

POST-ELECTION BRIEFING: IMPROVING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING OF STATISTICS AND DATA

RSS manifesto ask

The public to be supported with the tools to critically evaluate claims made in the media, including on social media, and to identify potential misinformation. The UK Statistics Authority's (UKSA) role in drawing attention to the misuse of statistics should be bolstered.

Summary

Statistics and data are used widely in the media, and misinformation can be rife. The ability to distinguish between trustworthy information and misinformation is key – as this information influences behaviour, from political views to daily activities.

People need to be provided with tools to help them critically evaluate claims they come across in the media (for example, see [RSS guide on critically assessing statistics on social media](#)). We call for a governmental role in this, to raise awareness and equip the public with the necessary skills via public-facing campaigns and resources.

We also call for the role of the UKSA to be bolstered: increased regulation of statistics and data in the media will help members of the public navigate the array of claims being made and will help increase public confidence in the trustworthiness of claims.

What's the problem?

Statistics and data are widely used in the media and on social media – from backing up political claims to measuring progress and telling stories. There are a range of scenarios that may result in misleading data and statistics being shared, either accidentally or due to purposeful spin.

As our Chief Executive Sarah Cumbers set out in her opinion piece, this was [exemplified during the pre-election period](#), when an array of claims led the chair of the UKSA to urge all parties to use statistics responsibly and ensure that statistical claims enhance understanding rather than misleading.

It can be challenging to know which statistics are trustworthy and which are misleading. This is important as the information we absorb shapes our views and activities – from our political inclinations and voting practices to our daily habits and outlook on the world around us.

At the RSS a key goal of ours is to [support public understanding and engagement](#) and empower citizens to meaningfully engage with the statistics and data that impact the world around us. Statistics and data should be trustworthy and should be communicated in a clear, accessible manner to aid understanding.

How to fix it

We have [produced a guide](#) (2024) to help people think critically about the figures they encounter on social media and beyond. The guide covers key aspects to help assess whether figures are trustworthy or require further investigation, including considering the source of the statistics, how they are described and how they are presented graphically. We provide examples to be wary of, including misleading charts, ‘cherry-picking’, and confusing correlation with causation, along with tips to help ‘sense check’ figures.

We believe more such tools and further education and awareness on how to critically interrogate the figures we come across are needed. We call for the government to take a key role in ensuring that the public are equipped with these tools, by providing resources and via public awareness campaigns as well as incorporation into school education.

We also believe that the UKSA, as an independent statutory body, should have a more prominent role in ensuring that statistics and data in the media are used to enhance understanding and not to mislead. The UKSA has the [statutory objective](#) of promoting and safeguarding the publication of official statistics that serve the public good, including ‘regulating quality and publicly challenging the misuse of statistics’. The UKSA makes [public statements](#) when they believe claims are likely to mislead the public and this could impact public confidence or debate, taking into account factors including the impact that the misleading statement is likely to have. While some UKSA interventions are public, many are private.

We call for the role of the UKSA in drawing attention to the misuse of statistics to be bolstered – through increased resourcing and strengthening of legal and enforcement powers. The increased presence of a body to regulate statistical claims in the public domain would enable the public to have confidence that statistics are being used responsibly and are trustworthy and would discourage the misleading use of statistics and data.

