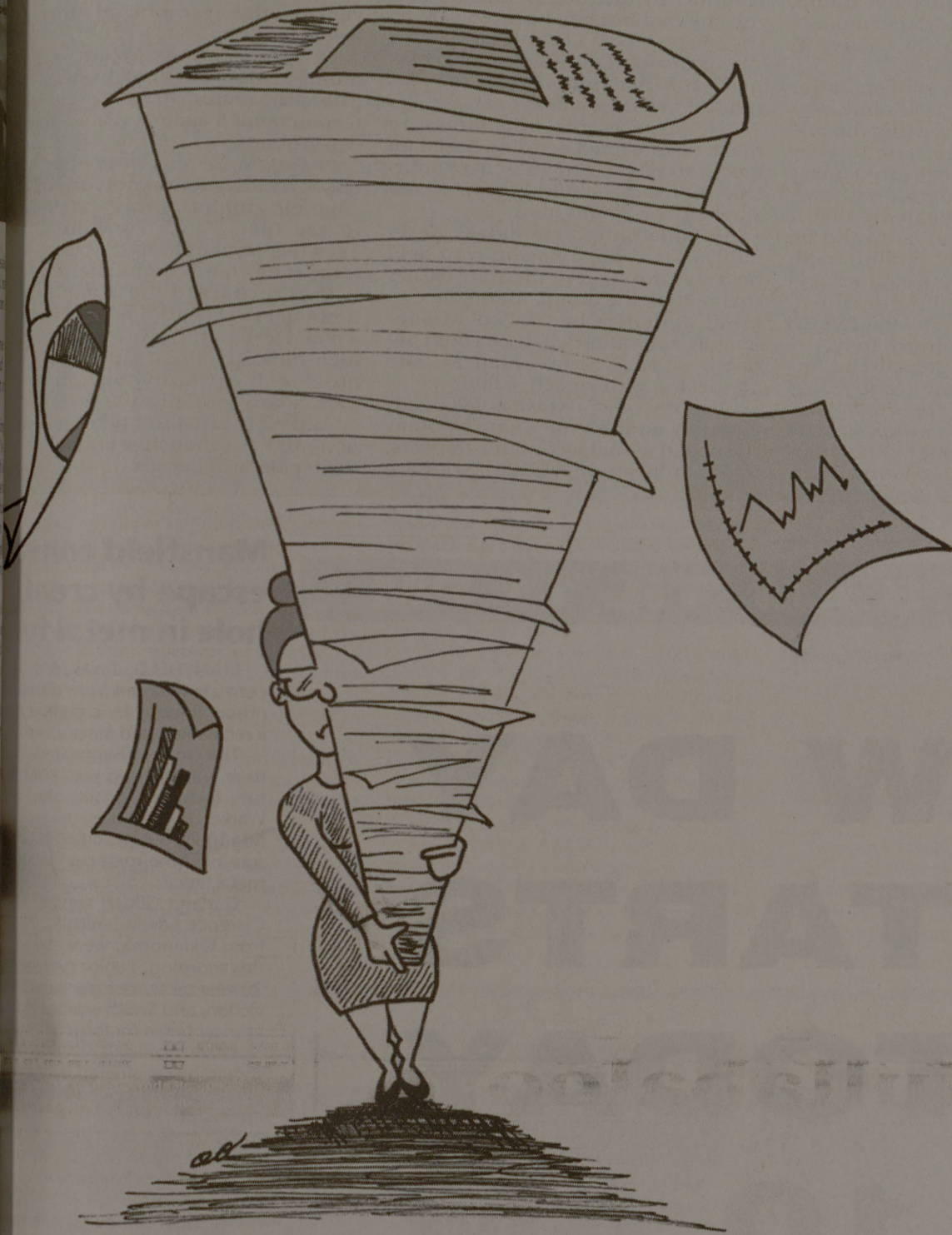


Manipulative measures

Overuse of statistics borders on numerical brainwashing



GRAPHIC BY QUATRO OAKLEY / THE BATTALION

The next time one sees a statistic in a popular magazine or on TV, puke. Please, do it for me.

Because chances are the number that is being given is being misused. Even if the number is valid, gastric upheaval still would be justified because it might send the message that we're sick of statistics being overused.

Sure, every once in a while some innocent newsnik is gonna get chunked, but better safe than sorry, because the casual use of statistics is diluting the power of numbers.

To those who usually have better things to do than ponder mathematical power, that statement might sound extreme, but it's important to recognize that in today's America, numbers are hefty things.

