

Triennial Assembly: Proposed Contribution to the issue of Public Understanding and Engagement

Proposal for a Workshop to review the ONS Website:

Themes: Trust, engaging the Public, to improve public perception of government statistics and also contributing to the issue of Use of Statistics and Misinformation

Introduction:

As indicated by the comments provided below Better Statistics Associates who had replied to the survey had considered the above themes to have been extremely important.

Via a workshop that provides the opportunity to 'move' through the website from topic to topic, at users request, we will explore the effectiveness of the site and discover user needs. This will include questions of misinformation by reviewing data output, reports and QMI's

Suggested preparatory activity:

Explore the website to identify areas of interest for review.

The Discussion will cover:

The discussion will present User concerns with the quality of the website and other interaction with Users including the role of consultations, and could include ideas as to how Users could work with ONS to address potential issues:

Specific topics might include:

- How can the public's understanding of statistics be improved? Specifically, how can statistics be presented so that they are readily (and correctly) understood?
- Statistics come from too many govt sources/are too dispersed – how can they appear to be one system and have consistency?
- How can better access to help be provided, the role of NSEUAC and consultations
- Could we utilise AI to prevent the spread of incorrect statistics?
- What are the roles of the QMI's, how should reliability be reported?

Proposed Facilitator/ Speakers:

An Associate from Better Statistics or other Plus ONS Website person

Proposed Mode:

Workshop plus, possibly, breakout groups addressing sub-issues

Conclusions

Will identify genuine user concerns, and recommendations. Possible ways forward. The issues where user consultation would be useful, Identification of a possible public User group

SELECTED COMMENTS FROM BSC Associates

Clear and honest use of statistics, agreed forms of using data, checking published statistics. Longer term - education in schools and beyond; an 'ombudsman' for referral of questionable usage.

How to promote a better dialog between statistics producers/UKSA, and then both "users" and citizens generally. Raising the level of knowledge in the population generally about statistics, what they show and how they might be compiled. Tacking the "fear" than many have when faced with the thought of statistics.

Public engagement seems spare and inconsistent by area, and not much in the space of dialogue, more being told stuff.

Public pressure is needed to improve any UK Government's capability to deliver and support better economic growth in all sectors of the economy.

The MRS and the Royal and other statistical institutions need to have regular online, on mobiles and other platforms offer of training and explanation. The MRS did this with the BBC about 30 years ago but it has never been repeated. Why? Education of the public and journalists is urgent and it must be continuous. It's very urgent.

It is important that people can understand statistics to benefit from them and avoid their misuse. Having statistics readily available is also useful

Little attempt seems to be made to use real time data which technology can now make available

Understanding Statistics as a subject is poorly understood (should be part of National Curriculum in my view). The radio programme More or Less has done a great job of engagement but (as it's Radio 4) probably has not been as widely heard as it should. I would like to see some real thought go into how to present statistics clearly and interestingly, how to make graphs understandable, how to have appropriate footnotes that are engaging and won't be ignored. For example people need to understand whether the graph has a base line, when the sample size is too small, or the sample too biased to have any real value. This becomes all the more important as AI produces a torrent on misinformation. And in my experience the understanding of statistics is relevant not just to the general public but also to some professionals. (For example I met a geography teacher teaching at tertiary level who didn't understand the difference between penetration and profile).

I heard a minister in the Commons last week quote a statistic that had been totally debunked previously on More or Less. The motto remains, "Figures don't lie but liars will figure."

This topic (misinformation) pervades the entire arena. Without strong support for the correct use of statistics, and strong rejection (or even consequences) for inaccurate or inappropriate use, we shall continue to see a growth in mis information (and disinformation) which is increasingly harmful to our society.

Greater emphasis needs to be made on the validation of claims associated with facts that are validated by accredited authorities. In the age of social media this is more important than ever before.