Lesson Plan for Chapter 13: What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You

*The Signal and the Noise*, Nate Silver

**Prepare for class:**
- Read the Introduction and Chapter 13: What You Don’t Know Can Hurt You
- Review ‘Key Points’ in the Reading Guide on the FYB website and be prepared to discuss
- Go through the Resources on the website for Chapter 13
- Bring laptops to class

**Main Objectives:**
- Observe how public opinion has changed over time and discuss the reasons why.
- Engage in a conversation about ‘signal’ and ‘noise’ in the issue of Syria, and talk about how we can begin to distinguish between the two.
- Recognize the roles that instinct vs. data play in the way the polls, the public and politicians are approaching Syria and the issue of war.

**In class:**

Why did it take two years for Syria to reach the forefront of public awareness? One of the main issues of *The Signal and the Noise* and Bayes’ Theorem is recognizing prior data, which is often overlooked in favor of focusing solely on current data. This lesson will focus on looking at how available data and public opinion has changed over the past two years, from 2011-2013, in regards to the conflict in Syria. Small groups will construct a timeline based on polls, media, and other data that represents public opinion. Then, the class should discuss why these changes have occurred over time and how they have led to the current state of public opinion, awareness, and political stances on Syria. The point of this exercise is to raise questions, spark discussion, and break down the influx of data around a highly charged, current issue.

**Exercise:**

1. Break into three groups.
2. Each group will be assigned a year: 2011, 2012, or 2013. Their goal will be to search online, using the chapter ‘Resources’ available on the FYB page but also branching out using search engines, to find information about the national reactions to issues involving Syria from that year. Each group should come up with two major examples from polls and other data sources that reflect their year and be prepared to share them with the class.
3. As a class, construct a timeline. The main points can be written on the blackboard for discussion. Compare and contrast what each group has found, and identify the ways that things have changed over the years.
4. Use the following questions for discussion:
   a. From what we’ve found, what seems to be ‘signal’ and what seems to be ‘noise’? How can we distinguish between the two?
b. How does data from 2011 relate to data from 2013? Talk about why things have changed, but also talk about how things have progressed. What steps brought what you’ve found in 2011 to what it became in 2012, and then in 2013?

Finish-up:

- How can we look at data differently to make the best possible decision regarding a topic, particularly something as highly-charged and nationally significant as the issue of Syria?
- What are your personal feelings on the issue? Were they different before constructing the timeline? Discuss why or why not.