

Using (and contributing to!) the Chance News Wiki

Jeanne Albert & Bill Peterson

Middlebury College

April 13, 2010

<http://www.causeweb.org/chance>

Outline

- History and purpose of *Chance News*
- Using *Chance News* articles to enhance classes
- Editing and Posting articles to the *Chance News* Wiki

A brief history of *Chance News*

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Chance Project Moves to CAUSEweb

1 MARCH 2010 85 VIEWS NO COMMENT



Snell

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Uses for Chance News

- “Chance-Enhanced” Intro Stats (Joan Garfield)
- First-Year Seminar
 - Fall 2009, *Chance* (Bill Peterson)
<http://f09.middlebury.edu/FYSE1025A>

- Quantitative Reasoning courses
 - See Carleton QuIRK Initiative (another project!)
<http://serc.carleton.edu/quirk/>

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The Growing Power Of The Sugar Pill

by ALIX SPIEGEL



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Morning Edition

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March 8, 2010

text size **A A A**

The other day I came across a fake news story on the Internet. It was a send-up of the pharmaceutical industry which featured a bunch of drug industry executives wringing their hands in despair: placebo pills, the fake news story reported, were getting stronger, what was a drug executive to do?

Placebos getting stronger?

[The growing power of the sugar pill](#) 

by Alix Spiegel, NPR, 8 March 2010

The randomized double-blind placebo-controlled experiment is regarded as the "gold standard" in medical research. This story describes new research indicating that our response to placebo treatments may be getting stronger over time. One example of this so-called "placebo drift" phenomenon is provided by Arthur Barsky, the director of psychiatric research at Brigham and Women's Hospital in Boston. Barsky compared trials on antidepressants from the 1980s with studies done in 2005, and found that the reactions to placebos had become twice as strong...

Last summer, Wired Magazine had an [article](#)  describing a number of drug trials that were cancelled at various stages when the drugs failed to outperform placebos. Among these was an anti-depressant that had been under development by the pharmaceutical company Merck.

Discussion Question

In the Wired article we read:

Two comprehensive analyses of antidepressant trials have uncovered a dramatic increase in placebo response since the 1980s. One estimated that the so-called effect size (a measure of statistical significance) in placebo groups had nearly doubled over that time.

What is being confused here?

Submitted by Bill Peterson

A "Golden Oldie" from the Chance Newsletter

TO justify spending hours steering dimpled balls into plastic cups, many business people explain that golf is great for building relationships with clients. This reasoning, of course, makes the great untanned masses back at the office suspect that golf is merely a clever excuse for playing hooky.

But now, people who drive, chip and putt during the workday need slink to the links no longer. Improving one's golf game, it turns out, really is good for business.

That, at least, is a conclusion one can draw from a rigorous study by The New York Times of the golfing and management prowess of America's chief executives.

Comparing the handicaps of a group of corporate chiefs, as reported by Golf Digest magazine, to their companies' stock market performance over three years, a clear pattern emerges: If a chief executive is a better-than-average golfer, he is also likely to deliver above-average returns to shareholders.

The Times looked at the 51 chief executives who appear both in Golf Digest's June issue and in the data base of large-company executives maintained by Graef Crystal, who edits a San Diego-based newsletter on executive compensation.

After scientifically sifting out a handful of chiefs because of their statistical extremes, the 11 executives whose companies delivered the best stock market performance over three years also had the best average handicap index: 12.4.

(A note to nongolfers: The lower the handicap, the better the golfer. And a handicap "index" is basically a way for players to

Continued on Page 9



Continued From Page 1
compare skills; it accounts for the relative difficulty of the course where they established their handicaps.)

The next group of 22 chief executives, whose companies' performance in the market is middling, are somewhat worse golfers, with an average handicap index of 14.6.

The bottom 11 executives in the sample, whose companies turned in a subpar market performance, are poorer golfers still, with an average handicap index of 17.2.

The correlations among these data are hardly a statistical fluke. Mr. Crystal, who performed the complex and probably unprecedented calculations, said the probability that the findings were due to chance alone is less than 1 percent.

