

Alliance for useful evidence

Stats, Facts & Evidence-Checking: what role for evidence in the General Election – and beyond? London, 4 March 2015

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A few years ago, I was given a book: *Great Speeches of the 20th Century*. JFK was on the cover. All the old favourites were in there: the ‘I have a dream’; the ‘we shall fight them on the beaches’, and so on. In preparing this paper, I looked at it again, and I noticed an interesting thing: the almost total absence of statistics from these great speeches. There was one reference to teenage pregnancy in a speech by Tony Blair; and something on the per capita frequency of Nobel Prize winners in the UK and the US in a Margaret Thatcher speech. Apart from that: nothing.

Contrast that with contemporary political speeches. They are full of numbers and facts and stats. I looked at speeches by Clegg and Cameron; by Sturgeon and Salmond; by Miliband and Balls. And they are absolutely peppered with facts. *Great Speeches of the 21st Century* will be a very different read: instead of luxuriating in prose and imagery and principle and reason, we’ll drown in facts.

My point isn’t that contemporary speeches are less good than in the past. That would be ridiculously rose-tinted. It’s more that the nature of contemporary political communication places a great deal of emphasis on quantification, facts and statistics. Facts, checkable facts, are now one of the key building blocks of how politics is communicated.

This explains why fact checking is so important: it involves checking the truthfulness of statements at the heart of political communication. And Full Fact have done a very fine job – from small beginnings they’ve grown into a highly effective organisation – an example of social entrepreneurship I think we should all applaud.

It also explains the Authority’s role. Our statutory function – and here I quote - is “to promote and safeguard the production and publication of official statistics that serve the public good”. If all we did was assess the quality of the statistics themselves, we’d be missing out on a key part of the public good. We must also ensure that the dissemination and use of statistics serves the public good. Where we have concerns, we will report them publicly.

To help us in this, we have two key principles to guide us:

- First, not all the statements and facts in political communication are based on official statistics. We therefore do not aim to police all political discourse. Our aim is simply to ensure that statistics are used appropriately, released in an orderly way, and that their value is recognised.
- Second, we adopt a wide definition of official statistics: anything that looks like a statistic produced by Government, not just what the bureaucracies define as official statistics at any given time. So it includes management information, research and quantified information. This stance is not always popular with Government Departments. In particular, it’s not always popular with the Treasury – so we must be doing something right!

When we make our public interventions, we don't always get the right tone and emphasis. I'll admit that. But when our interventions work, they typically revolve around 4 types of problem with the use of statistics:

- i. Outright misstatement – where official statistics are misquoted. For example, the Secretary of State for Health recently said that 6,500 Welsh cancer patients were being treated in English hospitals. But in fact, the 6,500 number relates to admissions, and there were only 2,400 separate patients. To his credit, he promptly corrected the record when we drew this to his attention;
- ii. Misinterpretation – This is where undue weight is placed on or inferences drawn from statistics. Lots of grey areas here, but the best example is the benefit cap, and our conclusion that there was no evidence in official statistics to support the statement that the cap had led to people taking work;
- iii. Things which undermine trust in the statistical system – For example, we acted when Alex Salmond accused the ONS of responding to Treasury direction in its compilation of GDP; and
- iv. Unequal access – in a way, this is my biggest concern: the disorderly release of statistics in terms of timing, or context, or completeness. A really interesting example of one of our interventions here is a letter I wrote recently to the Scottish Government about the release of statistics on Accident and Emergency Waiting Times.

Let me close by saying two positive things. First, this growing use of evidence, of facts, has some downsides; but overall, attending an event such as the Alliance for Useful Evidence, we must recognise it as broadly a welcome development.

Second, to return to my starting point, facts and stats have become the very stuff of political communication. This means that the work of fact checkers is essential and Full Fact do it brilliantly: setting out the position with lucidity, clarity and logic.

Indeed, I don't think we have lost clear succinct prose, logical argument, reasoned analysis based on clear principles. It's just that we find it less in speeches – and more in fact checking.

The contemporary equivalent of the book, then, won't be Great Speeches, but Great Fact Checks of the 21st Century.