This semester we'll complete the first step of a research plan to track the impact, if any, of California Assembly Bill 392, The California Act to Save Lives. Enacted in 2019, AB 392 will purportedly decrease the number of people killed by law enforcement officers. Under the previous law, an officer could use deadly force if there was an "objectively reasonable" belief that they were confronting a person who was endangering them or other people. Under AB 392, officers can only use deadly force if it is "necessary."

Identifying the issues and the players for this research question will require you to have a thorough understanding of people, government jurisdictions, the criminal justice system and criminal and civil courts. You will learn how data is not "objective," and how the ways that crime data is collected (or not collected), analyzed, reported and used for decision-making have led to and sustain systematic racism.

I am committed to including and valuing the identities and voices of all students, especially those from historically marginalized and vulnerable groups. I hope we will all hold each other accountable for fostering an inclusive and anti-racist learning environment as we tackle this complex question.

**Student Learning Outcomes**

1. Analyze a raw dataset.
  - a. Describe what questions a dataset can and can't answer.
  - b. Identify and explain the biases in the way data is collected, analyzed and reported, and how these biases have contributed to systemic inequities.

- c. Use AP Style guidelines to write precisely and accurately about race and ethnicity.
  - d. Categorize and add additional information to a raw dataset.
  - e. Prepare a data dictionary that documents what's in each column and identifies missing and problematic data issues.
2. Use math and Excel to "interview" data to answer research questions about possible stories.
    - a. Calculate absolute vs. relative change; fractions, rates, percentages and per capita; averages and medians.
    - b. Use reader-friendly techniques in stories such as rounding numbers and writing paragraphs that include fewer than eight digits.
    - c. Use Excel as a qualitative data organizing tool.
  3. Using a template, develop a comprehensive research plan for an in-depth story.
    - a. Select the relevant facts from an analysis of a dataset and identify the biases, missing data and other caveats that affect the use of the dataset in a story.
    - b. Locate, summarize and compare and contrast information from law enforcement agencies, district attorneys, civil suits and news stories.
    - c. File Freedom of Information Act or California Public Records requests for primary source documents.
    - d. Write research briefs and check them using industry-standard fact checker annotations.

## Description and Assessment of Assignments

### 1. Weekly assignments

There will be an assignment on Blackboard due each week. We will start the assignment in class, and it will be due the following week. Assignments will usually have two components – an Excel worksheet with calculations from raw data, and a write-up and/or short answers based on the data.

In each class I will spend at least 30 minutes going through the quantitative concepts and demonstrating the Excel steps. Some of you will be able to follow along and complete the assignment in class. If you're just learning Excel, you might want to just observe and then complete the assignment at your own pace. There will be optional step-by-step videos that will duplicate the in-class demonstration. I'm also available for one-on-one walk-throughs either in person or on Zoom.

Grading for the weekly assignments will be largely based on your analysis, interpretation and write-up of data vs. your Excel skills. Each question or component will have a point value and a grading rubric.

### 2. Readings for the following week

Each week there will be readings that will prepare you for the class discussions and assignments.

### 3. Investigative Reporters & Editors conference write-up

IRE is the premier professional organization for investigative and data journalists. As part of this class you will be getting a one-year IRE membership and virtually attending the National Institute for Computer-Assisted Reporting conference March 3-6 courtesy of USC Annenberg. In addition to setting up a profile on the conference site, you will be writing a summary of your observations and

reflections on the sessions you attend and the people that you meet.

**4. Interview with an investigative or data journalist and write-up**

This assignment will help you explore what it takes to report and produce an investigative or data journalism story. It will be assigned in Week 2, and will be due in Week 11.

**5. Final project**

The final is a research plan for investigating the case of a person listed in the Washington Post Fatal Force dataset who was fatally shot by a Los Angeles Police Department officer. You will be working on your final throughout the semester with the weekly assignments.

Assignments are due by the beginning of class as time-stamped by Blackboard (15-minute grace period). Late assignments will be accepted only up to 24 hours after the due date and time, and will be assessed a 10% point penalty.