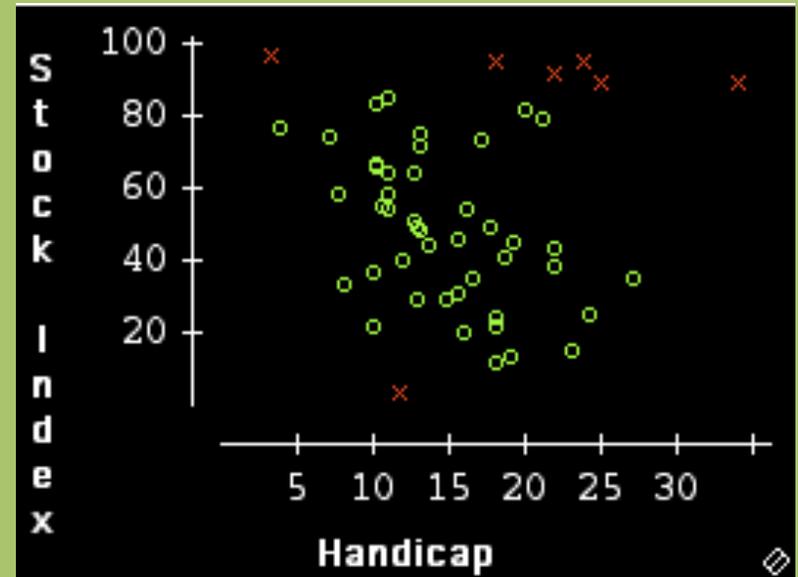
"For all the different factors I've tested as possible links to predicting which C.E.O.'s are going to perform well or poorly, this is certainly one of the oddest — but also the strongest — I've seen," he said. "There's got to be something here."

But what, exactly? As tidy as the statistical correlation may seem, there remains the tricky matter of figuring out why better golfers also tend to be better chief executives, or vice versa.

Perhaps time on the golf course offers an opportunity to think big, strategic thoughts. Perhaps natural leaders also tend to be natural athletes. Maybe perseverance and the ability to focus — useful qualities in any endeavor — pay particularly large dividends in big business and golf. Or perhaps caddying as a youngster offers future chief executives the dual advantage of building golf skills and immersing their sponge-like minds in business banter between strokes.

Michael J. Fradette (handicap index 6.5), a consultant with Deloitte & Touche who has played golf with about three dozen chief executives through the years, has his own theories.

Chief executives, he said, tend to be competitive in all walks of life — maybe more so in golf even than in



Full dataset: $r = -0.042$

"Outliers" removed: $r = -0.414$

Duffers Need Not Apply

Data Show That
Good Golfers Make
The Best C.E.O.'s

By ADAM BRYANT

The New York Times

May 31, 1998
Sect 3; page 1

FYSE 1025A: Chance, Fall 2009

Professor: [Bill Peterson](#), [Department of Mathematics](#), [Middlebury College](#)

Office: 313 Warner Hall, ext 5417

Hours: Mon/Wed 1:30-3:00, Tu 2:00-3:00, Th 11:00-noon

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Catalog Description

Do movie reviews affect box-office revenues? Do the US News rankings affect Middlebury's applicant pool? In what sense do such assessments reflect "quality"? The Wall Street Journal recently asked, "Can eating breakfast cereal determine the sex of your baby?" Nowadays, you can't read the news, choose a college, or even enjoy breakfast without encountering statistical claims. Which would you trust to inform your life decisions? We'll investigate these questions through readings that include your favorite newspaper, paleobiologist Stephen J. Gould's elegant essays on excellence and variability, and statistician Edward Tufte's trenchant critique of data graphics in the popular press.

FYSE 1025A: Chance, Fall 2009

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1. **Numbers We Should Know**
2. **Summary: The Cancer-Cluster Myth**
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4. **Argument Paper**
5. **Final Paper: Analysis of a Chance Topic in the News**

Last modified: 21 October 2009

Posting an article to the *Chance News Wiki*

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- Get an account and password
- Log in to the Wiki site
- Click an “edit” button
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- *Save your changes* before leaving editing mode

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When already logged in with username and password,

1. Go to Special Pages (lower left corner, toolbox).
2. Select Preferences.
3. Your User data window should show up.
4. Your real name, email and password can be changed

Don't forget to click Save preferences at the bottom left, when done.

After you log in, return to the main page.

To add a new post, click on the *Chance News* issue that is “under construction.”



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Chance News 62

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Quotations

"It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information."
 --Oscar Wilde

Quoted in [All too much: Monstrous amounts of data](#)[ⓘ]
 The Economist, 25 February 2010

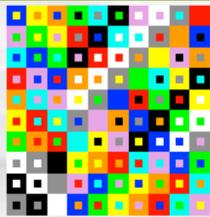
"Statisticians are engaged in an exhausting but exhilarating struggle with the biggest challenge that philosophy makes to science: how do we translate information into knowledge? ...

