

## Response from the Royal Statistical Society to the BBC Trust Impartiality Review BBC's reporting of statistics

1. The Royal Statistical Society (RSS) is a learned society and professional body for statisticians and data analysts, and a charity which promotes statistics for the public good. We are one of the world's leading organisations promoting the importance of statistics and data, and have done so since we were founded in 1834. Two of our key strategic goals for 2014-2018 are for statistics to be used effectively in the public interest, and for improving statistical literacy across all sectors of society. In our [Data Manifesto](#) we advocate the need for basic training in data handling and statistics for politicians, policymakers and other professionals working in public services.<sup>1</sup> In our view, such training is also a crucial element of building public trust in journalism. A poll that we commissioned with Ipsos MORI in 2014 suggests a very low level of trust among the public that the media uses data appropriately, in comparison to other sectors and organisations.<sup>2</sup>
2. Activities that we undertake in line with our strategic goals also inform our response to this review. Through the Science Journalism Training Programme, we have directly supported training in statistics for news journalists. We developed [free online courses](#) for journalists on science and statistics, and over the last four years we also trained 1,500 journalists and student journalists with the help of our volunteer network.<sup>3,4</sup>
3. As the BBC is a public service, we believe it is especially important that its journalists are numerically and statistically competent. It is crucial that its journalists are able to choose the right stories to focus on and interpret them correctly to the public. A good grasp of numbers is an important basis for statistical reporting, and in our view is currently not comprehensively addressed. We believe the BBC is strong in some areas, and does in general take a serious approach in its reporting of statistics. We commend programmes such as Radio 4's More or Less, which is one of the few programmes that takes an in depth look at statistics. However, we are also aware of

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<sup>1</sup> The Royal Statistical Society (2014) 'Data Manifesto' [webpage], Available at: [www.rss.org.uk/manifesto](http://www.rss.org.uk/manifesto)

<sup>2</sup> Ipsos MORI. (2014, July 23). New research finds data trust deficit with lessons for policymakers. Retrieved December 10, 2015, from Ipsos MORI: <https://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/3422/New-research-finds-data-trust-deficit-with-lessons-for-policymakers.aspx>

<sup>3</sup> The Royal Statistical Society (2015) 'Resources for Journalists' [webpage], *StatsLife*, Available at: <http://www.statslife.org.uk/resources/for-journalists>

<sup>4</sup> The Royal Statistical Society (2015) 'Statistical literacy initiatives' [webpage], available from: [www.rss.org.uk/getstats](http://www.rss.org.uk/getstats)

several key areas for improvement to address the standard of reporting across the organisation.

4. Firstly, we would like to see the BBC **develop a more comprehensive, consistent in-house training programme available to all BBC journalists**, with ongoing support for those across the organisation. Whilst we are aware the BBC does offer some statistics training, we believe this could be improved upon with a more established programme for those both at junior and senior level, including editors, commissioning staff and graphic design teams. We would especially encourage all those with key editorial responsibilities to gain a better than average statistical understanding in their day to day work. We would also like to stress that knowledge of statistics is not just for data journalists, as statistics will underpin all areas of reporting. An improved training programme would allow for example, interviewers the skills to successfully question those who are misusing statistics. In place of isolated pockets of statistical expertise within the BBC, journalists in all areas need to have a good grounding in statistics and the ability to liaise with researchers and statisticians for factual reporting.
5. Accompanied by this, a second area for improvement would be for a **more open dialogue between the BBC and the statistics community**. It is important that there are known points of contact on statistics in the BBC. This would enable a more effective dialogue; especially when particular statistics based news items require clarification or a correction. Statisticians outside the BBC could also provide support and advice to editors, producers, reporters and other staff across the BBC, enabling a reciprocal dialogue between the BBC and the statistics community.
6. We would like to see **improvements to editorial guidelines**. We find that the section on statistics titled “Reporting Statistics and Risk” is insufficient in coverage and breadth to cover the due process needed for reporting statistics. Whilst the chapter on “Politics, Public and Policy Areas” has detail on polls and surveys, we would like more obvious guidelines regarding statistics more generally. For a major news outlet the lack of comprehensive statistical guidance is a cause for concern.

For example, in the ‘Reporting Statistics and Risk’ section it is stated that:

***“It will usually be appropriate to report the source of figures, and sometimes the margin of error, to enable people to judge their significance.”<sup>5</sup>***

We believe 'usually' to be unnecessarily vague. Reporting margins of error is essential for readers to critically assess the reliability of a source. We understand that statistics based stories need to be presented in a way that is newsworthy but it is always important for readers to have all the facts. **The margin of error should therefore always be made clear** so the public can have confidence in the statistical information being presented to them and be able to assess it for themselves.

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<sup>5</sup> BBC Trust. (2015). Editorial Guidelines. London : BBC Trust .

7. With regards to the publication of sources, we are aware that in the case of sensitive material, journalists must protect their sources, but when reporting statistics it is essential that the sources, the correct context and margins of error are readily available, as advocated in the Media Standards Trust and the Associated Press' transparency checker tool, hNews.<sup>6</sup>
8. There are a number of cases where BBC journalists have reported data in news stories and the link provided is to a source which can only be accessed through a paywall (for example, a subscription only academic journal) or the link to the source is not available at all. We understand journalists are under severe time constraints and mistakes are easily made or repeated from third parties, but it is clear that if the original source of the information is linked, corrections can be made more promptly.
9. The BBC's correction process is a related area which we believed could be improved. We are aware of other outlets that have a policy of publishing corrections on online articles, and we believe this to be good practice. For BBC stories, corrections are made with no mention that the article has been amended, making such corrections very difficult to identify. The time spent on responding to complaints also varies greatly. As it stands the guidelines on corrections states:

***“We email or post over 90% of replies within 2 weeks (10 working days) but cannot always guarantee this.”<sup>7</sup>***

Quick response rates are an especially important principle with regards to statistical corrections, as this leads to more timely reporting of the correct information. In the age of 24/7 journalism, two weeks seems like an unduly long response time. Upholding timely and accurate statistical reporting should be a key principle for the BBC in its role as a public service, and in its dialogue with the public and with regards to online content, **we ideally would like corrections to be dealt with on the day they are received.**

10. Finally, editorial guidelines do not commit the BBC to publish the full results of surveys that it commissions. As such surveys are publicly funded; the BBC should facilitate access to the data as part of its role. **A requirement to publish survey results** should not be arduous to implement, and improves public access to the relevant information.
11. The BBC has the potential to be a world leader in providing accurate and impartial reporting of statistics alongside accessible critical analysis. If the BBC can provide greater detail on the use of statistics in its editorial guidelines, increase its links with the statistics community, and accompany this with a more extensive and established training programme, its capabilities in this area can be significantly strengthened. The

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<sup>6</sup> Sambrook, R. (2012). Delivering Trust: Impartiality and Objectivity in the Digital Age . Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, p35.

<sup>7</sup> BBC Trust. (2015). Editorial Guidelines. London : BBC Trust .

BBC has a key role to play in reporting statistics as part of wider public debate, and whilst we are aware that good work has been done in this area, more can be done to comprehensively address the quality of reporting.