Numbers tell how much people are being taxed and how much the government spends. They tell how many of us there are, and who is being voted for.

Unfortunately, the science of statistics has been taken out of such weighty subjects and relegated to the realm of indiscriminate use on CNN.

What is worse is that the average citizen is being encouraged to substitute a pollster's figure for independent thought.

The best example of this phenomenon is the reporting of the president's job approval rating. Despite Clinton's scandal-ridden second term, the rating continues to hover around 80 percent.

That number only should mean that about four out of five Americans approve of the job that Clinton is doing, or at least they can't find a reason to complain about it.

But to listen to some news anchors and the president's supporters, that number is both vindication and high applause.

According to them, that number means that 80 percent of Americans can actually identify what the president is doing for the country. The number means that 80 percent of Americans believe that the president is honest.

The number means that 80 percent of Americans don't care about the moral character of their leader. The number means that 80 percent think that Clinton is the best president this country has ever had.

Not one of those assumptions is correct. In fact, each has statistics that indicate the contrary. Many people think the president is dishonest. Many others think he's had sex with Monica

Lewinsky and a host of others, and hardly any of us can come up with a compelling list of what he's done for us.

But pollsters and spin doctors have got America caught in a feedback loop where the president's high job approval rating actually perpetuates itself.

Here's how it works: Take a bunch of people and ask them a relatively meaningless question, like "Is this guy attractive?" When they start to ask themselves what the question actually means, give them several new specific questions.

Tell them to look at his hair, his clothes and how he smiles. Then tell them to listen to his voice and to notice who he hangs out with.

Then convince them that if they like even one of those attributes, they should say he's a looker. Remind them of their own shortcomings in some of those areas.

Even if the guy is far from impressive in each of those categories, and downright ugly in some, the chances that people will fault him in all of them are slim.

Finally, reward their cooperation with a number that confuses them, but lets them know they're a part of the crowd. Ask them the same question next week and voila: instant enduring false approval.

Compared to that technique, other statistical games simply are played and easily identified.

It's easy to spot "majority rules," the game where measured popular opinions are exalted as good and proper.

For instance, everyone knows that abortion on demand is moral and a fundamental right because 75 percent of Americans think it is.

Sure, every once in a while something crazy happens and the crowd gets snubbed.

After all, the majority of Americans used to find slavery acceptable, and just look where that great institution has gone.

Statistics are meant to be dispassionate. They are as much units of measurement as the foot or the pound.

When people use them without considering the possible editorial impact, they are acting unethically.

My job is to tell students what I think, and convince them that I am right, not that most out there already agree with me.

On a good day, the use of numbers tends to be inaccurate and indiscriminate. On a bad day, the truth can be slaughtered with little more than a percentage sign.

It's enough to make one nauseous.



JEREMY VALDEZ
columnist

Jeremy Valdez is a senior journalism and chemical engineering major.

Homework bound

Home schoolers lack skills

Once upon a time, in a far away kingdom, there lived a princess. That princess was the daughter of a king and queen who loved her very much, and only wanted the best for the princess. The king and queen also believed in the divine right of monarchy, and so they thought they were better and smarter than everyone else in the kingdom.

When the princess was old enough to go to school, the king and queen decided since the schools were not good enough for their daughter, with all the honors and liberal ideologies they would keep their daughter home from school.

"Since I am smarter than everyone else, I will teach myself," the king said.

The years passed, and the king taught his daughter everything she needed to know about ruling and running the kingdom, including state-mandated health classes.

When it came time for princes to come and court the princess, the parade of princes was politically powerful. The king was very happy and proud.

Then, Prince Chivalry, as a spokesperson for the rest of the princes, came to talk to the king.

Prince Chivalry said, "What did you do to that kid? None of us ever want to see her again!" With that, the princess stormed out of the castle.

So, the king and queen went away to talk things over. When they came back, they had decided to have another kid.

The king and queen had another child, a prince, and they sent him into the public school system. The king helped him after school, and upon graduating, the prince was an intelligent well-rounded individual who could get himself not only friends but a date. The prince locked his sister in the tower, and eventually her head was chopped off. And everyone lived happily ever after.

The story shows one thing that is very true and very dangerous to students, especially to students who were home schooled through high school and who want to succeed. Home schooling does not prepare children to succeed in the world outside of their home.

To begin, there are two kinds of home schooling. One is when the parent teaches the child. The other is when the

parent sends away for material to teach the child. For the child, the first is far worse.