"If you think that statistics has nothing to say about what you do or how you could do it better, then you are either wrong or in need of a more interesting job."
 --Stephen Senn, *Dicing With Death*

Suggested by Paul Alper

The table of contents shows the stories that have been started or completed.

Click the "edit" button at the top of the page to see the source text for the whole issue.



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==Quotations==

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Suggested by Paul Alper

<blockquote>"Of course, there are plenty of veteran basketball decision-makers who don't believe

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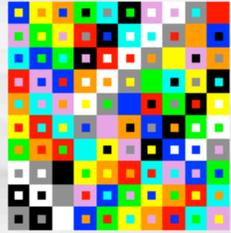
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==Flummoxed about flu==

[<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703429304575095743102260012.html?KEYWORDS=betsy+mckay> "The Flu Season That Fizzled"]

by Betsy McKay, <i>The Wall Street Journal</i>, March 2, 2010

Experts cannot explain the unusual "lull" in flu cases at this time of year, compared to the wider incidence of H1N1 swine flu in the summer and fall of 2009.

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The University of Virginia's student health director stated:

<blockquote>[The] student health center usually sees as many as 130 students a week complaining of flu symptoms this time of year. Recently, no more than three to five students a week have been coming in with fever, cough or other signs of flu</blockquote>

It is not clear whether - or how much - vaccination or hand-washing has played a role in the decrease in flu cases. There remains a danger that the H1N1 virus may rear up again, in the same or a mutated form. However, its appearance is also waning in most places around the world at this time.

See [<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703429304575095743102260012.html?KEYWORDS=betsy+mckay#articleTabs%3Darticle> "Tracking the Flu"] for a time-series chart of the "percentage of all doctors' visits made by patients with influenza-like symptoms" for seasons 2005-06 through 2008-09.

Submitted by Margaret Cibes

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KEYWORDS=[betsy+mckay](#) [the flu season that fizzled](#)

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Also notice some of the other syntax in the source text, and compare that to the preview.

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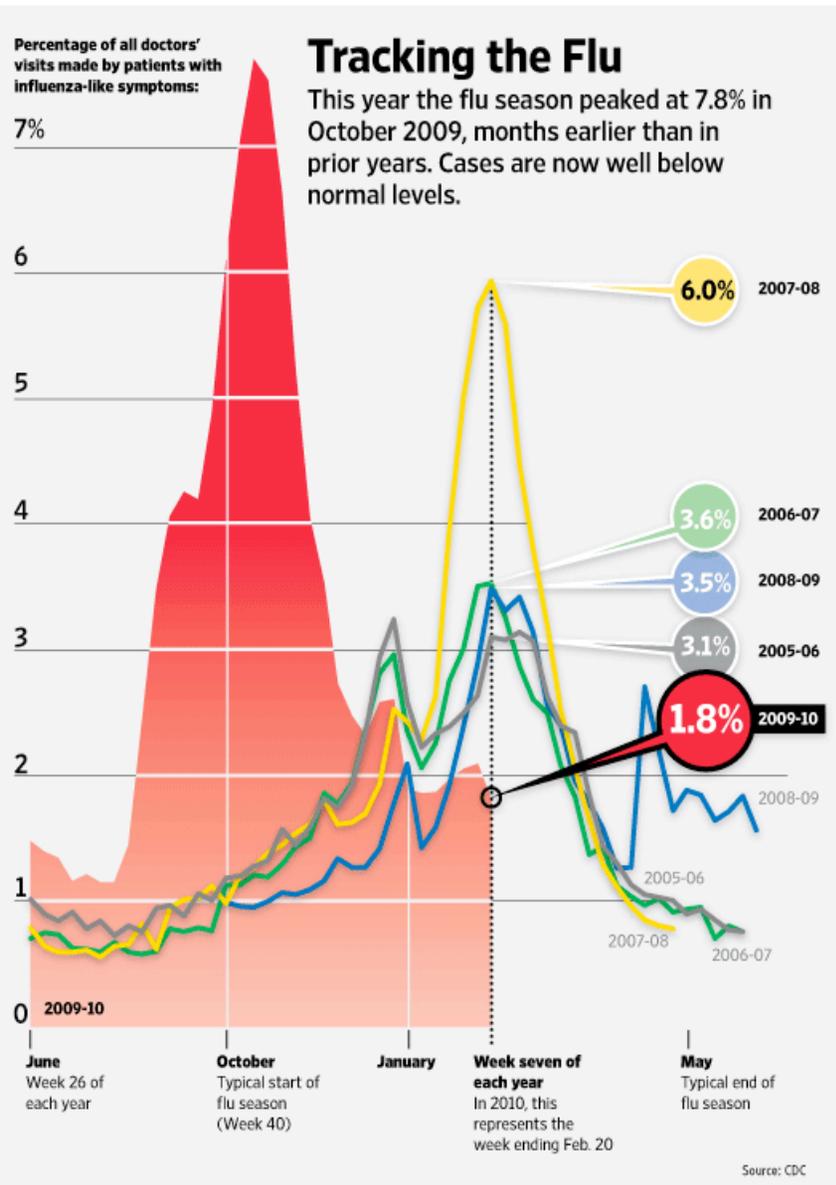
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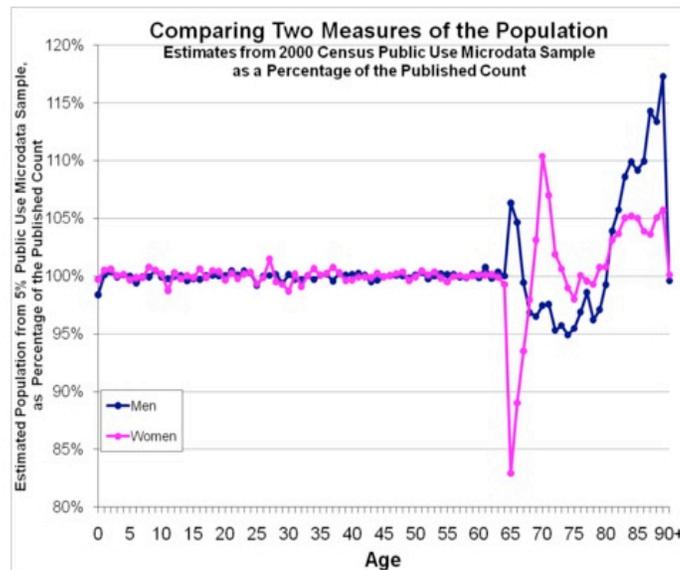
by Justin Wolfers, New York Times, Freakonomics blog, 2 February 2010

