

Should You Believe It? Critical Minds in the Information Age

Rebecca Goldin
George Mason University

Thursday, May 9, 2019
2:00 pm in Lawrence 115

Abstract:

News accounts of science and scientific ideas are filled with numbers and implicit advice. They also tell a story. Do violent video games lead to violence? Can brain scans read our minds? Does chocolate make us smarter?

In contexts as diverse as political surveys, criminal courts, and public health, numbers are playing an increasingly prominent role as data becomes more accessible. Despite our need for clear rendering of numerical information, many media accounts using statistics are misleading. I will share some humorous as well as serious stories about statistical bloopers in the media, peppered with insights about how our minds work. Numerical reasoning can be powerful when we move past politics and morality to clarify what quantitative information actually tells us, what it does not, and what it cannot.