

2012 Victor Cohn 1

**Victor Cohn (1919-2000):  
A Retrospective**

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by  
**Milo Schild**  
**President, Twin-Cities Chapter of the ASA**  
**US Chair: International Statistical  
Literacy Project**

**Oct 23, 2012. Augsburg College**  
[www.StatLit.org/pdf/2012Schild-Cohn-Retrospective-6up.pdf](http://www.StatLit.org/pdf/2012Schild-Cohn-Retrospective-6up.pdf)

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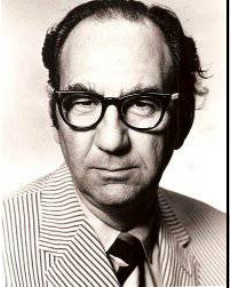
**Dean of American  
science-medical journalists**

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Starting out as a reporter on the Minneapolis Tribune in the 1940s, *Cohn developed the craft of science and medical journalism as it is known today.*

He later served as a reporter and editor at The Washington Post for 25 years, before retiring in 1993.

Teich's Tech Tidbit of the Week:  
7/16/ 2001




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**1954: Our Hopeful Future - 1999**

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Fascinating perspective on how the future looked to technical experts at the midpoint of the 20th Century.

Source:  
[www.alteich.com/tidbits/t071601.htm](http://www.alteich.com/tidbits/t071601.htm)



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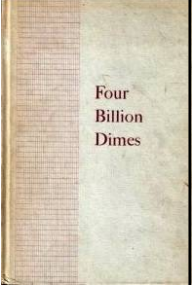
**1955: 4 Billion Dimes**

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Early history of the polio vaccine development effort supported by the March of Dimes (National Foundation for Infantile Paralysis).

*Provides details not found in other contemporaneous accounts and more recent histories.*

Publisher: Mpls. Star & Tribune  
Source: Amazon.com



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**1959: Co-founder of CASW**

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The Council for the Advancement of Science Writing [CASW] is committed to improving the quality of science news reaching the public.

...CASW develops and funds programs to help reporters and writers produce accurate and informative stories about developments in science, technology, medicine and the environment.

Source: [casw.org/casw/announcement/news-numbers](http://casw.org/casw/announcement/news-numbers)



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**1975: Sister Kenny**

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Sister Kenny: The Woman Who Challenged Doctors.  
The Australian Florence Nightingale.

Publisher: Mpls. Star & Tribune and the U. Mn Press.

Source:  
<http://sisterkenny.net/biographies.html>



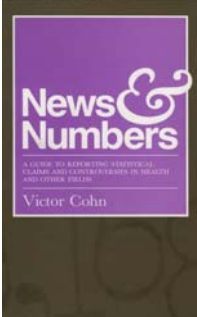
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**1979: News & Numbers (1<sup>st</sup> ed.)**

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Great “confounder” stories!  
 Chicago lawyers without a college degree earned more than those with. P. 28

Men cope better with death of spouse than do women.  
 Data: Widows=15% of all suicides; widowers=5%.  
 P. 110



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FOREWARD BY Fredrick Mosteller

1. **Facts and Figures – We Can Do Better**
2. **The Certainty of Uncertainty**
3. **The Scientific Way:** Probability, "Power" and Numbers, Bias and *Confounders*, Variability
4. **Studies, Good and Bad:** Experiments versus Seductive Anecdotes, Clinical Trials, What Makes a Study Honest? *Epidemiology*
5. **Questions Reporters Can Ask**
6. **Tests and Testing:** Drugs and Drug Trials, Animals as Models
7. **Vital Statistics: The Numbers of Life and Health:** Crude Rates versus *Rates that Compare, Other Ways to Compare, Reporting Hospital Death Rates, Cancer Rates and Cancer "Cures"*, The Important Questions about Cancer, Shifts, Drifts and Blips.
8. **The Statistics of Environment and Risk:** What's Believable?, Questions to Ask, Evaluating Environmental Hazards, Advice to Reporters.
9. **The Statistics of Politics, Economics and Democracy:** The State of a Nation's Statistics, The Bottom Line.

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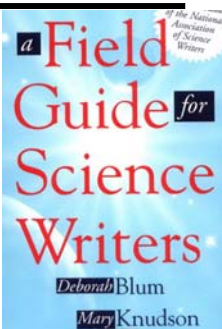
**1998: Coping With Statistics**

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Chapter in “A Field Guide for Science Writers” 1<sup>st</sup> ed.