**Course Notes and Policies**

Please be courteous to me and your classmates by arriving on time and being fully engaged. Regular attendance will be crucial for successfully completing the weekly assignments and the final project. The scope of the work and the interpretations and context that should be in the write-ups will be determined by class discussion, similar to how a newsroom team operates.

We will be researching the details behind the data that shows that Black and Hispanic people are fatally shot by law enforcement officers at disproportionate rates. Trying to understand the quagmire that is the U.S. criminal justice system can be overwhelming and triggering, especially during these fraught times. Please let me know if you or any of your classmates are struggling with the materials, discussions and/or assignments.

**Required Readings, hardware/software, laptops and supplementary materials**

1. ***Numbers in the Newsroom: Using Math and Statistics in News, Second Edition***, by Sarah Cohen for Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc., 2014, 134 pages.  
Available for \$10 via [the IRE website](#).  
This handbook includes explanations about the quantitative concepts in the course and guidelines about writing about numbers that I'll be referring to – and grading you on – throughout the semester.

2. ***The Associated Press Stylebook***

Available for free from [the USC Library \(must be signed in\)](#).

All assignments will be graded for AP Style. Expressing numbers in a consistent style is essential to communicating data accurately, clearly and credibly. A summary of the AP Style guidelines for numbers is on Blackboard.

You will be completing a video lesson module to help you learn the [AP Style guidelines when describing gender, race and ethnicity](#) when appropriate in a story. From the AP Stylebook: "In all coverage – not just race-related coverage – strive to accurately represent the world, or a particular community, and its diversity through the people you quote and depict in all formal. Omissions and a lack of inclusion can render people invisible and cause anguish."

3. **[Knight Science Journalism - MIT Fact-Checking Project](#)**

You will be using the industry-standard fact-checking methodologies outlined in this module throughout the semester.

### Computer Policy

Hardware and software support is available from USC Annenberg Technical Services and Operations at <http://annenbergtechops.com/techops>. Blackboard support is available 24/7 by calling 213-740-5555.

### Software

**Microsoft Office 365 or Office 2016 (Word, Excel, PowerPoint) is required.** It is available for free to USC students at [itservices.usc.edu/officestudents](https://itservices.usc.edu/officestudents).

### Grading

#### a. Breakdown of Grade

| Assignment  | % of Grade  |
|---|-------------|
| Weekly assignments  | 50%         |
| Investigative Reporters & Editors conference profile and write-up | 5%          |
| Interview with an investigative reporter and write-up             | 10%         |
| Final project   | 35%         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>  | <b>100%</b> |

#### b. Grading Scale

|                |                |                |
|----------------|----------------|----------------|
| 95% to 100%: A | 80% to 83%: B- | 67% to 69%: D+ |
| 90% to 94%: A- | 77% to 79%: C+ | 64% to 66%: D  |
| 87% to 89%: B+ | 74% to 76%: C  | 60% to 63%: D- |
| 84% to 86%: B  | 70% to 73%: C- | 0% to 59%: F   |

#### c. Grading Standards

Each assignment will have its own rubric. Each rubric will include a component for grammar, punctuation, spelling, AP Style, number formatting and rounding.

Below are some common components for all assignments. Due to the quantitative aspects of this course, you will be held to a higher standard for accuracy than what you may be used to. A typo in a word is minor editing; a typo with a number is a material factual error.

**“A” stories** are accurate, clear, comprehensive stories that are well written and require only minor copyediting (i.e., they would be aired or published). The data, calculations and any data visualizations are correct and complete, and use Excel as directed. Data sources are correctly presented.

**“B” stories** require more than minor editing and have a few style or spelling errors or one significant error of omission.

**“C” stories** need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have many spelling, style or material or omission errors.