[Census Bureau obscured personal data—Too well, some say](#)

by Carl Bialik, Numbers Guy column, Wall Street Journal, 6 February 2010

These stories describe problems with the Census Bureau' [IPUMS](#) (Integrated Public Use Microdata Series) data, which provides subsamples of Census data to outside researchers. In order to protect the privacy of citizens, the records are altered slightly. For example, incomes may be rounded and ages may be tweaked by a small amount. Ideally this would make it impossible to identify any particular individual, while at the same time not introducing any meaningful distortions into the overall demographic profile.

Unfortunately, it appears that serious distortions have resulted. A recent [NBER working paper](#) details the problems, which seem to be especially pronounced in data for ages 65 and above. The Freakonomics post reproduces the following graph from the paper



which shows how total population estimates based on the microdata diverge from the actual Census counts for older Americans. Furthermore, breakdowns within particular age groups are also distorted. For example, The Wall Street Journal article has an [interactive graphic](#), revealing how data released in 2006 showed inexplicable fluctuations from one age year to the next in the percentage of women who were married (those errors were corrected in 2007).

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Editing Chance News 61 (section)



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==Census errors==

[<http://freakonomics.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/02/02/can-you-trust-census-data/> Can you trust Census data?]
by Justin Wolfers, New York Times, Freakonomics blog, 2 February 2010

[<http://online.wsj.com/article/SB20001424052748704533204575047241321811712.html> Census Bureau obscured personal data—Too well, some say]
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<center><http://graphics8.nytimes.com/images/2010/02/02/opinion/Census-Chart/blogSpan.jpg></center>



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The highlighted text shows the direct link to the graph.



Chance News 62

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Quotations

"It is a very sad thing that nowadays there is so little useless information."
--Oscar Wilde

Quoted in [All too much: Monstrous amounts of data](#)
The Economist, 25 February 2010

"Statisticians are engaged in an exhausting but exhilarating struggle with the challenge that philosophy makes to science: how do we translate information into knowledge? ...

"If you think that statistics has nothing to say about what you do or how you do it better, then you are either wrong or in need of a more interesting job."
--Stephen Senn, *Dicing With Death*

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