“Doing science writing without reading this is like preaching in a Baptist church without having read the Bible.”

*Understanding and Using Statistics* by Lewis Cope 2<sup>nd</sup>.



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**Reaching Out for Vic**

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Sept 27, 1998  
 Fritz J. Scheuren, Chair,  
 Office of Scientific and Public Affairs (OSPA) Advisory Committee

**I am trying to contact Victor Cohn. I enjoyed his AMSTAT article in the Jan. 1997 issue. In that article, he mentioned his membership on your committee. The problem is that Victor has an on-line listing under ASA, but that listing does not show Victor's e-mail address. I am attending a session on Quantitative Journalism at the University of Minnesota in mid-October. Victor Cohn is one of the featured speakers. I would like to contact him before that meeting. If you can send me his e-mail address, I would appreciate it.**

I have been an ASA member for about 7 years. I am organizing a special contributed session for ISM 1999 on Statistical Reasoning, Critical Thinking and Observational Studies... This session might fit in with your committee's attention to being able to read and interpret statistics to non-statisticians.

Thank you in advance for whatever assistance you can offer.  
 Milo Schield

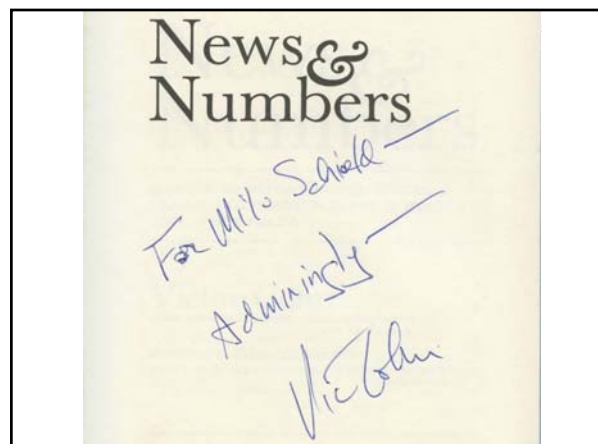
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**1<sup>st</sup> Contact**

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Date: Fri, 2 Oct 1998 09:33:41 -0400  
 From: Vic Cohn <102101.325@compuserve.com>  
 Subject: Meeting  
 Sender: Vic Cohn <102101.325@compuserve.com>  
 To: Milo Schield <schield@augsborg.edu>

I left a phone message for you yesterday (Thursday), I hope, saying how about breakfast (not at the crack of dawn) Friday morning Oct. 23 at the Radisson Metrodome, where I'll be staying? Or we might sit together at lunch at the Saturday session you mention -- I'm the luncheon speaker, but that would give us some time, at least. My schedule has gotten kind of full, I'm afraid, but I do want to meet you and talk. **Do you have a copy of my book NEWS & NUMBERS?** Do phone me at 202 223 6783. -- Vic Cohn



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## ASA: Statistical Literacy 1999

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**John Bailar, III** (U. Chicago) is the chair,

The four presenters are:

1. **Donald Rubin** (Harvard),
2. **Tom Wonnacott** (Univ. of Western Ontario),
3. **Victor Cohn** (former reporter for Washington Post)
4. **Milo Schield** (Augsburg College)

Our discussant is:

5. **Gudmund Iversen** (Swathmore College)

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## 1999: How to Help Reporters Tell the Truth (ASA)

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*Victor Cohn: "I believe that six principles pretty much sum up what the media and the public need to know about statistical thinking:*

- the certainty of uncertainty
- the use of probability.
- the power of large numbers
- the danger of bias
- the ubiquity of variation, and
- the hierarchy of studies.


Victor's talk was presented by Milo Schield  
 Victor's paper: [www.statlit.org/pdf/1999CohnASA.pdf](http://www.statlit.org/pdf/1999CohnASA.pdf)  
 See also *Stat Med.* 20:1341-1346, 2001.

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## Vic's work has been carried on

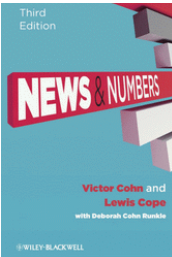
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Lewis Cope: Retired, Mpls Star and Tribune  
 Deborah Cohn Runkle: Am. Assoc. Advance Science



2<sup>nd</sup> ed. 2001

3<sup>rd</sup> ed. 2011



For more on Vic Cohn, News & Numbers, and journalism, see [www.statlit.org/Jrn11.htm](http://www.statlit.org/Jrn11.htm)