

## **Response to the BBC Trust's impartiality review into the BBC's reporting of statistics**

### **Introduction**

The Academy of Social Sciences welcomes this review and takes pride in Dame Jil Matheson's leadership of it: she will bring a vital social science perspective to bear.

In it, the question isn't just about how the BBC uses statistics but how data and evidence (qualitative as well as quantitative) are deployed when they are contested or inadequate and they often will be. A prime test of (social science inflected) journalism is how the declaratory and affirmative nature of story telling deals with abounding uncertainty. Acknowledging what we don't know and the limits within which we can know is a badge of journalistic honesty, however much viewers and listeners and online readers crave assurance and certainty.

Learned societies in membership of the AcSS are responding to the review. The Royal Statistical Society, for example, makes telling points about how numbers are handled and, paying due regard to the corporate efforts made by the BBC in recent years, how journalists' statistical capacity could be improved. The observations below reflect the wider interests of Fellows of the AcSS, among them people who have studied and worked in the media as well as academics concerned to maximise public understanding of economy, culture and society through the agency of accurate and self-aware journalism.

### **Reflexivity**

How the BBC uses data and evidence in reporting cannot easily be disentangled from how other media behave, especially the newspaper press. BBC journalism depends on newspapers, usually for worse. The BBC may follow stories originating in the press; it reviews and reflects their content; it utilises their staff and contributors. The BBC risks contamination from their biases and incapacity.

Unlike the BBC Trust and its interest in BBC content, newspapers are rarely prepared to subject themselves to inspection. With honourable exceptions newspapers have little interest in or capacity for self-reflection. This asymmetry is important. Criticisms of BBC coverage have to be weighed against the performance of other media and their journalism. It hardly needs to be said that British journalism is suffused with political commitments, editorial bias. Neither Leveson nor litigation around hacking has advanced the public accountability of the press.

We, too, as social scientists need to be self-reflexive. Evidence-driven journalism that seeks and presents data depends on suppliers – academics and researchers with stories to tell, graphs to share and, at best, the personality to stand in front of camera or microphone and explain complexity. Social science evidence has champions – Andrew Dilnot, Laurie Taylor, Paul Johnson -- but there is more we could do as a community to find and promote talent and reach out to journalists.

## **Science and social science**

In its report *The Business of People* (1), the AcSS's Campaign for Social Science argued that many of the challenges now facing economy and society -- tackling infectious disease, coping with climate change, boosting growth -- demand 'science' in the round, social, physical and life science together. The point has since been echoed by the government's Chief Scientific Adviser Sir Mark Walport (2): social science and humanities understanding of behaviour, institution and (especially) policy development and delivery is part and parcel of what science is and can do. BBC Science is, however, still very much defined in terms of STEM and the natural sciences. Social science isn't a BBC rubric though one social science, economics, is. As a result, the methods and techniques underpinning data quality in reporting on health, public finance, migration and so on may go unrecognised. In reporting on pharmaceutical developments or space science, journalists generally pay heed to the culture of science, including its emphasis on accuracy. When there is no 'social science' as a backdrop, they are not similarly constrained in reporting on welfare, the regions or communities.

## **The IFS gold standard**

Stories need presenters (talking heads) and – on television – an Aston or caption that conveys authority. In matters of public finance, taxation and – recently – welfare the Institute of Fiscal Studies has become an indispensable source of clear and definitive quantitative analysis. What its director, Paul Johnson, says carries great weight: the IFS's reputation for rigour and objectivity allow him to contradict chancellor and shadow chancellor alike, as the evidence demands. Others fill the role: John Appleby at the King's Fund on the finances of the NHS, for example. We would urge producers and reporters to seek out more such commentators from think tanks and research centres, bearing in mind thinktanks are not all like the IFS with a mission to explain objectively; others are partisan and lack research capacity. We would also urge research funders and researchers to step forward and give incentives to experts to become more media friendly. We need IFS analogues in fields such as migration and welfare, where controversy is rife and public understanding would benefit from cool appraisal of the available data, including critique of its misuse.

## **Risk**

A common complaint among social scientists about media handling of data is around uncertainty and risk. The fallibility of data gets insufficient attentions; flagging the limits to what the data say might spoil the story. Relative risk is the very essence of news reporting: it presents events as exceptional hence interesting and worth the attention of news editors and audiences. But relative risk has to be measured. Occasional plane crashes do not make air travel any less (relatively) safe compared with car journeys. News editors and reporters are obliged to remind audiences of relative risk: if they don't, they are misreporting.

## **Sampling**

Social scientists are increasingly concerned with the accuracy of sample surveys as response rates drop and the cost of ensuring a representative sample rises. The Sturgis review of polling conducted before the May 2015 general election will add to our understanding of how cost and accuracy trade off (3). The BBC's record, generally, is superior to most other media in reporting sample surveys but news editors and producers still need to stop and reflect when a story hinges on a survey. Key questions must be: conduct by whom, for what client, on what sample size and within what margins of error.

## **Social mobility**

Concepts that become politically salient demand vigilance and, on the part of editors and reporters, close attention to the data. Social mobility is a good example of an analytic construct (the likelihood of children ending in different occupational or income brackets from their parents) become normative (social mobility conceived as one-way 'upwards' travel). Everyday discourse abounds in similar concepts that are intuitively appealing but may be barriers to understanding, for example community and – hugely politically relevant – poverty. Editors and reporters need, ideally, to be social science literate, aware that such ideas are contested but can be defined rigorously and, within limits, measured. Especially in reporting political uses of these ideas, journalists should be quizzical and wary. To mean anything, social mobility for example has to imply downwards movement in the income and occupational scales, which is not something political leaders always accept.

## **Conclusion**

BBC journalists' statistical capacity is part and parcel of their understanding of data and evidence (much of which, but by no means all, is quantitative). The BBC's record is generally commendable, especially its willingness to hear and respond to external scrutiny – some of which is malign and driven by the commercial interests of rivals. But social scientists would wish the BBC to adopt a wider definition of 'science'. Greater social science literacy would make journalists more cautious with concepts that are simultaneously intuitive ('what everyone knows') and contested and problematic. The AcSS would be glad to help the BBC improve its training and editorial capacity.

## **December 2015**

### **References**

1. <http://campaignforsocialscience.org.uk/businessofpeople/>
2. Walport, M et al All the talents: policy needs social science and humanities' input THE 22/10/15 p 28-29
3. <http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/general-election-7-may-2015/>