Sending away for material gives the same educational benefit as going to school. However, parents who teach their children are presumptuous.

It boggles the mind to think that a parent, who may or may not have a teaching certificate, can equal the professional educators available in the public education system.

To gain a teaching certificate from Texas A&M, a prospective teacher has to take classes on speaking, multiculturalism, computer literacy, educational psychology and on the principles of teaching. He or she also has to have at least a bachelor's degree and spend at least 12 semester-hours student teaching, helped along by a cooperating teacher and a faculty supervisor.

Educationally, parents who attempt to teach their child without any outside help simply cannot match those credentials, even with a bad teacher thrown into the mix.

However, the primary danger, a danger that may cripple the child in his or her later years, is that Home schooling removes the child from the complex, pervasive social environment that exists outside of home school.

Dr. Linda Putnam, Head of the Department of Speech Communication, said that the key to interacting in the modern world, as a good communicator, is understanding there may be miscommunications and compensating.

She also said the more an individual practices effective communication, the better at it he or she will become. It is possible to practice those skills with brothers and sisters at home. Home schoolers are capable of becoming effective communicators.

However, aside from those Home schoolers who do not have siblings, there is a problem. Keeping a student home from school may keep that student from exposure to different people, ideals and ideas.

Students are usually home-schooled because the parents do not believe public schools are a good environment for their child. Keeping the student home may keep him or her from experiences that would develop better communications skills, as well as developing their self. In public school, it is impossible to avoid these valuable experiences.

This deficiency is doing the exact opposite of what the parent intends. Instead of protecting and helping the child, Home schooling is increasing the chance that the child will end up a poor communicator which will hurt the child's ability to succeed in life.

Chris Huffines is a junior speech communications major.

Home schooling proves beneficial, rewarding for some

She never attended public high school. She didn't go to prom, or football games

or graduation.

She made her friends at church and at the summer camp where she worked.

Two months ago, she walked across the stage at Reed Arena and received her degree from Texas A&M.

This is the true success story of a home schooler. She was educated at home from seventh grade all the way through high school.

She never dressed like an Amish housewife. She listens to secular music. She is not "socially retarded."

In fact, she is a beautiful and intelligent person with a kind heart and a pure soul. This girl is my older sister, and I admire her for the criticism she has endured because she home schooled.

Home schooling is not an excuse to sleep until noon and work lessons in one's pajamas with a television going in the background.

A home school book fair is offered once a year in Dallas. Home schoolers from all over the

state come to browse literature and various programs offered.

Families place textbook orders in the same way high school superintendents choose school curriculum.

Many of the programs require students to mail in completed workbooks, term papers and assignments. At the end of a grading period, a student receives a report card.

Sounds a lot similar to public school.

The major difference between home school and public school is the personal attention a student can receive.

My mother, a certified teacher, gave my sister one-on-one instruction and spent extra time helping her with the subjects in which she struggled.

My sister was able to learn in a healthy environment without the adolescent distractions of popularity and competition.

She learned to focus on what was important — earning an education.

Home schooling is not for everyone. I stayed home in sixth and seventh grade and felt like a friendless hermit recluse.

I needed structure, and I needed to be around people who were not related to me, thus legally bound to spend time with me.

But it works for some people. It worked for my sister.

She was too mature for public school. She realized that having the biggest bangs and the purplest eye shadow was what every teen-age girl's life revolved around.

She wanted to study, she wanted to learn.

Instead of worrying about whether she owned the latest designer jeans, whether Johnny got the note she left in his locker or whether she should bring or buy her lunch, she was learning. What a concept.

Today, she is able to communicate with people her own age, as well as older and younger people. She interacts well with others and has plenty of friends.

She also has an education that is comparable to that which public schoolers received. She took math and science classes. She read books and wrote papers.

She went out on weekends with her friends from church.

The only things she was deprived of are useless things, such as pep rallies and fire drills.

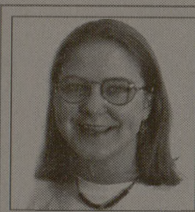
The things she missed out on are the things that waste students' time and take them away from the knowledge they are in school to receive.

Not every child should be home schooled.

But those who are secure enough to handle spending all day with textbooks and Mom should open their minds to the possibility.

It can be a blessed opportunity. It can provide an education in a timely manner and eliminate the distraction that kept so many students from taking full advantage of the classroom experience — other students.

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