The Sociology of Rational Decision-Making: Trust in Numbers, Sociology 335, Fall 2011. Professor Bruce Carruthers, #203, 1808 Chicago Ave., 467-1251. b-carruthers@northwestern.edu. Office hours: Tuesday and Thursday 4-5 pm, or by appointment.

This course explores the role played by numerical and quantitative information in private and public sector decision-making. More than ever before, organizations produce and consume vast amounts of quantitative data. Such information informs economic and political decision-making at the highest levels. Quantitative data are said to enhance the precision, accuracy, rationality, and objectivity of decisions.

We will examine how quantitative data are produced and consumed in a variety of organizational contexts, what role they play in real-world decision-making, and why such data continues to make us nervous. What circumstances make it easier or harder to derive quantitative measures? Can such data be used to produce rational decisions, or simply to rationalize decisions? We will explore these issues using examples drawn from private and public-sector decision-making.

Course readings include Theodore Porter's Trust in Numbers: The Pursuit of Objectivity in Science and Public Life (Princeton University Press, 1995), Control through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management, by JoAnne Yates (Johns Hopkins, 1989), and A Primer on Decision Making: How Decisions Happen, by James March (Free Press, 1994) as well as a set of articles. The books are available at Norris. Some articles have been posted to the class blackboard, and articles marked JSTOR can be found via NU electronic resources at www.jstor.org.

Class sessions will be run as a mixture of lectures, presentations and discussion. The course requirements include one group project (worth 30% of the grade), one individual take-home assignment (25%), and a final exam (35%). The final will be held during the regular exam period (Monday December 5 at 9 am). General class participation determines the other 10%. I reserve the right to adjust the syllabus if needed.

Feel free to give your notes to a student who missed a class. But do not sell, give away, or otherwise make public the notes taken in my class on any of the various websites that facilitate this (or any other way that this is done). My lectures are my intellectual property and are not for sale unless I sell them.

Course Outline (1-2 weeks per section):

2. Counting and measurement: how to create numbers.


3. The orthodox case for quantitative information in decision-making.


HBS Note 9-894-004 "Decision Analysis." On blackboard.

HBS Note 9-192-068 "A Brief Introduction to Cost Accounting." On blackboard.

4. Counting Close to Home (i.e., school).


5. History of Corporations and Information.


6. Critical interpretations of the role of quantitative information.


6. How managers and organizations use information.


7. Producers and audiences for quantitative information.