**“D” stories** require excessive rewriting, have numerous errors and should not have been submitted.

**“F” stories** have failed to meet the major criteria of the assignment, are late, have numerous errors or both.

For example:

- It doesn’t use the correct data or calculations.
- It misspells a proper noun and/or doesn’t use the full and proper name for a dataset.
- It states a hypothesis as a fact.

The following are some other circumstances that would warrant a grade of “F” and potential USC Annenberg disciplinary action:

- Emailing, texting or otherwise communicating in-class quiz or assignment questions and/or answers to others.
- Fabricating data or making up quotes or other information.
- Plagiarizing a script/article, part of a script/article or information from any source.

**Add/Drop Dates for Session 001 (15 weeks: 1/10/2022 – 4/29/2022; Final Exam Period: 5/4-11/2022)**

**Link:** <https://classes.usc.edu/term-20221/calendar/>

**Last day to add:** Friday, January 28, 2022

**Last day to drop without a mark of "W" and receive a refund:** Friday, January 28, 2022

**Last day to change enrollment option to Pass/No Pass or Audit:** Friday, January 28, 2022 [All major and minor courses must be taken for a letter grade.]

**Last day to add/drop a Monday-only class without a mark of “W” and receive a refund or change to Audit:** Tuesday, February 1

**Last day to withdraw without a “W” on transcript or change pass/no pass to letter grade:** Friday, February 25, 2022 [Mark of “W” will still appear on student record and STARS report and tuition charges still apply.]

\*Please drop any course by the end of week three for session 001 (or the 20 percent mark of the session in which the course is offered) to avoid tuition charges.]

**Last day to drop with a mark of "W":** Friday, April 8, 2022

**Course Schedule – SUBJECT TO CHANGE**

| <b>Week</b>      | <b>Topics</b>   | <b>Quantitative / Excel</b>   |
|------------------|---|---|
| Week 1 – Jan. 12 | Introduction to the class   | Excel Quick Access Toolbars   |
| Week 2 – Jan. 19 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Biases in data based on the way it’s gathered</li> <li>• U.S. Census data</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Scraping and cleaning up data from data.census.gov</li> <li>• Absolute (amount) vs. relative (percent) change</li> </ul> |

|                         |   |  |
|-------------------------|---|--|
|                         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>AP Style guidelines on race and ethnicity</li> </ul> <p>Interview with an investigative or data journalist assignment assigned</p>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intro to writing up quantitative data for a general news audience</li> </ul>  |
| Week 3 – Jan. 26        | Calculating and comparing racial composition  | Percent share; percentage points   |
| Week 4 – Feb. 2         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Government jurisdictions and law enforcement agencies in Los Angeles County</li> <li>FBI Uniform Crime Reporting data</li> <li>Violent and property crime rates</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Crimes per x people; 1 out of every x people</li> </ul>   |
| Week 5 – Feb. 9         | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Washington Post Fatal Force dataset 1</li> <li>LAPD Use of Force policy</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Preparing a dataset</li> <li>Starting a data dictionary</li> <li>FF: manner of death</li> </ul>   |
| Week 6 – Feb. 16        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>What happens when a person is fatally shot by an LAPD officer – disciplinary vs. criminal vs. civil actions</li> <li>Translating police jargon</li> <li>Fatal Force dataset 2</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adding columns to a dataset <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>New data</li> <li>Classifications</li> </ul> </li> <li>FF: flee</li> </ul> |
| Week 7 – Feb. 23        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interpreting and marking up an LAPD investigation report</li> <li>Fatal Force dataset 3</li> <li>Writing with eight or fewer digits in a paragraph to make quantitative data easier to understand</li> </ul>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Pivot tables</li> <li>FF: armed; blanks vs. undetermined vs. unknown vs. need to find out</li> </ul>  |
| Week 8 – March 2        | No class on March 2 – attend IRE NICAR conference sessions March 3-6  |  |
| Week 9 – March 9        | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interpreting the LAPD disciplinary actions (Use of Force Review Board, Chief of Police, Board of Police Commissioners)</li> <li>Averages, medians, ranges</li> <li>Fatal Force dataset 4</li> </ul> <p>IRE conference write-up due</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>FF: race, age, gender</li> </ul>  |
| Spring Break – March 16 | NO CLASS  |  |
| Week 10 – March 23      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>State vs. federal crimes</li> <li>California laws under which an officer could be charged with a crime; possible impact of AB 392/The California Act to Save Lives</li> <li>Fatal Force dataset 5</li> </ul>                           | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cross tabs; switching rows and columns</li> <li>FF: threat level, mental illness</li> </ul>   |
| Week 11 – March 30      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interpreting an LA County District Attorney investigation report</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>FF: Multiple fields</li> </ul>  |

