


Who you gonna call? Myth-busters

Answering the call for myth-busting regulators of political life is far from problematic argue **Miran Norderland** and **Martin Lodge**



RUSH FOR MARMELADE
SANDWICHES CAUSES
ORANGE SHORTAGE

*Royal wedding to be
held in town hall registry*

This is supposed to be the age of ‘fake news’ and of disseminating cynical falsehoods in political life. Much ink has been spilt on the potentially detrimental effects of such strategies on trust in institutions. How to respond to these politically attractive strategies has also generated considerable interest, in terms of types and kinds of fact-checking. One of the primary recipes against the spreading of fake news and misleading statistics is the creation of regulators to fact-check and publicly warn against continued misleading statements. One example of such a regulator is the UK Statistics Authority that plays the role of the watchdog on the use of statistics in the discourse of politicians and government.

Calling for the creation of real-time watchdogs with considerable bark and bite is one thing (Kuper, 2017). Being a fearless watchdog and statistical myth-buster is another. What, then, are the challenges facing such a real-time regulator of the use of statistical, let alone factual information? These challenges relate to the use of statistics themselves on the one hand, and to the institutional position of such a myth-buster on the other.

One critical question is, of course, how much statistically misleading information is ‘out there’ and whether there has been more of it in recent years. After all, the role of numbers in political life is said to have become increasingly prominent. For example, numerical indicators dominate discussions about the quality of public services, benchmarking is used to suggest that governmental performance can be assessed and compared as in private business life. Social media is also said to contribute to the tendency to communicate numbers in direct and amplified ways.

To assess how frequently statistics are used in misleading ways is a problematic undertaking. Firstly, one requires knowledge of the volume, frequency and type of numerical statements that have been initially made in the political discourse. To come closer to the question of ‘how much is out there’, the first step involves an assessment as to whether there has, indeed, been a rise in the use of numerical statements over time.

Such an undertaking is inherently difficult. In our research, we focused on a range of ‘data chambers’ (party conferences, parliament, government communication and Twitter), ministerial departments and senior politicians, as well as different numerical statements. The findings of this exercise are far from straightforward and paint a complex picture.

Looking at political speeches by party leaders made during party conferences, for example, suggests that, during the period 1967–2016, it was Edward Heath in 1969 who made most numerical statements during a party leader’s conference speech. Labour party leaders’ speeches tend to be more number-heavy than those of other party leaders, but that does not apply to specific numerical keywords. Similarly, speeches in parliament are not becoming more number-heavy. Ministers make more numerical statements than backbenchers, but it was the 1980s that featured numerical statements most prominently (as seen from 1967–2017). It is not the case that recent years and decades are more number-heavy than others.

The same mixed patterns apply to other forms of communication. Different keywords (such as rates, billion, numbers) feature across separate government departments in diverse forms of communication and at various times.

So, it is difficult to suggest that there are now ‘more’ numerical statements out there. Numerical statements seem to be driven by wider political dynamics. However, this does not mean that the role of a myth-busting fact-checker deals with limited complexity; it is arguably the ways in which numbers are used and their consequences for wider political debate that have changed. This context requires an approach towards the regulation of the use of statistics in political discourse that includes a number of key demands: *transparency* (in terms of source and method of calculation of the figure in question), *accuracy* (factual correctness), *frequency* of the statement (how often is that statement made) and *traceability* in terms of its recoverability so as to enable ‘holding to account’. For example, this might involve the requirement that any use of Office of National Statistics or departmental data has to include statements as to whether the original data or visualization was (re)adapted, including a URL link as to where the presented data set is located. Such requirements address some issues, but they cannot address more tricky questions that relate to questions of misleading interpretation.

Secondly, it requires a broad approach that focuses on a range of keywords and not just numbers per se. Different types of numerical statements and keywords dominate at different times, therefore requiring a broad monitoring of the type of statements made, visualized and formatted.

Thirdly, it requires an understanding of the different channels in which numbers are being communicated. Such an understanding requires a dashboard approach to identifying



relevant sources and monitoring their activity in real-time. The challenge of understanding these different forms relates in particular to social media. For example, when focusing on Twitter, it is one thing to monitor how MPs communicate and present (visualize) statistical information within the constraints of a 140-character tweet. However, it is much more critical to understand the potential reach. For example, when looking at Twitter communication, very different patterns regarding volume emerge when focusing on the number of Twitter followers of politicians and the amount of re-tweets. In other words, regulation needs to focus on channels for application as much as on the source and presentation of potentially misleading statements themselves.

Fourthly, while the deliberate use of mis-information as a political strategy, whether on campaign battle buses or in newspaper columns, might generate most headlines, there are far more insidious ways of misleading recipients of information, namely, through visually generated data-information. How to assess whether the graphical representation of statistical information is misleading (or not) will require a distinct set of skills and competencies. These competency demands include not just statistical competency, but also data forensics (detecting and tracing information) and wider digital skills.

Finally, however, the creation of myth-checking regulators also brings with it its own political dynamic. While it might be attractive for politicians to call for regulation to curb others' apparent misconduct, they will quickly turn on 'out of control' and 'loose cannon' regulators should these watchdogs be found to restrict their own room for manoeuvre. In part, regulators need to perform highly sensitive fancy footwork when any censoring might be accused of entering wider political battles in a timely manner. This might place additional transparency requirements on myth-busting watchdogs. More generally, myth-busting regulators risk becoming part of the political contest over the 'rightness' or 'wrongness' of larger issues rather than independent referees. This, in turn, is likely to harden attitudes and enhance distrust in political institutions rather than enhance them. In other words, creating a regulator that is unafraid of the sources of misleading statistics is one thing, how to ensure its continued viability to stand up to politicians and be perceived as unbiased is another.

REFERENCE

Kuper, S. (2017) 'Brexit: Britain's gift to the world', FT Weekend Magazine, 23/24 September.

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Miran Norderland is a **carr** research student, **Martin Lodge** is **carr** director. This article draws on research on the use of numerical statements in political life that is available on the **carr** website <http://www.lse.ac.uk/accounting/CARR/pdf/Impact/carr-report-for-UKSA-final.pdf>. The research was financially supported by the UK Statistics Authority.