|  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
|  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fatal Force dataset 6</li> </ul> <p>Interview with an investigative or data journalist assignment due</p>  |  |
| Week 12 –<br>April 6                                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Federal vs. state courts</li> <li>Deciphering plaintiffs, defendants and allegations from a civil suit docket and complaint</li> <li>Fatal Force dataset 7</li> </ul>                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>FF: Using a dataset and pivot tables to identify people to research further</li> </ul>                    |
| Week 13 –<br>April 13                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Summarizing jury instructions, jury minutes, verdicts, dismissals and settlements from court documents</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prep FF dataset file and pivot tables for the final project</li> <li>Source and document lists</li> </ul> |
| Week 14 –<br>April 20                                | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fact checking and annotations for primary and secondary source documents</li> <li>California Public Records Act information requests from the Los Angeles County Medical Examiner-Coroner</li> </ul> | TBD  |
| Week 15 –<br>April 27                                | Final project topic TBD   | TBD  |
| <b>FINAL –<br/>Friday, May 6,<br/>11 a.m.-1 p.m.</b> | <p>The final project is due on Fri., May 6, 8-10 a.m.</p> <p>Summative experience</p>   |  |

## Internships

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course that undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to 1 percent of the total available semester points for this course. To receive instructor approval, a student must request an internship letter from the Annenberg Career Development Office and bring it to the instructor to sign by the end of the third week of classes. The student must submit the signed letter to the media organization, along with the evaluation form provided by the Career Development Office. The form should be filled out by the intern supervisor and returned to the instructor at the end of the semester. No credit will be given if an evaluation form is not turned into the instructor by the last day of class. Note: The internship must be unpaid and can only be applied to one journalism or public relations class.

## Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

### a. Academic Conduct

#### *Plagiarism*

Plagiarism – presenting someone else’s ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” [policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b](https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b). Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, [policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct](https://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct).

*USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity*

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism's policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

"Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an 'F' on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators."

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

## **b. Support Systems**

*Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call*

[studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling)

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

*National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call*

[suicidepreventionlifeline.org](http://suicidepreventionlifeline.org)

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

*Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press "0" after hours – 24/7 on call*

[studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault](http://studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault)

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

*Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298*

[equity.usc.edu](http://equity.usc.edu), [titleix.usc.edu](http://titleix.usc.edu)

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

*Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298*

[usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care\\_report](http://usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report)

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

*The Office of Student Accessibility Services - (213) 740-0776*

[osas.usc.edu/](http://osas.usc.edu/)

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

*USC Support and Advocacy - (213) 821-4710*

[uscsa.usc.edu](http://uscsa.usc.edu)

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.



*Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101*

[diversity.usc.edu](https://diversity.usc.edu)

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

*USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu), [emergency.usc.edu](https://emergency.usc.edu)

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

*USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call*

[dps.usc.edu](https://dps.usc.edu)

Non-emergency assistance or information.

*Annenberg Student Success Fund*

<https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/annenberg-scholarships-and-awards>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.

**About Your Instructor**

I've been a full-time faculty member at USC since 2002 and now focus on data journalism and open data. My work experience includes consulting and management positions in digital analytics, strategic planning, marketing and finance at news organizations including Gannett and the Los Angeles Times. I have an undergraduate degree in journalism and an MBA from USC.